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Feminism in Africa and African Women's Writing

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Abstract

Feminism developed out of the discontents of women in the West. Although African women, over the ages, have always been sensitive to all forms of discrimination within the African society, the emergence of feminism and feminist consciousness-raising awakened in them a new awareness of their oppression through the inequalities in society, reinforced by patriarchal tradition and culture. Many African women have aligned themselves with feminism and the feminist cause and, despite all odds have made remarkable progress in their lives and society and gained respectable acceptance and recognition from even the most stubborn reluctance of male domination. This trend has been captured by African women writers in their literary works which reflect the progress African women have made in transitioning from the margin to the centre and their contributions to social change.

Key Words: Feminism, Africa, patriarchy, African women, consciousness-raising, change

The Historical Background of Feminism

Feminism is an ideology which advocates equality between the sexes in society; it is a commitment to achieve equal rights for women by fighting against all forms of patriarchal and sexist oppression that prevent them from self-realization. In her attempt to define feminism, Gamble (2001) aptly observed:

[Feminism] is the belief that women, purely and simply because they are women, are treated inequitably within a society which is organized to prioritize male viewpoints and concerns. Within this patriarchal paradigm, women become everything men are not (or do not want to be seen to be): where men are regarded as strong, women are weak; where men are rational, they are emotional; where men are active, they are passive; and so on (p. vii)

Gamble further revealed that this rationale causes women to face negativity in all spheres and also denies them “equal access to the world of public concerns as well as of cultural representation” (2001, p. vii). The aim of feminism is, therefore, to change this situation for the betterment of women and the progress of society.

Bearing in mind the African context, Chukwuma (1994), a feminist scholar and critic, proffered her own perception of feminism thus:

Feminism means a rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self as a worthy, effectual and contributing human being. Feminism is a reaction to such stereotypes of women which deny them a positive identity (p. ix)

Ezeigbo (1996) also acknowledged the fact that feminism “emerged as a response to oppressive and unjust laws and attitudes arrayed against women [which have kept them in] subservient, dependent and marginalized positions, permanently relegating them to the background... [Thus, feminism aims to] liberate and emancipate women worldwide from oppression, ignorance, poverty and self-immolation” (p. 1). A feminist, then, is one whose desire “is to articulate a self-consciousness about women’s identity both as inherited cultural fact and as a process of social construction [and to] protest against the available [negative perceptions] of female becoming” (Miller, as cited in Heilbrun, 1988, p. 19).

An offshoot of the Women’s Liberation Movement in Europe and America, feminism dates back to the 18th century and the aftermath of the Reformation. It was a period which witnessed a change in social values during which men began to seek personal and political freedom. Now more conscious of the passive roles allotted them by society, women began to crave a share of this new liberty. In Europe, Mary Wollstonecraft in her feminist tract, “Vindications of the Rights of Women” (1792), called for consciousness-raising in women through education (Freeman, 1975, p. 13). This message resonated with many including John Stuart Mill who showed his support in an essay entitled “The Subjugation of Women” (1867). Other prominent intellectuals and societies lent their voices and this led to the emergence of the feminist movement in Europe.

In America, the change in social values and social structure (in the aftermath of the American Revolution) have been identified as the two social forces that led to the development of equalitarian values. For women in America, the abolition of slavery led to the awareness of, and demand for freedom of self. This perception spilled to different parts of the world as women were encouraged to perceive themselves not as subordinates but, in all ways, the equals of men.

Feminism was formally launched in America in 1849 at the first feminism convention at Seneca Falls. A commitment to women’s suffrage was made and women outlined their grievances and summed up their case that “man has endeavoured in every way they could, to destroy their confidence in their own powers, to lessen their self-respect, and to make them willing to lead a dependent and abject life” (Freeman, 1975, p. 13). Thus, first-wave feminism took root as a strong movement in the West. Lorber (2005) noted that, first-wave feminists fought for rights which, today, many women take for granted. She remarked:

It is hard to believe these rights were among those once denied to women of every social class, racial category, ethnicity, and religion—the right to vote ... [and] to own property and capital, to inherit, to keep money earned, to go to

college, to become a professionally certified physician, to argue cases in court, and to serve on a jury (Lorber, 2005, p. 1).

The goal of first-wave feminists was for women to attain the vote, equal legal rights and opportunities for education, employment and economic independence for women. In America, the realization of this dream began to manifest when women attained the right to vote; many European countries also accorded women this right after the two World Wars. However, the climate of opinion that female suffrage and equality would destroy homes and families limited the visions and the attainments of many of the goals of the movement. One thing the first-wave did, however, was to pave the way for the emergence of second or new-wave feminism, the movement that emerged after World War II.

Unlike first-wave feminists who held a common belief of the factors responsible for the oppression and marginalization of women, second-wave feminists were less united in this regard. This paved the way for the formulation of different theories, perspectives and solutions to the problems of women. It is pertinent to note, however, that this diversity in views is not negative in orientation but as a result of people gaining more insight into the sources of gender inequality and their effects. Four major strands of feminism emerged under the umbrella of the second-wave: Liberal, Radical, Marxist and Socialist feminism respectively.

Liberal feminists are largely traditional in their outlook. They believe that women and men are not so different and should therefore be accorded the same rights. They acknowledge the centrality of men in the lives of women, but recognize the need for a social system that values and encourages diversity in all spheres of life. Thus, they advocate legal and economic reforms in society that will uplift women and ensure their active participation in all spheres. Lorber (1997), described liberal feminist activists' focus thus:

[They] are concerned with visible sources of gender discrimination, such as gendered job markets and inequitable wage scales, and with getting women into positions of authority in the professions, government, and cultural institutions ... [and they have adopted] anti-discrimination legislation and affirmative action ... to fight gender inequality, especially in the job market (p. 9).

Although liberal feminism has not been able to change the prevailing perception that men and women are inherently different, they have successfully proved that women are, in no way, the inferior to men.

Radical feminists, on the other hand, regard feminine values as being superior to masculine values. Rather than equal rights, they advocate the eradication of male dominance and emphasize the power of sisterhood and consciousness-raising among women. By refusing to fall in line with conventional assumptions, radical feminism directly confronts "the deep-seated denigration and control of women in the gendered social order, [which] pushes feminism into direct conflict with those in power" (Lorber, 2005, p. 136). Kirk and Okazawa-Rey (2007) gave further insight into radical feminist perspective by remarking that in their view, "... male domination manifests itself in women's sexuality, gender roles, and family relationships, and it is carried over into the male-dominated world of work, government, religion, and law" (p. 16). Radical feminists, therefore, regard the eradication of patriarchy and the creation of alternative ways of living as avenues through which the problem of female subjugation can be solved.

Marxist feminists developed their theories along Marxist principles and premises. Di Stefano (2014) defined Marxist feminism as follows:

[It is] a species of feminist theory and politics that takes its theoretical bearings from Marxism, notably the criticism of capitalism as a set of structures, practices, institutions, incentives, and sensibilities that promote the exploitation of labour, the alienation of human beings, and the debasement of freedom. For Marxist feminists, empowerment and equality cannot be achieved within the framework of capitalism. (Abstract)

It is clear that for this group of feminists, capitalism is responsible for limiting women through issues such as inferior occupational and pay levels. They also regard the family as a domain where women are oppressed and exploited. They advocate economic independence as an avenue through which women can gain their freedom and, therefore, call for changes in the economic structure of society that will result in the empowerment of women through the provision of equal opportunities and resources.

Socialist feminism was defined by Napikoski (2019) as ‘a mixed theoretical and practical approach to achieving women’s equality ... [which emphasizes] the connection between the oppression of women and other oppressions in society, such as racism and economic injustice’ (para.1). For Socialist feminists, “... class and gender are symbiotic, at least to some degree, and one cannot be addressed without taking the other into consideration” (Napikoski, 2019, para. 2). Women’s oppression would, therefore, be entirely eradicated in society with their removal of all forms of class oppression through a working-class revolution. This is because women’s struggles are considered as an integral part of class struggle. The removal of class oppression would, subsequently, lead to women’s emancipation.

Evidently, second-wave feminism witnessed the emergence of a diversity of theories, ideologies and perspectives. However, it is important to emphasize the point that, “the divisions, the arguments among scholars about theories, approaches, methodology, are not, of themselves either dangerous or unexpected. Indeed, they are essential to the progress of understanding” (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 19).

Cox et al. (1997) identified some of the notions that are central to the ideologies of second-wave feminists by noting that,

[for them,] the link between biological sex and socially appropriate gender roles is politically motivated to perpetuate male privilege, but also that many of the qualities that society typically celebrates about masculinity are, at best, of questionable value and, at worst, socially destructive. (p. 178)

Although much of the activities of 20th century second-wave feminism were centred in the West and other industrialized countries, the struggle for equality also found its way to many other parts of the world including Africa where its emergence held significant implications, not only for women, but society as a whole.

Feminism in the African Society

Although the African society has always regarded women as weak and docile due to its patriarchal nature, African women have always had very powerful traditional groups that unite and promote their cause and fight for their rights. Among these groups are the Umuada of the Igbos of Nigeria and the Queen Mother and her group of women in Ghana, who wield a

lot of power and are greatly respected in society. History has also disproved the notion of the passivity of African women in relation to situations and events that directly affect their lives and well-being. The 1929 Women's Revolt which witnessed the uprising of women in South-East Nigeria against economic exploitation and taxation is an example. Ogundipe-Leslie's observation that "there were indigenous patterns within traditional African societies for addressing the oppressions and injustices to women" (2009, p. 548) was, therefore, valid. With its emergence in Africa in the late 1960s, feminism anchored itself on the achievements of these indigenous groups of women.

Without doubt, women have always been aware of the inequities in the African society that have directly or indirectly been responsible for their oppression. However, they were conditioned to view and accept these realities as natural. Independence and post-colonialism, however, gradually saw women becoming more conscious of their individuality.

Feminism, however, received a hostile welcome in Africa in the 1960s because of perceived notions that it would impact traditional, socio-cultural and religious values negatively. For Ezeigbo (1996), this attitude emanated from a misunderstanding of the concept which, for some, "conjures up visions of aggressive women who try to be like men, dress carelessly and abandon essential feminine attributes" (p. 1). Feminism was regarded by many as irrelevant in the African society; for this group of naysayers Ogundipe-Leslie (2009) pointed out that it would be incorrect to say "the African woman...does not need an ideology that addresses her reality, hopefully and preferably, to ameliorate [that reality]" (p. 547). Also, Ogundipe reiterated the notion that feminism is not really foreign to the African woman by observing that they did have channels through which "women's oppositions and resistance to injustice within their societies" (2009, p. 547) were handled. Like their counterparts in the West, African women have embraced different types of feminism depending on the context of their situations and perspectives. Among them are three major feminist perspectives: African feminism, Womanism, and Accommodationism.

African feminism is an ideology which advocates female individualism and assertion across the board. According to Chukwuma (1994), "African feminism is not elitist at all and is not the exclusive right of the educated women ..." (p. xiii). African feminists are united in their battle against gender inequality, discrimination and social injustices against women in the African society. Subsequently, they embrace those institutions which are of value to women and reject those that impede their positive growth. Davies (2009) also identified a significant aspect of genuine African feminism as a recognition of

a common struggle with African men for the removal of yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation [achieved through a unity of both sexes and an acknowledgement of] certain salient aspects of women's subjugation which differ from the generalized oppression of all African peoples ... (p. 563).

Helen Chukwuma, Julie Okoh and Amma Darko are all proponents of African feminism who advocate for gender equality and a breakdown of patriarchal structures in the African society that impede the positive growth and actualization of African women.

Womanism, a concept formulated by Alice Walker which is black-centred, advocates an end to sexism and a meaningful relationship between black women and men, and children. For Njoku (1997), what makes Womanism suitable for the African context is its commitment not only to black people but to their culture, its perception of the individual and self as important,

and its emphasis on women, their ideals, experiences and welfare as the focus of interest (pp. 77, 78). In essence, Womanism “expresses black women’s experiences and their reactions to these experiences” (Njoku, 1997, p. 77); and this is a true reflection of Womanism in the African society. Flora Nwapa and Mariama Ba are proponents of Womanism.

Accommodationism upholds the man as the head of the family but emphasizes a complementary relationship between men and women. Nnolim (1994) defined Accommodationists thus:

[They] stress as womanists do, the unity of man and woman in spite of bickering, misunderstandings, and the jostling for power. Reconciliation, not separation; convergence, not divergence; love, not hatred; affection, not mere passion; a pooling together of resources, not scattering; a building together, not destruction of the latent love between the sexes; an establishment of the family under patriarchy, not advocacy for a new arrangement – these form the focus of their own ideological praxis. (p. 252)

Accommodationists therefore promote a healthy and loving relationship and mutual respect between African men and women. Among this group are Zaynab Alkali and Ifeoma Okoye.

It must be noted that some African writers and critics adopt perspectives of feminism outside of the three discussed above in their commitment to the cause of women in the African society. Among them are Nawal El Saadawi who is a radical feminist, Ama Ata Aidoo whose works echo the principles of Marxist feminism and Christine Obbo whose works have underpinnings of socialist feminism.

It is evident that despite their differences, all perspectives of feminism discussed above acknowledge the need for gender equality; the recognition of the African woman as an individual as well as a partner in progress in family life and nation building and, as Nwapa (2009) posits, the significance of women’s roles as “crucial for the survival of the race ... [which is] true of all women across the globe, be they black or white” (p. 527).

In many African societies, women have had to struggle against patriarchal perceptions as regards their womanhood, roles and personal identity. However, feminism and feminist consciousness have made a great impact on their lives. Chizea (1991) posited that women “are the building block upon which the foundations of happy homes and families [and subsequently communities and the nation] are built” (p. 10). For centuries, the African woman was deprived of equal rights with men in the society and cowed into accepting the status quo. While acknowledging that the forms of women’s inequality and oppression have changed over the years, Enejere (1991) posited:

... the fact of inequality formalized by the state and sanctioned by religions and communal customs have remained intact. The ideologies of the exploiting classes justify this inequality by reference to the so-called inferiority of women, their social biological features, the function of motherhood etc ... but we know that scientifically, women’s inequality is rooted in socio-economic conditions. (pp. 48-49).

Enejere’s views may have stemmed from the fact that, despite their resilience, resourcefulness and skills, many African women have been deprived of opportunities in the socio-economic sphere that would have enabled them to become fully independent and to gain power and control over their lives and destinies. The opportunities open to these women in society have,

consequently, been very limited. Unfortunately, this problem has not yet been fully eradicated in contemporary African society. No wonder Ezeigbo (1996) remarked that “the responsibilities and limitations of being female in a male-dominated society are realities that are constantly in the consciousness of every [African] woman” (p. xv).

Fortunately, experiences such as colonialism and the emphasis on female education through consciousness-raising efforts have helped many women to focus on their lives and personal experiences. This has empowered them to challenge societal ideas and perceptions of womanhood that are false, promote new perceptions that reveal the truth about the condition of women and advocate justice and equality. Nwapa (2009) revealed the implications of this new female awakening:

Women have started to redefine themselves; they have started to project themselves as they feel they should be [perceived]. There have been tremendous changes in all facets of life which contribute to the continent-wide awareness and rethinking of women’s problems and roles in the society. (pp. 528-529)

Unfortunately, in spite of the many and positive achievements of feminism in the African society, some women who are, or should be interested in the feminist cause, as earlier noted, shy away from being identified as feminists because of the negative images of rebellion associated with the concept of feminism. Fortunately, however, this has not hampered the desire and zeal of many others to identify with feminism in order to improve the lot of African women.

Feminist Consciousness and African Women’s Writing

Ojo-Ade (1983) noted that Black Literature is a mirror of man’s inhumanity and the voice of the victim (p. 71). It is, therefore, not surprising that through feminist consciousness, literature has become an avenue to reveal and challenge all aspects of male domination and the subordination of women, and the avenues and structures that have reinforced and maintained them. Indeed, African literature which, once upon a time, was phallic and dominated by male writers and male critics who focused almost exclusively on male characters and male concerns, entered a new phase with the emergence of feminist conscious writers (Ogunyemi, 1988, p. 60). Evidently, “when women tell their own story, they emerge as actors and participants in a host of activities beyond home and family, providing strong evidence for the [recognition] of women as [a] force [in society]” (Ware, 1989, p. v). This is because they empower women to discover the potency and value of their abilities as well as the resources and choices that are open to them.

With emphasis shifting from the individual and man to the collective development of women, African women writers globally are voicing out the realities of African women through their literary works which reveal an awareness of gender issues which negatively impact the lives of women. By sharing vital knowledge and information on these issues, they challenge women to fight against their passivity, silence and subordination and for their rights to be respected, their voices heard and opportunities created for their advancement. Furthermore, through the platform of literature, they educate society in general to perceive women in a new light, desist from relegating them to the fringes of society and embrace them as equal partners in progress.

For Ojo-Ade, the African society is, therefore, currently enjoying a remarkable era of dynamism and progress in which feminism has found a forum through the significant roles

being played by African writers, male and female, who are feminism inclined or advocate the cause of women equality (1983, p. 72). Literature has become a positive avenue to shape feminist, and consequently, gender consciousness through instruction, information and entertainment and women writers are moving from a conciliatory perspective to a more assertive one in their treatment of the subject of womanhood in relation to traditional and cultural values and expectations. Through their literary works, they are reflecting the various types and trends of feminism, and creating room for African literature to effectively explore and describe women's problems and offer choices which could be gained through consciousness-raising and self-awareness leading to self-actualization.

Choices such as economic independence, assertiveness, personal upliftment and growth through education and sisterhood are offered by African women writers, among them Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Nawal El Saadawi, Mariama Ba, Julie Okoh, Tess Onwueme, Tsitsi Dangarembga, and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, as avenues through which the African woman can realize herself and bridge the gap still existing in gender relations in the African society. Critics such as Katharine Frank, Molar Ogundipe-Leslie, Helen Chukwuma, Iniobong I. Uko, Abena Busia and Monica Bungaro also urge women on to a higher consciousness of themselves as individuals and writers.

Literature has, thus, become a creative tool used by feminists in the African society to uplift the African woman and their contributions have established them as the significant 'other voices' of African literature. With this new development, the reader is offered "a more concentrated vision of female experience [in literature where] women play crucial roles ... [and] a balanced perspective of womanhood" (Chukukere, 1994, p. 101).

However, the problem of people not wanting to be identified with 'feminism' also manifests on the literary scene. As Nkealah (2006) observed, "The definition and use of the term *feminism* in African literature poses a number of problems for African women writers and critics, many of whom tend to deny any affiliation to the feminist movement, even though their writings espouse feminist aspirations" (Abstract). Evidently, this detachment emanates from people's misconceptions and wrong interpretation of feminism especially in the African society, as being anti-male, culture and anti-religion. This makes it difficult for many African women writers to take a feminist stance. Nkealah further explained this situation thus: "She has to accept feminism with all its implications (some of which might be opposed to her cultural beliefs), or reject it completely, or appropriate the concept and redefine it in a manner that appropriately expresses her cultural experience" (2006, Abstract).

Adeleye (2017), however, lays the blame for this problem on "white feminists who [were so] submerged in their own narrow understandings of what universal liberation for women should look like ..." (para. 4). This, inevitably, resulted in their disregard for the unique identities and experiences of the black African women which alienated some African women from the feminist ideology.

African women critics have also faced embarrassing situations where writers they have categorized as feminists refuse to be so identified. Prominent among such writers is Emecheta who would rather be regarded as an 'ordinary writer' than a feminist. She asserted:

I don't deal with great ideological issues. I write about the little happenings of everyday life. Being a woman, African born, I see things through an African woman's eyes. I chronicle the little happenings in the lives of the African women I know. I did not know that by doing so I was going to be

called a feminist. But if I am now a feminist then I am an African feminist with a small f. (2009, p. 553).

Adeleye (2017), however, aptly noted that Emecheta may have considered herself a feminist ‘with a small f’ but “... when she wrote, she was a ‘big F’ [for] her books were loud and clear about where she stood” (para. 8). Chukwuma confirmed this in her description of Emecheta thus: “She is the one African writer who has in novel after novel projected the feminine point of view. [She] is committed to the female cause and has earned for herself a coveted place of honour in African literature” (1994, p. xviii).

Nevertheless, the feminist ideology has continued to inform the works of African women writers, raise the consciousness of African women and revolutionize African literature so that male writers and critics are now more sensitive to female issues and more balanced in their portrayal of female characters and experiences. Evidently, these male writers and critics have realized, like Uko (2006) that “... contemporary African women writers are not only establishing the new woman ... They show that though the woman may be said to be situated on the fringes, the borders, the margins, her strength and resilience keep her in control at the centre” (p. 93).

Clearly, feminism helps in building a positive feminine culture which contributes largely to the development of society and without women, there can be no meaningful development in literature and society.

Conclusion

Two emerging feminist perspectives in Africa are third-wave feminism and Post feminism. Third-wave feminism is a continuation of the second-wave, and seeks to build on what is perceived as the failures and successes of the second-wave. Post feminism, however, lacks a clear definition and many traditional feminists regard it with deep scepticism, considering it as a product of assumption rather than a concrete ideology. The notions of the sceptics are very true of Africa in particular, at this point in time.

Nevertheless, African women are actively contributing to the growth of literature and society and their impact can be felt in all facets of life. The socio-political, economic, educational and religious spheres, as well as the creative industries are replete with women committed to the feminist cause. Even then, there is continued need for unity and consciousness-raising, to enlighten and carry other women along by supporting, encouraging and inspiring each other to greater heights. Women, individuals and writers, must learn to confidently admit their ambitions, claim their achievements, allow their successes to give hope and courage, and to testify of their indispensability in the African society.

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