
ADDRESSING AFRICAN FEMINISM

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1.0 Introduction

Popular struggles for democracy and human rights in Africa today have, among other things, precipitated a reflective consciousness upon the status and conditions of women. The African woman herself has become sensitised to the multiple forms and sources of oppression and bondage hitherto regarded merely as part of natural designs. She now sees herself as marginalised by both her male-counterpart as well as her culture and feels that something ought to be done. Such perceptions of women's experiences find ample expressions in the feminist ideology. Feminism in general advocates the influence of women in spheres conventionally reserved for men by arguing for the "equality of the sexes." Essential to feminism, therefore, is the conviction that women are and have been unjustly treated because of their sex and that this scenario ought to change for the better. Through the feminist ideology all women are called to the cause as Grimshaw says "Women have available to them more than men certain resources for developing a critique of the damaging and destructive aspects of human institutions"². Being oppressors, men are incapable of this objective critiquing since, as Rhoda Howard says, "Men have a material as well as an ideological interest in continuing women's subordination"³. Further, the conceptual framework and the structure of socio-cosmic reality, is allegedly or at least, based on what has been termed the 'law of the father.'⁴ Thus the reconstruction of reality requires a new set of conceptual tools (different from the conventional male chauvinistic ones) preferably coined by women themselves. But the African feminist reacts against mainstream (or western) feminism, to the dismay of the radicals. She prefers to be called "womanist."⁵

The aim of this paper is not to argue for or against feminism or womanism as such, but rather to offer a critical assessment of the socio-epistemological basis of their conceptual distinctions and to argue that if womanism draws its inspiration from western feminism while rejecting its model then the prevailing variables must be elaborately clarified and justified to ensure validity.

2.0 Womanism or Feminism?

Why does the African feminist prefer womanism to feminism? Marie Eboh observes that "African women recognise the need for international feminism but they reject the Western Model"⁶. So, the rejection cannot be because feminism is irrelevant to the experiences of African women. They too are in "a difficult position of fighting sexist institutions of their own culture, as well as those bequeathed from the West in the educational, religious and occupational spheres". "Therefore", Kissekka concludes, "the demands of feminists in Western countries are equally relevant to the needs of African women"⁷. In fact one would expect the African women to be in the forefront of international feminism considering their double yokes of oppression. But they appear reluctant. However, the apparent reluctance is no conclusive evidence of indifference or rejection. Filomena Steady notes that the African woman is in practice much more a feminist than her western counterpart since "the black women in Africa and the diaspora have feminist characteristics well developed though not always out of choice"⁸. What then makes womanism so different from and (perhaps) unacceptable by western feminisms? In other words, what is the philosophy of womanism?

Like other ideologies, womanism encapsulates diagnosis of certain imperfections of reality, a vision of a better reality and a means to that better reality. Needles to say here however that Africa as a continent is one, but culturally and politically diversified. Since womanism has very little (if any) concern with the continent as such but with the productive human beings, and given that Africans have diverse cultures, then the uniqueness of womanism to African experiences needs to be clarified. It is perhaps for this reason that Alice Walter argued that "a womanist is in part a black feminist, a feminist of color committed to the survival and wholeness of an

entire people, male and female”⁹ So, womanism bears a double commitment, one to the emancipation of women and another to the liberation of all African peoples from social, economic, cultural and political oppression. The womanist feels that feminism fails to deal with issues that directly affect Africans: she is not truly represented by mainstream feminism. Furthermore, western feminists have often been seen as partners in the oppression of both black men and women. Hence Carole Davies argues that the womanist “would rather identify more with the African man in the struggle for social and political freedom than with the middle-class white feminist who ignores the fact that racism and capitalism are concomitants of sexism.”¹⁰ So the womanist is repelled by racial politics within the feminist camp. Consequently, she is either campaigning for colorless feminism through the philosophy of womanism, or she is taking an equally racist stance by advocating womanism for black feminists. But certainly not both at once. Another point of difference concerns the issues addressed. It appears that the womanist is currently more concerned about family issues which ought to be sorted out before proceeding onto the more open ones. But this does not of course mean that the issues cannot be tackled simultaneously. It is rather a question of priority and relevance in time. The womanist is, therefore, not exactly comparable with the feminist, on priority issues. Marie Eboh says “the problem with a comparative study of this nature is that the modern African woman, who should have been compared with her Western counterpart, is not seen as an authentic African. She is regarded as a “Philistine woman or as a Westernised woman tinctured with traditionalism.” “As a result,” Eboh concludes, “we end up comparing the traditional African woman with the modern Western woman”.¹¹ Surprisingly, Eboh does not see the gravity of the problem beyond the surface. According to her, “this is not totally out of order, given that the feminist problem is not the same in all cultures”. But it is such simplistic observations that perpetuate irreconcilabilities within feminism.

A study of African feminism includes “female autonomy and cooperation and, emphasis on nature over culture, the centrality of children, multiple mothering and kinship, the use of ridicule in the African woman’s world view, a number of traditional rights and responsibilities of women”.¹² However, these concerns are not unique to the African woman. Central to feminism in general is the women’s free-

dom to choose, and this involves autonomy and self-determination. This is evident in womanism as well. According to traditional convention, feminism is controversial and revolutionary. Mary Wollstonecraft's publication in eighteenth century England advocated "financial and mental independence for women" in an era when tradition consigned women to men's appendages. The publication was regarded, revolutionary and controversial. Other feminist literatures that followed later mostly fought for property and political rights for married women, until the late twenties. In England, it was not until 1975 that the law prohibiting sex discriminations in employment, housing and other opportunities was passed. "True feminism", Steady argues, "is an abnegation of male protection and a determination to be resourceful and reliant".¹³ In womanism, this element is not found wanting. Perhaps most important to the African women and found wanting in feminism are issues like, lack of choice in motherhood, circumcision and marriage, oppression of barren women, culturally enforced silence and so on. Another most telling feature of womanism is the approach to the envisioned better world. Notably, the womanist "lacks the radicalism of the Western feminist."¹⁴ Nonetheless she is seen to gain significant ground in the fight against sexist segregation. The following passage tells of the womanist's modus operandi:

"black womanists unlike white feminists, eschew bitterness in their confrontation and relationship with men. They do not negate men rather they accommodate them; men are central to their lives not merely as husbands but also as sons, brothers, and their continuous presence is assured".¹⁵

Thus, womanism emphasises female solidarity without antagonising the males; it enlists male support bearing in mind the indispensability of each to the other. Further it is not apprehensive of womanhood, wifhood or motherhood. In short the womanist appreciates the natural design of femininity as a given fact, and aims to promote and preserve the pride of being a female human being. Through the cautious approach, the womanist intends to avoid the excesses and vulgarities of Western style feminism, thereby making the movement more attractive and more acceptable. Thus Eboh observes that regardless of the lack of Western radicalism "the

new breed of African women now has a voice and a choice within and outside marriage; there is a greater female awakening and a better life. She has forcefully made her point and she has been heard."¹⁶ Further most African governments have heeded the woman's voice and taken the lead in speeding up women's emancipation even to the point of begging them to venture into spheres that were formally male preserves.¹⁷ But the battle has just begun. There are many wards of African women, traditions and cultures that must be brought to bear on the women's anxieties, capabilities and ability in the interest of the whole society. This is more so with attitudes to marriage, spinsterhood, barrenness, parenthood and circumcision.

3.0 Dilemmas of Feminism

It is unrealistic to judge that all African women espouse womanism and all Western women are feminists. This assumption is as wrong as the view that all women are feminists in the broader sense of the term. Although feminism aims at improving the status and realising the full potentials of women it is not the case that all women understand, appreciate or even subscribe to feminism. There are a number of reasons for this scenario, some of which are:-

- (a) feminism is scarcely seen to mobilise women since it often addresses men,
- (b) traditions of female thought, woman's culture and female consciousness per se are not feminist. Femaleness and feminist consciousness are not equivalent terms according to Linda Gordon. Feminism for her is "a controversial political interpretation and struggle by no means universal to women,"¹⁸
- (c) lack of consensus as to what constitutes practical feminism, the forms of women oppression prevailing and the sort of corrective measures envisioned. Jean Grimshaw, for example, believes that feminism for a people depends on the concepts and theories which are used (explicitly or implicitly) to make sense of experience, and to try and understand the situation of women,¹⁹

- (d) often, feminists seem to be fighting for sexist prejudice instead of fighting against it by mainly attacking and excluding men in their ideology,
- (e) the material content is problematised by biographical experiences which are often not universalisable without undermining the arguments with heavy doses of emotion. In short feminism both in theory and practice is characterised by contradictions and paradoxes (e.g. wanting and not wanting laws, ethics, men, attire, curtsy, love, children, sex, etc). Through negation, it affirms the negated even more strongly, since negation is not destruction or abolition and one cannot negate nothing.

4.0 Feminism and Men

African men have been seen or said to be particularly resistant to the idea of women's liberation. This observation may be true to an extent. Two basic explanations may be offered for this state of affairs. The first one is that traditional systems of thought entrenched in custom and supported by religion and myths die hard. The truth value of most fundamental beliefs are taken for granted as based on self-evident principles. Religion, myths and morality influence pre-critical perceptions of reality so that what is cultural (or actual) is seen as absolutely rational and justified. There is lack of critical appraisal in myth, while traditional morality and religion are basically prescriptive of conduct. Even language, Deirdre Byrne argues, presents a symbolic order "into which growing children are inserted and is analogous to both the social code and the law of the father."²⁰ In Europe, 18th century feminists boldly challenged the status quo by attacking the bases of cultural attitudes on the status of women and so managed to provoke demands for legislations on social, economic and political equality. In Africa too, feminism ought to address both men and women on the negative aspects of the traditional status of women. The men ought to realise that women's liberation is part and parcel of liberation for society and mankind as a whole.

The second explanation is that Western trained feminists in Africa have not been prudent enough in advancing their cause within the African cultural context. They

have been too sudden, too radical, too general and too antagonistic. That is, their operational framework has often neglected cultural variations which require special conceptual definitions and analysis. For example, the employment of patriarchy as a central concept of analysis with which to understand the oppression of women has been so overgeneralised to the point of marginalising other important factors. Kate Millet, for example, believes that patriarchy is all-pervasive, penetrating class divisions, different societies and different historical epochs. "The specific variations within patriarchy" according to her "are less significant than its general truth."²¹ This observation, however, is too simplistic. It is the specific variations in cultural norms and values that matter so that "a sensitive understanding of the meaning and value of custom should temper any imposition of universal norm."²² Further, the African feminist has not specified the sort of injustices she targets and has not advanced the ways of rectifying them. By trying to 'do without men' she has furthered antagonism with men who interpret the move as a fight for exclusive domination and not inclusive equality. In short, lack of clarity and lack of appreciation of historical, class and ethnic differences coupled with tendencies of idealisation of women has served to repel rather than attract the attention and sympathy of men.

5.0 Prospects of Womanism

Is there anything in womanism that spells more success than Western feminism in Africa? The success of womanism, one believes, will greatly depend on the perceptions of and approaches to the concerns of the African woman; her tensions and fears, ambitions and aspirations, capabilities and abilities. The following issues will have to be embedded in womanism to enhance positivity of the distinction from feminism;

- (i) develop a clear concept and consciousness of women's oppression and women's liberation within a framework of African experience and reality,
- (ii) provide the necessary female ethic to portray a proper critique of the ways in which male views have tended to be damaging to the status of women,

- (iii) to be wary of historical, social, cultural and economic differences which may account for different perceptions of reality,
- (iv) emphasize on such issues as choice of marriage, motherhood, parental responsibility, property rights, career opportunities and other forms of participation or sharing with males (particularly domestic issues).
- (v) scale the value of those spheres from which women have been excluded; they may not be worth fighting for after all,
- (vi) be wary of the distinction between a fight for special rights (or privileges) and a fight for equal rights,
- (vii) avoid over-generalisation of patriarchy bearing in mind the strengths of matriarchy in many African societies. Whilst the usefulness of the concept of patriarchy in feminist arguments is rarely contested, there is nevertheless no consensus about the meaning, competence or status of the term. Recently the trend has been a reappropriation of patriarchy for materialism, arguing that "patriarchal relations take their particular form from dominant relations of production."²³ Womanism may have to review this marxist orientation in line with African family relations of production historically and economically, and,
- (viii) appeal to and enlist the support of all mankind regardless of sex, color or creed. If the argument that men have been responsible for cultural male-chauvinism is indeed valid, then the men should be brought to bear upon the doctrines of feminism. Feminism itself deals with societal problems and if the males are partly to blame, they cannot be exculpated by simply being negated or ignored.

6.0 Conclusion

The democratic change and multiparty politics in Africa today symbolise a progressive advance in the consciousness of and respect for human rights and liberty. Women's liberation struggle forms an integral part of the philosophy of human emancipation, forms of coercive institutions or systems of thought. But, although all human beings share a common humanity, the concerns, needs, fears, hopes and aspirations of specific individuals, groups and communities are never exactly the same at a particular point in time. Women's liberation in Africa must, therefore, be seen to be largely originating, fermenting and maturing on the soil of African minds, experiences and realities, if it is to be more effective. With a clearly defined cause, womanism can proceed with its own approach to the issues it seeks to address and redress. But mere fanaticism with no critical assessment of foreign (or universal) models is often socially and psychologically destructive. It reaffirms that which it seeks to destroy, (e.g. sexism and sexist segregation). Finally, African feminism should endeavour as much as possible to avoid unnecessary excesses and vulgarities of mere emotional outburst which only aggravates hostilities between the sexes, and therefore being counter-productive.

Footnotes

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