

RECREATION OF AFRICAN WOMANISM: GENDER ISSUES IN THE WORKS AFRICAN WRITING

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Abstract

Gender issues are features in the development of the society. This study reveals that the African environment is patriarchal and polygamous in nature, also colonialized oppression through slavery. African women are self-sacrificing, hardworking and successful. The emergency of Feminism theory has generated a serious argument as a result of inadequacies in Feminism; womanism which is an African-American variant was created. Womanism asserts and illustrates the interpretation of Black female experiences globally. Although most African women have recognized with womanism, this study therefore, determines the extent womanism defines the indigenous African women's experiences, understandings, knowledge and perception. It explores the different positions of female African literary achievers. The study highlights several principles for an actually indigenous African womanist position. The study further looks at the practical approaches of practicing African womanism to provide practical gains for African man and woman, and also to play appropriate as a tool for evaluating works by literary writers in Nigeria principally and Africa in general.

Keywords: African Women, African Writing, Feminism, Gender, and Womanism

Introduction

Gender is employed in social science analysis to view the roles and activities of male and female. The attention towards gender issues is not based on biological variations between male and female but rather on their understandings and experiences as components of the society. Gender issues are similar to a device in the understanding and having more knowledge about the activities of male and female in the society and the difficulties and prospects that each faces in carrying out those activities. Femi Ojo-Ade (1998) cited in Imam, A. and Adekunle, S. S. (2016) state that the role of male controlled society is affirmed when the scholar posits that African Literature is a male created, male oriented chauvinistic art.

In other worlds, gender roles are obtainable and accessible to each one but with them come limitations on who can carry out which activity with seriousness and this gives rise to gender and sex are the same. Gender is a social understanding and collection of individuals being allocated to definite roles as male or female.

Gender Discourse

Gender is referred to as a construct that have its conception and creation to a number of social institutions. Gender, unlike sex, which is based on biological division, is specific in character, is further amorphous in nature and is subject to change with indication and reference to context and time. Gender refers to roles played by male/female that are distinguished and differentiated by the society. It illustrates the social differences between male and female as they differ extensively in society and culture. It refers to those activities which generally reveal belief systems on what should be the ultimate roles of male and female within a given social structure. Gender involves cultural, belief systems and practices which centered on creating dichotomies among duties and privileges.

Emenalo (2017) described gender as the social constructed characteristics of man and woman in norms, roles and relationships. It varies from society to society and can be changed. Igwe (2003) affirmed that gender is relationship between men and women and not simply women issues. Jick and Nkweteyim

(2016) assert that gender issues have become very topical around the world today because the woman is moving away from roles which were once assigned to her, and to which she was very much restricted, to ones which were thought to be the preserve of her male counterpart, from voting to writing. Olawoye (2002) states that gender is not synonymous with sexual differences which are based on biological characteristics. It is constructions that are culture specific which assigned different identities and roles to men and women. Gender therefore refers to sets of relationships, attributes, roles, beliefs and attitudes that characterize what being a man or woman is within the society. It is a socio-cultural construction that assigns roles, attitudes and values considered appropriate for man or woman.

Womanism as an Alternative Theory

Though feminism alleged that its objective was the liberation of every woman from sexist subjugation, oppression and domination, it was unsuccessful in considering the peculiarity of Black females and males of colour. In practice, feminism deliberated and gave attention to the wants of middle class white women in Britain and America while creating the belief that it was the movement for the liberation of women internationally. Patricia Collins (1990) asserts that though Black women intellectuals have extensively conveyed an exceptional and outstanding feminist consciousness about the connection of race and class in structuring gender, they have not been entirely participants in white feminist organizations.

Bell Hooks (2018) also indicts feminism of not including Blacks from playing completely in the movement, thus she criticizes Betty Freidan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) because though it is applauded and heralded as creating the opportunity for modern feminist movement, it is written in the form that the Black/lower class women non existing. In Hook's opinion, racism subsists in the writings of white feminist, and consequently, female connection and relationship is hard in the face of ethnic and racial differences. The deficiencies of feminism as practiced by middle class white women and the necessities to evolve a fresh theory or principles that takes care specifically of the requirements of Black women folk later gave rise to the establishment and growth of another alternative of feminism called Womanism. This term was created by Alice Walker in her collection of essays titled *In Search Of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983). Womanism establishes aesthetics and visuals for the Black female literary understanding and knowledge.

According to Alice Walker (1983) a Womanist refers to a black feminist or feminist of color; A woman who loves other women, sexually and /or nonsexually. Values and appreciates women's culture, women's arousing and expressive suppleness, values tears as a natural counterbalance of laughter, and women's strength. Occasionally loves personality of men, sexually and/or non-sexually entrusted with survival and entirety of people, male and female loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves, struggle, Loves the folk, Loves herself.

Commenting also, Julia Hare as cited by Hudson Weems (1998) described womanism as women who call themselves black feminists that need another word to describe what their concern are". Weems consequently asserts that women of African descent who embrace feminism do so as a result of the absence of an appropriate existing framework for their individual needs as African women. She therefore defined Africana womanism as: ... an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is foregrounded in African culture, and necessarily focused on the distinctive understandings, struggles, requirements and aspirations of African women. It significantly addresses the vibrants of the conflict between mainstream feminist, the black feminist, the African feminist and the Africana womanist.

Womanism as an alternative theory is differentiated by its focus on the Black female understanding and knowledge with writings featuring racial issues, classist issues and sexist issues with a warning and instructive notice through Bell Hooks (1998) who maintains that: Racism thrives in the writings of white feminists; strengthening and highlighting white dominance and opposing the likelihood that women will connect politically across ethnic and racial boundaries. To womanist writers, racial and classist oppression are indivisible and inseparable from sexist oppression. Several womanist writers still illustrate racial and classist oppression as having preference over sexist oppression. This is as results of the Womanists' consideration and thinking that the emancipation and liberation of Black women folk cannot be attained except from the liberation of the whole race. Womanists as a result believe in affiliation with their men folk.

This attribute makes a distinction of womanism from feminism which is mainly a separatist principle. Womanism differs from feminism because it identifies the oppression of Black women in racial, classist and sexist oppression as identified and fought against by womanists, as opposed to the feminism major apprehension with sexist oppression.

Womanism clarifies that the requirements of the Black women is at variance from those of their white counterparts, and by identifying, recognizing and accepting male participation in the struggle for liberation again makes a difference from feminism in its methodology of ending female oppression. Womanism has foundation in Black culture which gives account for the importance of family, community and motherhood in its discussion and as principles have broadening beyond the frontiers of Black America to being accepted and embraced by several women in and from Africa, and globally.

Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1985) described womanism as the African female understanding, knowledge and experience. Her notion of African Womanism might be at variance to some extent from the Womanism presented by Alice Walker, though there are various points of similarities.

In the first instance, in advocating and suggesting womanism through an African American perspective, womanism is a global principle that identifies the understanding, knowledge and experiences of Blacks in the Diaspora as well those leaving in Africa. Thus the application of womanism as principle that represents all Black females and non-white women's experiences is not justified because it is primarily based on the experiences of African American women at the segregation of women from/in Africa, and women of colour. Womanism is indisputable and very significant to all Black women's condition globally.

Secondly, regarding the history of unfairness, inequity and oppression in America, African American womanist discourse racial concerns became a primary issue in the creation of principles and theory articulation in contrast that women in Africa would rather place economic issues beside sexist issues to form an indigenous theory since scarcity, insufficiency and harsh economic conditions considerably shape their experiences.

Thirdly, some characteristics of Black feminism through womanism integrate lesbianism which proposes and implies that lesbianism is an acceptable satisfactory, practical and viable alternative for women to end their subjugation and oppression.

These problems created the situation of womanism in the context of the African female understanding, knowledge and experience in Africa in questioning the need for either a fusion of the existing theories so as to integrate the obvious peculiarities or evolution of a new set of theories to take care of distinction of the African woman in Africa.

Feminism

Feminism originates from the Latin word 'femina' which explains women's issues. It developed out of the struggle for rights of women. It started in the late eighteenth century. The intensification of feminism started in Europe and America at the time women became aware and conscious of their repression, domination and took steps to put right this subjugation. Currently, feminism has increased and expanded globally though in several countries it has developed into different labels. Feminist ideas are part and parcel of daily thinking, and are previously a varied and culturally different international movement which has been variously classified and illustrated by several people. It does not have a brief universal definition. While recognizing the suggestions and allusions of a clearing definition, the following illustrate the concept of feminism.

Barrow and Millburn (1990) described feminism as a label for an obligation and dedication to accomplish and attain equality for women. J.A. Cuddon (1991) identified it as effort to explain and interpret women's understandings, knowledge and experiences as illustrated in different types of literature". Maggie Humm (1992) asserts that feminism dealt with a belief in sexual equality combined with obligation to change society. It is clear from the above definitions that whatever feminism means to different people, it revolves principally around the female understanding and experience. Bressler (2007) asserts that feminism inquires about understanding the manners in which women are subjugated—socially, economically, politically and psychologically—with the intention of reducing, if not eradication of their subjugation and repression.

Feminism is apprehensive with females not just as a biological class, but the female gender as a social classification. Feminists share the opinion that women's domination and subjugation is attached to their sexuality. This is as a result that women and men's biological differences are reflected in the organization of society, and based on these variations; women are treated as inferior to men. Feminism distinctively and particularly focuses on women's understanding, and experiences and draws attention to various forms of subjugation which the female gender is facing in the society. In view of the fact that feminist's view that male domination is discovered in almost all important aspects of life, this male domination is looked at as the foundation of social inequalities, discrimination, and injustice which influence the life of women. Feminists therefore demand for the removal all the barriers to equal social, political and economic opportunities for women and reject the notion that a women's worth is decided primarily by her gender and that women are naturally inferior, submissive or less intelligent than men.

Development and Diversity of African Feminisms:

The notion of African Feminisms is looked at from the perception of equalist theories, applications and practices common in Nigeria. Writers and critics of Nigerian origin are at the front line of creating and re-creating workable adaptations of conventional feminism in Africa. Whether it is called Motherism, Feminism, Neo-feminism or African Womanism, greater part of the parts comprising African Feminism were created and made up by Nigerians. The following part of this study surveys the meaning, development and evolutionary periods of African Feminisms, commencing from the different suggestions related with the feminist label among women writers, theorists and critics principally from Nigeria and in a different places in Africa.

The importance, meaning, relevance, claim and application of the expression feminism in Africa causes numerous problems for African women writers and critics, most of whom are predisposed to move toward the feminist theory with an indefinable view that suggests denial. These writers deliberately and intentionally distance themselves from the feminist group, struggle and movement, although their writings go forward to the goals of feminism. Their unresponsiveness and unconcern perhaps occurs from the misunderstandings and misinterpretations that surround feminism and its multiple fine distinctions. Nkealah (2007) noted that feminism is frequently interpreted as being anti-culture, anti-male and anti-religion in its theoretical structure. This makes it difficult and challenging for a female writer who contributes to none of these ideologies to engage and undertake the feminist tag. For instance, several women writers like Bessie Head, Mariama Ba and Buchi Emecheta honestly and clearly detach themselves from feminism, giving rise to Ogun-dipe-Leslie to make clear their indifference in the direction of the theory as follows:

The present writer is of the judgment that, Ogun-dipe-Leslie's viewpoint above is not completely agreed by research. These female writers explicitly and undeniably identify the unstructured meanings related with feminism and not the 'male ridicule and backlash' as the basis and source for their position. For instance, (James 31) notes that Zaynab Akali, a great African woman writer laments that feminism rather hinders with women's writing. In the nonexistence of a thoughtful consideration and perception of these writers' fears, they are left with the alternative and option of embracing feminism simultaneously with all its anti-social nuances or re-theorizing it in a way that appropriately achieves their socio-cultural beliefs. Thus, African women writers and critics steers and navigates through 'feminism', 'womanism', 'African Feminism' and 'Africana Womanism' in explore for suitable theories for the understanding and explanation of their writings.

Chioma Filomena Steady tries to find out a reverse to the western thought and ideologies inherent in both. According to her,

Regardless of one's position, the implications of the feminist movement for the black woman are complex... Several factors set the black woman apart as having a different order of priorities. She is oppressed not simply because of her sex but ostensibly because of her race and, for the majority, essentially because of their class. Women belong to different socio-economic groups and do not represent a universal category. Because the majority of black women are poor, there is likely to be some alienation from the middle-class aspect of the women's movement which perceives feminism as an attack on men rather than on a system which thrives on inequality (23-24).

Steady's theory is, however, unacceptable and dismissed by Hudson-Weems for the reason of classification and categorization. Feminism and Womanism: She recommends her theory of African Feminism to assign the uncharacteristic of the African woman. The latter contends that,

in spite of the accuracy of Filomena Chioma Steady in The Black Woman Cross-Culturally in her astute assessment of the struggle and reality of Africana women, the name itself, African feminism, is problematic, as it naturally suggests an alignment with feminism, a concept that has been alien to the plight of Africana women from its inception (18-19).

The notion at this time is that Africana Womanism avoids the radical predispositions of feminism; tendencies and inclinations that drive the isolation of women from men; and setback of 'imaginary' suppression of Africana woman by man. Certainly and undeniably, an Africana man is deficient in the institutional power to suppress an Africana woman just as she does not view him as her adversary and foe. For instance, the incidence of influential warriors, priestesses and queens in traditional African societies invalidates the opinion that women entirely existed on the peripheries, experiencing and undergoing subjugation and domination at the mercy of men.

Nevertheless, demystifying and discrediting the claim that prejudice and sexism barely existed in nearly all traditional African societies and Africans neither associated men with dominance and women with inadequacy. There are documentations and instances of women's heroic acts in Nigeria. In Emeka Nwabueze's *The Dragon's Funeral*—a dramatic reproduction and re-creation of the 1929 Aba Women's riot in colonial Nigeria, women of Osisioma Ngwa prepare, plan, participate in, undertake and carry out accomplishments that save and rescue the womenfolk and, indeed, the whole community from mass taxation by colonial administrators. The success accomplished by women is noticeable, traceable and appreciable to their mindful recognition and detection of whom/what the problem/enemy is.

Adaugo explains as follows: Adaugo: Women of my ancestral land, there is dust in the air. Evil men have enveloped our land. The name of that evil, that dust is government. We have heard different rumours about what government is doing and even what it intends to do. Our husbands have heard it, our children have heard it, even the trees of our land have heard it. The serene atmosphere of this village will soon be disrupted by the strangers in our midst who call themselves government (Nwabueze 18; my emphasis).

The women's identification of their enemy provides a good judgment for direction to their ultimate steps. In addition, it is obvious and noticeable in the above extract that the women are careful of causing peace in the village. Thus, they distinctly pointed out their grievance—taxation—and embarked upon it to the end. This drama provides credibility and acceptance to the substance and existence of multiple gender activities and performances by women in Nigeria and in reality Africa.

The plurality of African feminisms indicates and suggests the cultural differences among women, including the numerous dynamics that make up their lived understandings and experiences; patriarchal opinions; and identification of the requirement for appropriate African feminist approaches that can offer women a voice. Embedded in cultural differences among the Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba—the principal ethnic groups in Nigeria—the various methods of doing the feminine gender lead to various viewpoints on the woman question. Ogundipe-Leslie differs from the view that African women do not need freedom or feminism because they have never been in oppression (542). In strengthening her view that African women are subjugated and oppressed, she clarifies the six challenges facing the African woman and wonders why, in Africa;

Man is always superior to woman, [and] boys should go to school and girls should only go when they can, when there is money to waste and no work to be done at home or in the farms and markets? (548).

She therefore recommends STIWA—an acronym for Social Transformation Including Women in Africa—as an alternative for feminism, with the intention of bypassing the confrontational discourses that result whenever one deliberates on the issue of feminism in Africa. This new presumption, according to Ogundipe-Leslie, would reduce the pressure created each time feminism is mentioned; men and women would naturally acknowledge and allow the inclusion of women in the social change and modification of Africa. Other advocates for women's co-partnership in the transformation and modification of Africa are Chikwenye

Ogunyemi's *Black Womanism* and *African Womanism*, Catherine Acholonu's *Motherism*, Obioma Nnaemeka's *NegoFeminism* and Chioma Opara's *Femalism*.

Femalism disagrees with Simone de Beauvoir's disgust of nature, drawing attention to the female body as a vital biological site. Comparing the revered female body to the African continent annihilated by scarcity, war and hunger, Opara's femalist thought is based on the woman's body—which she associates and equates to mother earth, creating a touching and distressing assertion on the relationship between the emancipation of African women and Africa at large. Femalism campaigners for the creation of consciousness and awareness on feminism without significantly opposing man; he is rather endured and accepted on considerate grounds, as a partner in progress, provided that he does not amount to obstacle to women's self-actualization. This theoretical recommendation of gender roles is inclined to advocate a vilification of man, and as a result depicts feminist theorists as individuals who do not actually aspire for gender equality but a role-reversal of the asserted domination and subjugation against them. The femalist principles are akin to Ogunyemi's Womanism which emphasizes on black accord as follows:

Womanism is black-centred. It is accommodationist. It wants meaningful union [sic] between black women and black men and black children, and will see to it that men will change from their sexist stand. This ideological position explains why women writers do not end their plots with feminist victories (5).

Womanism is absolutely realistic just like womanists aspiration for harmony among black men, women and children. As a result of the endless theoretical creations of African feminist theorists Womanism is supposed to have been accepted and approved as a standard recommendation and remedy for gender behaviour and objectives for the black Africans.

According to Catherine Acholonu, Motherism is a multi-dimensional theory that involves the self-motivated ordering, re-ordering, creation of structures, building and rebuilding in collaboration and team work with Mother Nature at all planes of human endeavour. The thrust of this theory is the endorsement, encouragement and promotion of common love, acceptance and defence of family values, absence of violence and associated hostilities between man and woman. One is tempted to view the differences between Motherism and Womanism, bearing in mind that both concepts advocate the collaboration and team work of both men and women and the defence of black roots and family values (Ogunyemi). Arguing that the simply substance of the Motherist theory is the addition to feminist vocabulary, Nnolim proposes that African Feminisms are in confusion within itself. This view is based on the metaphor of mayhem emanating from African feminists' curiosity in creating their individual and private theories instead of bringing together opportunities in achieving a distinct feasible and workable concept.

While outwardly substantiating the need to stop propagation of theories, Akachi Ezeigbo suggests that

African feminism and African Womanism are one and the same thing; and we do not see any significant difference. In Carole Boyce Davies' summary of African feminism, she refers to its recognition of a common struggle with African men against European/American exploitation; its respect for the African woman's status as mother; its validation of the virtues of self-reliance and the penchant to cooperative work but rejection of the overburdening exploitation of women by patriarchy. These attributes are equally identified with African Womanism (Cyprian Ekwensi 139).

Defending the creation of multiple theories of African feminism, on the other hand, Chioma Opara affirms that, Nnolim's worry may be understandable for he has the competence as an out-spoken gynandrist, discovered and identified morally with the female cause. It is slightly untimely and early to illustrate negative conclusions at this premature stage of theoretical development in African feminism. There is no doubtful alternatives of African feminism, though more recent than the theory of Western predecessors are regardless of few teething problems developing slowly. Feminism, womanism or femalism, the connecting string of female playwrights' schools of thought is the enhancement of the woman's condition. These theories are definitely African imitative of mainstream feminism, pinpointing of the fact that feminism refers to different concepts to different people irrespective of race, culture and historical knowledge.

Illustrations of Female Characters in Male Authored Texts

Men globally have perception that women are ignorant and respond to them there were of no significance. Africa writers have united with African men in portraying women as objects; some describe them as individuals with minds of their own while some others are sympathetic in their portrayal of women. Most African male writers sometimes represent women in African Literature or in their texts as slaves, helpless victims, reproductive machines, and lately heroines.

In Achebe's earliest writings, particularly *Things Fall Apart*, there is distinction between masculine stories of men and feminine tales. Women are considered to be weak and the males are not expected to sit with them so as not to have their minds polluted with feminine ideas. This was seen when Akueke's bride price is to be paid. The men carry out the negotiations. Also, in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, wife assaulting is a general feature. Women take everything done to them faithfully and women are made to be compliant, obedient and submissive in nature. Indeed, it can be possibly noted that Achebe's earlier works are realistic presentations of what was occurred in the past. But his more recent writings such as *Girls at War* and *Anthills of Savannah* present women in heroic lights.

G.D Killian (ed) *African writers on African writhing* (1984) demonstrates Elechi Amadi as one of the African's female sympathizers. He perceives them as whores who are both faithless and helpless victims because they have been created what they are by the male controlled society. In one of his novels *Estrangement*; he sees women as contravening the patriarchal restrictions and attaining accomplishment in life through prostitution. In this novel, we have a male character who perpetually wants to downgrade women to the background.

Again, earlier writings of Ngugi wa thiongo disclosed that his attributes had a lot of positive qualities for women. Some of them, like in Amadi's *Estrangement* may be prostitutes but certainly not helpless victims. They are in the vanguard and forefronts of events and sometimes even lead men. They had great sense of direction. Ngugi is one of the writers that created the way for women writings, making them to deem and believe in themselves.

Women writers have resisted and challenged male pressure and are out spoken from their position as others. Feminist critics both male and female have provided capacity, vigor and vitality to gender discourse in decisive break by providing voice to female written novels. They are resistant to oppression, subjugation, dictatorship, male chauvinism and antagonism. The search for female liberation from male suppression is summarized in the saying that 'a nation's development can be judged by its treatment of its women'.

Conclusion

This study discloses that feminism has not succeeded in its global objective to provide the needs of women universally. This study has deliberated those unpleasant and unprogressive notions on the strategies of obtaining gender equality as the bane of African feminisms. The search for status has provoked several female writers and critics to advocate theories which do not reasonably vary from the subsisting ones they abandoned. As a result, the hurriedly appearing theories increase daily at the expense of women's emancipation from the patriarchal hold. Having endeavoured a holistic examination of the well-known theories that compose African feminisms, this study identifies the restoration and improvement of African feminists to be more corrective, practical and virtually responsive to the interest of humanity. Feminism as a put into practice discusses the requirements of middle class white women. As a result of the inadequacies of feminism, the African American women developed the notion of womanism to gather the wants of Black woman in America. The study also identified that though womanism claims to deal with the needs of every Black woman, African American womanism alone is commonly insufficient for the explicit interest of African women in Africa. As a result, it becomes imperative to question about an African alternative and modification of the feminist theory while various efforts are made to get together this need, however no agreement have been reached at, and from feminism, womanism, to motherism, there is still a commonly acknowledged home-grown and indigenous theory unusual to African women in Africa. As a result, a home-

grown African on gender should engage a dialogic approach, a healthy positive reception of African cultures, a acknowledgment and identification of the heterogeneity of African cultures, a pragmatic and reasonable strategies not having needless antagonism, and the centralizing of positive understanding, knowledge and experiences for African women resulting from the idea that diversifying feminist theory would meet the particular needs of African women in which gender discourse will be protected from becoming inappropriate, irrelevant, stagnant, unyielding and assertive, and expectantly assist in resolving the various difficulties and challenges of African women in Africa.

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