

African feminism: the African woman's struggle for identity

Ruvimbo Goredema

There is an interesting point, where at the crossroads of being a researcher of rhetoric and an observer of gender relations in Africa, I find that my biology of being a woman filters the experiences of how I understand literature, arguments and social interactions. I view this as a result of accepting how my biology and socialisation (in and outside the academic environment) have influenced to a large extent my relations with men, women and texts. With this in mind, the question I seek to answer is how do women create and maintain identities for themselves in Africa, particularly in the academic public sphere?

I choose this space because historically, and still to some extent, the academic public sphere is a place in which they have been in the minority and have had limited access. In order to tackle this question, I present two arguments. The first is that the understanding of the "feminine/feminist" perspective, (which has been mostly disseminated by women in academia) is based on the idea that there is an opposite and invasive understanding of the world that is masculine. Secondly, the study of Rhetoric has often been accused as being a male preserve that has historically failed to accommodate the role of women in creating a 'rhetorical' path, especially in Africa. Therefore, by analyzing arguments concerning African feminism, I hope to create the opportunity for the two disciplines of Rhetoric and Gender Studies to interact on the African intellectual plain.

I would ask the reader to evoke for themselves a '*double consciousness*' as propagated by W.E B Du Bois,¹ "this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, two identities warring in one body". On one hand there is an identity that has been historically oppressed, and the other that understands privilege and has been successful □ in so doing, you are imagining the current position of the middle class African Woman. The rest of this paper will aim to shed light on the following questions: who is this African woman and what does she want to achieve? What do her past, her present and future look like? Finally, what does she think of others? African feminism, like any other discourse that asserts itself, gives pleasure for both its advocates and scholars in highlighting the struggles of the subject. It is these challenges that I wish to discuss, and leave you not only with a perspective to the questions I put forward, but also leave you with more questions regarding the future of African feminism in an increasingly integrated world.

¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Strivings of the Negro People", *The Atlantic Monthly*, August (1897): <http://www.americasinging.com/wordpress2/wp-content/uploads/2009/11/WEB-DuBois.pdf>. accessed December 2009.

African Feminism

African feminism is a feminist epistemology and a form of rhetoric that has provided arguments, which validate the experience of women of Africa and of African origin against a mainstream feminist discourse. It is a justice that aims to create a discernible difference between women who were colonised and those who were deemed the colonisers, and a social movement that aims to raise a global consciousness which sympathises with African women's histories, present realities and future expectations.

African feminism concerns itself not only with the rights of women from Africa but is also inclusive of those living in the Diaspora as many of the contributors to the literature have often lived "abroad". Therefore, let our inquiring minds not be limited by a geographical location as the name would imply. However, the debates, practices and implementation are most credibly pursued on the African continent.

Ama Ata Aidoo,² an authoress of African literature states,

"I should go on to insist that every man and every woman should be a feminist – especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives and the burden of African development. It is not possible to advocate independence of African development without also believing that African women must have the best that the environment can offer. For some of us this is the crucial element of feminism".

There is an understandable misinterpretation which regards African feminism as a part of Third Wave feminism, however, it is within the realm of the Third Wave feminist interpretation that the tensions between race and culture begin to appear. The tension has even led to the rejection of the concept of Third Wave feminism being applied as a principle for African women. It is because this wave is interpreted as an ideology that is hinged on Western Feminism, or to be more explicit, "historically recent Europe[an] and America[n] social movements founded to struggle for female equality and subsequently carried forward in an imperial march across the globe".³

Within Africa, in both social and most academic environments, there seems to be an agreement about what feminism is, and that its source originates from European and American (hereafter referred to as Western) definitions. This is because traditionally and geographically the West has provided the disposition and the strategies associated with this movement.

² A.A. Aidoo, "African Women Today" in *Sisterhood Feminisms & Power: From Africa to the Diaspora*, O. Nnaemeka, ed. (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa Wide Press, 1998).

³ O. Oyewumi, *African Woman and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, (Trenton New Jersey: Africa World Press Inc, 2003).

Natasha Gordon in her paper highlights this point and supports it with other feminist literature done by Chandra Mohanty.⁴ She argues that “Western Feminism has ultimately created an ahistorical, stagnant ‘Third World Woman’ that is constituted as a coherent group, (thus) sexual difference becomes conterminous with female subordination, and power automatically defined in binary terms: people who have it (read: men) and people who do not (read: women).”⁵ Yet, African feminism cannot be defined by one or several movements that are as discernable as in Western feminism where the distinction between the first, second and third wave movements are clear. For African women, feminism is very dependent on a temporal scale shaped by political eras. These eras are pre colonial, colonial and post colonial Africa. These eras are dissimilar across African countries because the histories of the liberation struggles are different for each country. The result of this is that the definitions and experiences of feminism are different from region to region within Africa.

Regional distinctions add further problems when defining African feminism, particularly regarding at which level the discourse’s subject and terminology are to be set. If national borders are used as a parameter, it would be possible to distinguish between, Nigerian and South African Feminism for example. These countries’ histories are different and so are their cultures and traditions. “But Nigerian and South African feminisms too are mere constructs which hardly do justice to feminisms’ heterogeneity”.⁶ This is because there is ethnic plurality in South Africa which is supported by the recognition of 11 official languages that include English and Afrikaans (Colonial languages). There could be a Zulu-Feminism, but what would that consist of and how would it interact with Afrikaner Feminism or even Sotho Feminism? In an effort to not be overwhelmed by issues of heterogeneity, African feminism returns to iconic categories that put a spotlight on the differences between African and Western Feminisms initially. They are the following: 1.) Culture/Tradition, 2.) Socio-economic and socio-political issues, 3.) The role of men, 4.) Race, and 5.) Sex and/or sexuality.

These categories are fundamental because they are the cement that hold the discourse of African feminism. They’re also dynamic because to varying degrees, they represent the concerns that have shaped many of the movements within Western Feminisms. However, African Feminism would have us believe that these very same categories make the experience of feminism in Africa unquestionably different from that experienced in the West. These categories are explained as oppressions. Gwendolyn Mikell, supplies us with a description of African feminism as “dealing with multiple

⁴ C. Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses”, *Feminist Review*, 30 (1988): 61-88.

⁵ N. Gordon, ““Tonguing the Body”: Placing Female Circumcision within African Feminist Discourse”, *Issue: A Journal of Opinion*, 25, 2 (1997): 24.

⁶ S. Arndt, *The Dynamism of African Feminism: Defining and Classifying African Feminist Literatures* (Trenton New Jersey: Africa World Press Inc., 2002): 35.

oppressions” as indicated by the aforementioned categories. She also comments that African feminism is dealing with “women first and foremost as human, rather than sexual beings”.⁷ This is a key point because a woman’s sexuality and reproductive role in society has been a point of conflict in determining women’s access and mobility in the public sphere.

Duality of African feminist thought

It is clear that understanding African feminism is a delicate process of negotiating several discourses that can result in a double edged sword. In some ways African feminism, purposefully seeks to be detached from the notions of colonialism, race, class etc, as a way of explaining the current position of women in Africa. Yet, the very reason for its advocacy is because African women have tried to re-define and re-express the importance of these issues. The rationale for wanting to be detached from the colonial is illustrated when arguments that claim historically (by this I mean pre-colonial times) that African women have been in positions of power, and have had equal access to resources like men, and furthermore that authentic African culture and tradition did not oppress women.

For example, the existence of events and actions done by Black South African women prior to colonisation can be interpreted as feminist action. Black women did have positions of leadership and influence. Many women leaders existed throughout Africa even though historical evidence for some is fragmented. In South Africa, “Zulu royal women demonstrated such leadership before, during and after King Shaka’s reign and this took a variety of forms... Sometimes military, but more often economic and religious... including rain making, administering ritual medicine and custodianship of sacred objects”.⁸

It is historical narratives like these that support the imagery of the strong, black, selfless African woman. Yet the shortcoming is that often, the few women who have been documented have been left in the vaults of myth and exception. The repercussions have often resulted in a fruitless debate in the public sphere and an appeal to return to ‘authentic traditional practices’ that have been forgotten or watered down, due to “modernity”, for lack of a better term.

Colonisation also helped create the image of the selfless liberation war heroine. The liberation struggle in South Africa clearly exemplifies how black women who were actively fighting against apartheid could be labelled

⁷ G. Mikell, “African Feminism: Toward a New Politics of Representation”, *Feminist Studies*, 21, 2 (1995): 405-424.

⁸ J. Weir, “Chiefly Women and Women’s Leadership in Pre-Colonial Southern Africa”, in *Women in South African History: Basus’imbokodo, bawel’imilambo/they remove boulders and cross rivers*, N. Gasa, ed. (Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council, 2007): 8-12.

feminist by the very act of bearing arms. In addition, there is selflessness which women in society are still expected to perform. At this point let me emphasise that it is the *attitude of selflessness* that often is a deliberate self-construction advocated by some African women that is often juxtaposed against Western feminists who are viewed to be selfish in their desires, and daily practices when trying to obtain equality with men.

Another argument boils down the issue to a matter of linguistics. Some argue that feminism in Africa has always existed. It is only because in African languages there was no word to describe this position linguistically that unfortunately African women have blindly ascribed to an expression brought from the West. Accordingly, some writers and theoreticians who study gender relations in Africa have argued that traditional African societies have always thought and lived in a feminist way long before the colonial invasion. Kolawole stated:

*“Although many African languages have no synonym for feminism as it is defined by the West, the concept of group action by women, based on common welfare in social, cultural, economic, religious and political matters is indigenous and familiar to a majority of these women”.*⁹

This statement gives pause for thought. It cannot be fairly argued that every traditional ‘group action’ of African women was feminist in nature. If we agree to that then it implies that a feminist organisation is simply a gathering of bantering women who may or may not seek to challenge gender inequalities that repress and discriminate against them.

Another pinched nerve within the discourse is that lo and behold, African feminists do not really want to be called feminists. To be frank, you are not going to hear the term “African Feminism” in everyday conversation without someone having to offer an explanation for the terminology; even though there is an understanding that feminism in Africa is not quite the same as in America or Europe. In this vein Nora Chase, a Namibian Black woman activist argued that the minute you hear about feminism one immediately puts in the connotation of European and North American women’s struggles. These are women from societies which have long been independent — people who support the governments that support her experience of oppression. She maintains that she could never feel solidarity with that.

I would like to highlight a duality of thought within African feminist discourse, as highlighted by Flora Nwapa, an African authoress. Women in Africa are in two minds as to whether they should refer to themselves, or let themselves be referred to, as feminists.

⁹ M. Kolawole, “The Dynamism of African Feminism: Defining and Classifying African Feminist Literatures”, in *The Dynamism of African Feminism: Defining and Classifying African Feminist Literatures*, S Arndt, ed. (Trenton New Jersey: Africa World Press Inc. 2002): 31.

"I don't think that I am a radical feminist. I don't even accept that I am a feminist. I accept that I'm an ordinary woman who is writing about what she knows".¹¹

Buchi Echemta another African authoress declared in a speech at George Town University that,

"I have never called myself a feminist. Now if you choose to call me a feminist, that is your business; but I don't subscribe to the feminist idea that all men are brutal and repressive and we must reject them. Some of these men are my brothers and fathers and sons. Am I to reject them too?"¹²

The above quotes not only exemplify the crisis in determining the experience of feminism in Africa, but also highlight a form of negotiation that African women are particularly privy to — this is negotiating a dual existence of Western knowledge and values together with African authenticity and cultural value, a world where feminism is un-African because it is not part of African culture.

The debate that pushes forward the un-Africaness of feminism implies, a somewhat unflattering assertion, a jibe towards the description and value of "the 'real' African woman... [who] is content with her subordinate position as wife, mother and beast of burden. She is passive in the face of abuse, tolerant of all forms of infidelity; her only real ambition is to retain respectability by laboring for the maintenance of a stable marriage and family and seeing to the satisfaction of her husband's desires".¹³ I would suggest that the main reason why this tension is present is because of two areas of disagreement brought up by African feminists in order to disregard Western feminist thought. In area one — there are the challenges concerning how to interact with men in both the public and private sphere. In area two — there are the challenges African women face regarding how to preserve the cultural authenticity of their public and private spaces within national borders and as part of a continuously influential and invasive global community. Consequently, the lines have been drawn as to who gets to be identified as an African woman and who gets to be the example for African feminism. This leads to a process of silencing that takes place within the discourse, which is in part fuelled by class and racial differences.

There is no doubt that African feminism is largely made up of the responses of middle-class educated black women who are taking action upon

¹¹ O. Ogunyemi, "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English", *Signs*, 11, 1 (1985): 64-80.

¹² G. Mikell, "African Feminism: Toward a New Politics of Representation", *Feminist Studies*, 21 (1995).

¹³ Amina Mama, "Women's Studies and Studies of Women in Africa during the 1990s" (1995), <http://www.gwsafrica.org/knowledge/index.html>, accessed September 2009.

the claims set up by middle-class white women. Yet those who are uneducated, poor and in the majority serve the function of highlighting the differences between African and Western feminism. This suggests that African Feminist methodology and theory is also as questionable as Western Feminism's interpretation of African experiences. Mohanty explains it as thus, "similar arguments pertaining to questions of methods of analysis can be made in terms of middle-class, urban African and Asian scholars producing scholarship on or about their rural or working-class sisters which assumes their own middle-class culture as the norm, and codifies peasant and working-class histories and cultures as 'Other'".¹⁴

A problem of membership

There is an ideal that centers on the necessity of constructing and maintaining a movement for African women, which is reflective and supportive of the diversity within this population. It is important to recognize the tremendous heterogeneity that operates within the boundaries of the term 'African woman', however, up till this point, this still does not include white women who define themselves as being of African decent. This also raises questions about who has the platform to speak about African feminism, and why they have been granted that access? If, as the research has shown women involved in creating the base for this discourse are, primarily those who contribute to African literature and academia, can they be interpreted as being better champions for the identity than women who have low levels of literacy, and limited access to academia? Also, how can African men (including white African men) contribute to the discourse without being identified as an abnormality who has decided to go against his 'natural' male state by supporting women's rights and causes and weakening the advantages of patriarchy?

Both Western and African feminist literature in varying degrees silence men and protect a certain way of thinking about men in Africa. I'd be negligent if I did not challenge the notion of 'patriarchy', and to be fair, men have long been whipped into silence by the word and its implications. Patriarchy and how it is practiced presents many problems for the African woman. Many theorists have used the term "patriarchy" in African contexts to refer to the organisation of social life and institutional structures in which men have ultimate control over most aspects of women's lives and actions. For instance, men have access to and benefit from women's labor more than the reverse. Historically, the sexual division of labor was organised in such a way that women were (and still are) the primary caregivers, and were responsible for the bulk of food cultivation and/or processing. Women therefore played central, but socially subordinate roles in African society,

¹⁴ Mohanty, *Feminist Review*, 61-88.

resulting in their being denied access to institutions that were gendered a male preserve, such as academia. As for theorists critical of patriarchy, they put on the table an issue of agency, where women — both now and in the past — play pivotal roles that facilitate patriarchal economic and political dominance. The questions are: do African men want to contribute to the understanding of African feminism, or are they in their feminist closet? Could it be that the men that African feminists so wish to protect from Western feminists, have also been silenced by their own women?

White women in Africa

It can be argued that the chief challenge for African feminists is to sustain their authenticity as Africans against white Western Feminism. If they identify themselves as feminists they run the risk of being automatically linked to white feminist ideology, justifiably so or not. Along with this, those studying them from the outside, like rhetoricians can view the African Feminist as trying to imitate white feminists. The fact that race is the cornerstone of many arguments about what distinguishes African from Western Feminism leads to resistance from the 'accused'. White women in Africa have contributed to the debate in their own way, and although their arguments have been acknowledged, they have been received and interpreted in a singular fashion — they are simply regarded as a reinforcement of mainstream white Western Feminism. A lack of response from both black women and men through literature and research is apparent and this lack of acknowledgement can be interpreted as a silencing of another voice. This suggests that white women are trying to create new positions as feminists in Africa and secondly, more at the heart of the matter, they are trying to move from the intellectual margins of African academy to a point of validation. Amanda Gouws says, "criticizing the person instead of the argument stifles debate and does not enhance the feminist praxis of enabling other women to speak in their own voices; neither can it raise the consciousness of women who are guilty of racist, patronising, imperialist practices".¹⁵

It would seem from this position that black African feminists are accused of focusing their debate on individuals rather than ideology. She also says that African feminists give the impression that "White women should not speak for black women; neither should men speak for women". Yet, if the research meets the requirements of academic rigor, "white women should be able to speak about the experiences of black women, or black women can speak about the experiences of white women and men can speak about the experiences of women. But this should not occur at the expense of self-presentation".¹⁶ Researchers in fields studying societies, gender studies and

¹⁵ A. Gouws, "The Angry Divide", *Agenda Feminist Media Women and Difference*, 19 (1993): 67-70.

¹⁶ Gouws, *Agenda*, 68.

feminism are faced with the critical question of what entitles one to be an expert, or to study a subject if you have no legitimate claim to that reality?

I would like to conclude my analysis of African feminism by suggesting that although this discourse has legitimate support and claims it cannot speak for all who identify themselves as African women or men. Western feminism used certain rhetoric to persuade western women in order to support the feminist movement. However, if African feminism argues that it is inherently a separate epistemology from Western feminism, they still have a long way to go before they convince middle class African women of all races.

Issues and attitudes are always changing, and if African Feminism is to continue to rise as a discourse by holding on to old ideas of identity and accessibility, I fear that it may stagnate and remain in literature and the halls of academia rather than in new popular, dynamic African culture where it should be nurtured. What African feminists must realize is that their movement cannot be formed in a vacuum, they will need to acknowledge the "other", which consists of women from other races, and men. The reality is that the African feminist movement is not privy to the rhetorical techniques used by Western feminism. When Western Feminism began it did not have to recognise the pervasive effects of globalisation or the "other" as much as African feminism must do.