

ISSN: 2251-0095

JOURNAL

— ● — OF THE — ● —
LITERARY SOCIETY
OF NIGERIA (JLSN)

ISSUE 10, JUNE 2018

A Publication of the Literary Society of Nigeria

Culture and Afro-Centric Feminist Notions: A Critical Analysis of Stiwanism, Motherism, Womanism and Nego-Feminism

FOLUKE ALIYU-IBRAHIM

Abstract

Feminism has long been accepted as having different colourations and interpretations. Consequently, African feminist critics have formulated a plethora of afro-centric feminist schools of thought, all based on the premise that a feminist literary theory derived from the socio-historical/ cultural experiences of the writer and/ or the target audience, would produce a more valid interpretation of the writer's text. Using the analytic method, an attempt is made to examine four of the most common and known African notions of feminism, namely Stiwanism, Motherism, Womanism and Nego-Feminism. This is with the view to determining their congruence or otherwise, in both terminology and concept, with African culture in context. The research shows that the four afro-centric feminist schools of thought reveal differing levels of inconsistencies with African culture, a challenge compounded by the heterogeneous nature of the culture in Africa. The paper concludes on the need for one encompassing theory that will serve as the base from which other regional African feminist concepts will emerge and proposes Afro-Feminisms as an alternative.

Introduction

While not denying that literature has some autonomy, it would also be valid to claim that society influences literature to some extent. This informs the perception of African feminist critics that applying feminist theories derived from other cultures other than that that inspired the text could distort the feminist intents and other feminist symbols in such texts and also possibly do injustice to the culture in which the text is based. Nnaemeka posits thus:

Feminist theory and literary criticism should not be constituted into a wrecking ball with which to demolish and do violence to or initiate the demise of African literary texts; rather it should be fashioned as the key or map with which to unlock or decipher meanings in their multiplicity and paradoxes; it should be put in the service of cultural productions by increasing our understanding of them. (81)

Thus, as far as critics such as Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, Catherine Acholonu, Mary Ebun Kolawole and Obioma Nnaemeka are concerned, a feminist theory for

African texts should embody, in terminology and concept, the experiences of the African woman. Ogundipe-Leslie calls for transformation, not only in the theoretical postulations about the Africa woman, but also in practical terms. She states that a people's identity is not defined by race but by culture which she adds is dynamic. She calls for the reconstructions of African narratives of culture and epistemology so that analyses on the African woman can be culturally contextualized (233). Acholonu (1995) criticises Western feminists and some African feminists and female writers for misrepresenting the African woman by using Western concepts of feminism for Africa and calls for more researches that are anthropological in nature. In seeking an answer to the misrepresentations of the African woman by both Western and some African feminists and writers, Kolawole calls for an ideology that is socially constructed and which notes the centrality of the intertwined nature of gender, race, culture, class, and nationalism to African women's notion of self-assertion. Nnaemeka (2003) argues for the necessity and prudence of building on the indigenous African culture in the construction of a feminist theory that is African. It is noteworthy to mention that in spite of the fact that Nigerian critics are foremost in this regard, other theorists and critics such as the Sierra Leonian Filomena Steady (who proposed African Feminism in 1981) readily come to mind.

In response to the need to create what they perceive as the appropriate tool for the analyses of African texts, these Nigerian feminist critics proposed different feminist notions that are perceived to be reflective of the African culture. The afro-centric concepts to be examined in this study are 'Stiwanism' by Molar Ogundipe-Leslie, 'Motherism' by Catherine Acholonu 'Womanism' by Mary E. Kolawole (who adopted her notion from Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi's African Womanism), and 'Nego-feminism' by Obioma Nnaemeka. The study seeks to ascertain how reflective of African culture these afro-centric schools of thought are in both their conception and in naming.

Critical Analysis of Molar Ogundipe Leslie's Stiwanism

Ogundipe-Leslie's afro-centric feminist notion, Stiwanism, is enunciated in her collection of essays titled *Recreating Ourselves African Women and Critical Transformations* which are actually lectures and talks written and presented by her at various fora. The essay wherein she discusses her Stiwanism is the nineteenth of the twenty essays in the book and is put in the second part of the book titled 'Practice'. However, other essays in the first part titled 'Theory' are also of relevance to our discussion. Ogundipe-Leslie analyses and proffers solution to the question of the African woman from a Marxist perspective.

Her attempt places the African woman within a global socio-economic context. Adopting Mao-Tse Tung's statement about the obstacles in the way of

both the Chinese man and woman, Ogundipe-Leslie conceptualises the challenges facing the African woman as six mountains which she bears on her back. These are oppression from outside from historical experiences such as slavery, colonisation and Westernisation with their attendant capitalism; African tradition with the structures and attitudes inherited from indigenous history and sociological realities; the backwardness of the African woman; men; race and the African woman herself (28). However these can be re-categorised into four broad 'mountains'. Since the backwardness of the African woman and race are as a result of colonisation and imperialism, these two 'mountains' can be subsumed under the first challenge. Also, the sixth 'mountain' i.e. the African woman herself can be discussed as the resultant effect of both foreign intrusions such as colonisation and oppressive indigenous structures and attitudes. To Ogundipe-Leslie, these 'mountains' are indicative of the need for feminism (an ideology that discusses the rights of women) in the African continent.

Ogundipe-Leslie contends that the African woman must be considered, analysed and studied in the complexity of her existential reality. These include her class, culture, race, and ethnicity (35). She observes that misconceptions of the African woman, particularly the rural woman have led to the belief that she is voiceless. She states that the concentration on the woman as wife is responsible for this misconception especially as marriage is a major site of women's subjugation on the African continent. Ogundipe-Leslie states the many identities of the African woman declaring that "African women are more than wives. To understand their multi-faceted identities beyond wifehood, we must look for their roles and statuses in sites other than that of marriage" (13). Ogundipe-Leslie also emphasises female bonding (non-sexual same-sex association among women) which she observes is part of the various identities that the woman assumes.

Ogundipe-Leslie further asserts that feminism should not be opposed to African culture by preaching hatred of men; neither should it be the imitation of Western expressions and values. It is her contention however that there are ideologies in the indigenous African culture which provided avenues for women's oppositions and resistance to injustice; these are strategies which she submits were used to correct gender imbalance and injustice in indigenous African societies (61).

She states that the word 'feminism' is a controversial term in Africa and thus advocates the word 'Stiwanism' which is her acronym for *Social Transformation Including Women in Africa*. According to her, apart from bypassing the combative discourses which the word 'feminism' raises in Africa, Stiwanism:

Allows me to discuss the needs of African women today in the tradition of spaces and strategies provided in our indigenous cultures for the social

being of women. "STIWA" is about the inclusion of African women in the contemporary social and political transformation of Africa. (230)

Marxism colours Ogundipe-Leslie's perspective of feminism as her book foregrounds the importance of class in feminist studies. Her work places emphasis on the significance of the rural (often illiterate, often neglected) African women. In addition, her insistence that feminism existed in Africa's indigenous culture acknowledges the fact that African women had, and still have, a crucial role to play not only in the past, but also in the contemporary social and political engineering of society. Unlike Western feminism therefore, Ogundipe-Leslie's postulations stress the African woman's relevance in the public sphere. Paradoxically, this is an identifiable weakness in her theory as the Marxist leaning focuses more on the role of women in the public sphere rather than on equal attention to both public and private spheres.

Ogundipe-Leslie's perception that African tradition has structures and attitudes that are oppressive to the African woman is realistic. This gives weight to her submission that the African culture would also have in-built strategies to correct such imbalances or injustice that could arise from such oppressive attitudes. This offers a broader perspective to the solution. One however wonders why Marxism, an ideology foreign to African culture, predominates Ogundipe-Leslie's concept of feminism in Africa. In addition, while Marxism may have been a popular alternative to political and economic policies from the 1970s through to the 1990s, the same cannot be said for the twenty-first century as Marxism is no longer a favoured substitute.

Furthermore, we consider as unconvincing, the argument behind Ogundipe-Leslie's naming her concept as Stiwanism. First, contrary to her claim, there is no way Stiwanism will not be defined in relation to other feminisms (230). Stiwanism is a feminist ideology and it is only natural that it would be analysed and compared within the context of other feminist theories. To buttress this point, she herself uses the term 'feminism' in the book under review to refer to her ideology. Therefore, re-naming as a reason is too simplistic in making a distinction between it and other feminisms. In any case, feminist scholarship began in the West. It would thus be unnecessary to desire that any postulations on feminism anywhere would not, as Ogundipe-Leslie claims, have to answer to charges of influence and not necessarily imitation.

Critical Analysis of Catherine Acholonu's Motherism

Motherism was propounded by Catherine Acholonu in her seminal book *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*. The book can be divided into three parts. The first examines the place and position of the pre-colonial

African woman. The second part focuses on how the two foreign religions (Islam and Christianity), colonialism and post-colonialism altered the position of the pre-colonial African woman. The third part is a journey that culminated in her proposing *Motherism* as a term that encapsulates what she believes African feminism ought to be.

As far as Acholonu is concerned, the pre-colonial African woman lived a life devoid of gender oppression and marginalisation. The critic states that evidence from anthropology, oral tradition and the arts and craft show that African metaphysics is based on the complementarity of the female with the male. She maintains that rather than a subordinate role, the relationship between the man and the woman was one of complementarity. Acholonu affirms that the system of patriarchy was an inappropriate term to describe the relationship between the two sexes as power was shared in separate and complementary hierarchies. While the men received greater projection in the society because of the role they played in the socio-political sphere, Acholonu insists that the women held discreet powers that were spiritual in nature (6).

Worthy of mention because of its significance are the six different positions which Acholonu says the woman occupies in African cosmology. These positions are wife; daughter/ sister; mother; queen/ priestess; goddess; husband. Each of these positions has implications of power for the woman, even if some are in relation to the man (24). This shows the fluidity of gender in indigenous African societies. This fluidity of gender is one of the findings of Amadiume's research among the Igbo in her book *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. This concept has also been confirmed in researches carried out among the Yoruba by Oyewumi (*The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*), Olajubu (*Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*) and Olademo (*Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions*). Acholonu's typology has significant implications for character portrayal in African literature. It suggests the different 'images' of the woman that are possible in imaginative texts.

As far as Acholonu's research has shown, social status is determined by economic power and not gender. Consequently, she states that "the word equality...cannot be used in African gender relations at all" and adds that the Western concept of equality is a subversion of the natural order (106). She insists that African feminism must go back to the traditional ideal of womanhood which include motherhood, nature and nurture; this, she calls Motherism:

A multidimensional theory which involves the dynamics of ordering, re-ordering, creating structures, building and rebuilding in co-operation with Mother Nature at all levels of human endeavour. (111)

Acholonu explains that the Motherist, who could be either a man or woman, respects all men irrespective of colour, race, religion, and ethnicity. The motherist hates injustice in all forms and in the love for progress, would go to any length to ensure equity (112). Thus, in African literary texts, a character referred to as a mother would be seen as possessing inner strength, creating, teaching and nurturing what can be considered as positive elements in the society. Badejo asserts that values associated with motherhood are 'derived from ancient African philosophy and cosmology that in the words of an Akan saying recognise that through the womb of the woman all humanity passes' (95).

Acholonu also has precepts that the Motherist writer should adhere to. The motherist female writer is expected to have a literary constituency that is universal and not confine her vision to only women related issues. The motherist male on the other hand should not create his work from a patriarchal, masculinist and dominatory viewpoint (113).

According to Acholonu, while individualism defines Western feminism, social relationships, the most important being motherhood, are the constituents of both African and African American feminisms (108). Motherhood as a trope in African literature has been criticised by some scholars. Ogundipe-Leslie believes that the mother stereotype limits a woman's potential and alluding to Emecheta's *Joys of Motherhood* derides the concept thus: "The way African writers enthuse about motherhood, one wonders if there are no women who hate childbirth or have undeveloped maternal instincts" (58). Davies questions the 'appropriation' and privileging of motherhood as an identity of African women (242) while Lopez, citing what she perceives as the ironic ending to Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*, believes that the degree of attachment to the myth of motherhood may be more ambiguous and less homogenous than critics seem to suggest (84).

It is our contention, however, that motherhood has not been 'appropriated' as an identity of African women. Rather in the African culture, it is an identity naturally bestowed on all women, irrespective of race. The emphasis placed on the sustenance of the human race, one of which is achieved through procreation, is misunderstood by these critics. Procreation in the African context does not merely refer to the biological ability to produce offspring; it implies the aptitude to nurse and nurture the child into a being that will become a valuable and valued member of society. In any case, the fact of Nnu Ego's experience in Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* cannot be taken as evidence that motherhood is not appreciated in the African culture as Lopez claims. Nnu Ego takes the tasks of motherhood to an extreme level. This is an attitude, which Nnaemeka, citing the tragic fate which befalls Okonkwo in Achebe's *Things fall Apart*, insists is unacceptable in the Igbo culture:

In any
she cl
Afric

In ot
expr
is a v
A
fluid
are
rom
mar
stat
tha
pov
the
as
tes
ha
Aj
wh
of
pe
ac
th
v
a
r
t
t

I knew immediately that Okonkwo would not survive; his fatal flaw is his excess. In the same way, I knew that Nnu Ego (*The joys of motherhood*) would not survive: she was excessive/ obsessive in her pursuit of "the joys of mother-hood." The Igbo novel speaks against excess because the Igbo world view is informed by balance and the spirit of live and let live. (99)

In any case, Ogundipe-Leslie seems to contradict herself later in her book when she charges the African woman writer to first begin by knowing the truth about African women and womanhood and insists further that:

She must tell about being a woman: what the facts of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth and menopause contribute to the woman's personality and the way she feels and knows her world. (61)

In other words, if the woman writer feels good about motherhood, she ought to express this as a way of showing her commitment to what Ogundipe-Leslie says is a way of correcting "the false images of the woman in Africa" (61).

Acholonu's stress on the complementarity between the two sexes and the fluidity of gender in pre-colonial African societies is noteworthy. However, there are some significant criticisms of Acholonu's treatise. First, she makes an overly romantic statement in her assumption that gender was not the basis for marginalisation in indigenous African society. This is not a completely correct statement. Acholonu's use of the word 'hardly' in the statement: "The truth is that what determines social status in Africa, in all parts of Africa, is economic power, hardly gender" (44), introduces the role that class plays in the treatment of the woman and thus casts some doubt on her pristine view of pre-colonial Africa as far as gender relations is concerned. No doubt there are oral traditions which testify to the esteemed position in which women are placed. For example, women have played vital roles in the oral traditions of origins of towns and kingdoms. Ajon for instance helped in the establishment of Olukiri dynasty (in Ododo 325) while the stories of the exploits of such women as Queens Idia of Benin, Amina of Zaria and Moremi of Ile-ife have become well-known. However, as Okoh (38) posits, these women were predisposed to achieve these deeds because of the advantage of birth since in most ancient (and modern) societies the daughters of the nobility were often placed above discriminations which the generality of other women experienced.

Again, the African society has always privileged sons over daughters. This is a form of marginalisation or oppression of the female. An example of marginalisation on the basis of gender is the inhuman traditions a widow is made to undergo especially among the Igbos in Nigeria. In addition, instances abound in the oral traditions of Africa which attest to marginalisation on the basis of gender.

Examples of these include the popular folktale of the young girl who chooses to marry a man not chosen for her by her parents. Consider this Yoruba proverb which denigrates the woman: 'Obirin bi'mo fun ni ko ni ko ma pani' which literally means that 'the fact that a woman bears a child for one does not mean that she would not kill one'.

Naming her concept 'Motherism', implies that Acholonu privileges just one out of the six dimensions of womanhood identified. Apart from the abuse of the power in the position of daughters (i.e. the instance of the *Umuada* of Igbo land), Acholonu only highlights the positive aspects of the remaining five images of the woman. By concentrating only on the positive aspects of these other dimensions of the woman, she ignores the centrality of dualism or paradoxes. Acholonu, therefore, does not mention either the reality or the possibility of the abuse of the power implicit in the other dimensions of womanhood. The implication of this in character portrayal in literature is the (unnecessary) idealisation of female characters. This would not be a true representation of life. There is also the tendency of engaging in selective criticism whereby only positive values of characters are foregrounded.

In addition, Acholonu opines that the weapon of a motherist is tolerance, non-antagonism, non-militancy or violent confrontation. She adds that the motherist "hates to kill, hates war" (111), without qualifying these terms. We consider these qualities as contradictory, as African women have sometimes had to use violence in confronting oppression. Acholonu's postulations here present a non-realistic image of the African woman and her values and qualities. African history is replete with how African women have employed wars and other violent means to confront oppression. One of these is the 1929 Aba Women's riot which Acholonu herself mentions in the chapter titled 'Women's militancy in Africa':

It goes without saying that in a world where gender...is not always biological and where women exist within a parallel and complementary hierarchy to that of the men, women's lives would not naturally be divorced from militancy, nor would militancy and war be expected to be a preserve of any particular biological sex. Experiences documented about the African women from across the continent in pre-colonial and post-colonial times show that she has continued to indulge in wars and militant struggles for what she believes in, in defence of her land, her children, her people and their customs. (46)

It is interesting to note that the Aba women were not influenced by any anyone or anything in the Western world. In rejecting taxation by the colonial government, the women used the pre-colonial custom of 'sitting' which involves following the chiefs everywhere they went, heckling them and singing abusive songs until the pressure got too much for the men enough for the women to get what they

wante
check
white

Critic
Kolav
Africa
critic
misre
Won

Like
mer
she
doe
con
but
"ur
mc

fer
W
cc
to
aj
w
e
s

t
1

wanted. This is proof that there were structures in the culture that were used to check any perceived oppression of women even before the coming of the whiteman to Africa.

Critical Analysis of Mary Ebur Kolawole's Womanism

Kolawole's thoughts on Womanism are contained in her book *Womanism and African Consciousness*, wherein she acknowledges the efforts of previous African critics whose works had aimed at deconstructing existing images and misrepresentations of African women by Western feminists. Kolawole defines Womanism thus:

To Africans, womanism is the totality of feminine self-expression, self-retrieval, and self-assertion in positive cultural ways... this involves eliciting women's positive qualities, ability, self-enhancement, self-esteem, and freedom within African cultural context. (26 - 27)

Like Acholonu's *Motherism*, Kolawole maintains that Womanism accommodates men. The womanist does not seek "to build a wall around her gender across which she throws ideological missiles" (36). The womanist asserts her femininity and does not seek to be, look or act like men. This is because the African woman's conceptualisation of freedom does not entail erosion of her feminine attributes but, rather, in asserting her feminine qualities. Kolawole argues that the "unisexual lifestyle is definitely not a prerequisite for African women's mobilisation" (29).

Kolawole emphasizes the stance of *Womanism* on collective grouping and feminine bonding as opposed to the ideological bondage and the individualism of Western Feminism. She locates the family as the starting point for this communal/collective effort. This, she refers to as 'Umoja' which is the Swahili concept of togetherness. The Umoja concept ensures the accommodation of diverse approaches to the woman's question while bolstering African identity (193). The womanist is however expected to broaden this area to include the elimination of externalised colonialism in all its forms, either subtle or overt. Thus, she desires social consciousness for the womanist (194).

There are, however, issues that this study considers contentious in Kolawole's theory. The stress on contextualisation in the analysis of feminist issues, the principle of complementarity and the non-distinction between the public and private spheres are the similar principles which Acholonu and, to some extent, Ogunديpe-Leslie identify in their theories. Kolawole, however, puts undue emphasis on 'positive values'. The implication of this in imaginative writing would be the idealisation of the woman. This would not lead to a realistic

appi

conl

Wo:

We

is a

In

sel

(G

co

na

pr

cc

cc

w

ar

un

us

th

th

s

v

t

t

c

v

c

i

c

1

portrayal of the woman. As Kolawole herself admits, "not all female protagonists are positively depicted by female writers" (164).

Kolawole attempts to force wide acceptance of the term and concept of 'womanism' on earlier African critics and writers whose various works identify the need for an afro-centric feminist ideology. Kolawole thus gives the impression that any comment made against Western feminism suggests that the speaker/writer is a 'womanist'. She refers to Flora Nwapa as being "clearly a womanist" (24) and claims that Zulu Sofola, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Amina Mama alongside Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Angela Davis, Maya Angelou, Alice Walker and Clenora Hudson-Weems "identify womanism as deriving from African values" (37).

Furthermore, Kolawole does not distinguish between her concept of *Womanism* on the one hand and Walker's *Womanism* and Hudson-Weems' *Africana-Womanism* on the other. She fails to distance her concept of womanism from Walker's and Hudson-Weems' when she posits that: "Nevertheless, Walker's attempt to ground Black feminist or womanist consciousness is a part of the growth of awareness that seeks a unique identity for African women's consciousness" (p. 24).

However, we contend that the experiences of the African American woman are different from those of the African women. The distinctions between blacks in the diaspora and blacks on the African continent are basically cultural. Aidoo's *The Dilemma of a Ghost* (1965) imaginatively captures one of the differences in culture between people who are of the same colour. Kolawole recognises this in an instance herself. For example, she says lesbianism to African women "is a mode of self-expression that is completely strange to their worldview. It is not even an option to millions of African women and can therefore not be the solution..." (15) Yet lesbianism is a feature, albeit a controversial one of Walker's *Womanism* (Adam and Egbo 33). Another contradiction is her admission that Walker's definitions of Black Feminism and Womanism are ambiguous and that there is the need for a clear cultural delineation in the search for an afro-centric feminist ideology. Adam and Egbo state that one of the sources of critique of Walker's womanism is its nebulousness (33). We consider that a theory that is designed to correct ills in the society or designed for literary analysis should not be open to too many controversial definitions and interpretations. Kolawole's uncritical absorption of Walker's *Womanism* leads to our conclusion that her *Womanism* cannot be wholly suitable for analysis of African texts.

For Kolawole and indeed all the critics who subscribe to her *Womanism*, the attraction seems to be the fact of Kolawole's enthusiasm, over and above those of Acholonu and Ogundipe-Leslie, about an ideology whose distinct characteristics emerge from African values (27). Consequently, the word 'womanist' has been

appropriated to denote "any woman who consciously identifies with the African content of women emancipation and self-actualisation" (Shodipe 245). Thus, Womanism is viewed in opposition to feminism which is conceived of as a Western ideology.

Furthermore, to Kolawole, self-naming is integral to theorisation and naming is at the heart of the search for new terminologies of self-definition:

In many African cultures, naming almost assumes a sacred status. One doesn't just name a child in traditional African society. Diverse considerations such as family traits and achievement, lineal peculiarities or divine guidance determine a child's name. A stranger cannot be allowed to name a child since he does not have adequate knowledge of the paraphernalia of naming. (26)

In an introduction to another publication, Kolawole avers that "the search for self-recreation is predicated on self-identity which starts with self-naming" (*Gender Perceptions and Development in Africa* 5). Consequently, she is comfortable in the belief that 'womanism' is the first step and the appropriate name that encapsulates what feminism means to the African woman. This belief is predicated on the assumption that the word 'Womanism' was coined by women of colour. Unfortunately, there is no consensus among critics as to which woman of colour (African or African American) should be credited with the invention of the word. While Kolawole (*Womanism and African Consciousness* 24), Sotunsa (17) and Arayela (64) credit the coinage of the term to Walker, other critics are undecided on whether it was Walker or Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi who first used the term (see for instance Tsaku 307).

Going by the materials available to this present researcher, we contend that of the two critics (i.e. Walker and Okonjo Ogunyemi), Walker could be said to be the first of the two to use the term 'Womanism'. This is because Walker's *In search of our mother's gardens: womanist prose* where she mentioned the term was published in 1983. Although the edition of the book that was available for this research is dated 1986, Arndt cites an edition of the same (Walker's) book that was published in 1983 (65). For Okonjo Ogunyemi however, her 'Womanism: the dynamics of the contemporary black female novel in English' where she first mentions the term 'Womanism' appeared in the 1985/1986 edition of the journal *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. However, we must stress that this does not necessarily imply that Walker created the term 'Womanism'.

Equally important is a statement by Walters casting some doubt on the prevalent belief that the term 'womanism' was coined by a black woman. Walters while tracing the history of the word 'feminism', submits that in nineteenth century Europe both 'feminism' and another coinage 'womanism' carried

negative meanings and both terms were used with hostility (1). This is an indication that the term 'womanism' may have been in existence before Walker and Okonjo-Ogunyemi.

Critical Analysis of Obioma Nnaemeka's Nego-Feminism

Obioma Nnaemeka's proposal, Nego-Feminism, is contained in an article titled 'Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa's Way' published in 2003. Her concerns in this article include the necessity for an African theory of feminism, and the process of theory making and the components of such a theory. Nnaemeka argues for the necessity and prudence of building on the indigenous African culture in the construction of a feminist theory that is African (376).

In supporting a theory that is built on indigenous African culture, Nnaemeka stresses the need for constant and close scrutiny of culture. She believes that this is necessary in order to be able to separate reality from imagination or to trace the transformation of imagination into reality (374). She states that a theory built on indigenous culture:

...creates the feeling of ownership that opens the door to a participative, democratic process where stakeholders' imagination, values, and worldviews are taken into account while mitigating stakeholders' alienation, which could result from the invalidation of their worldviews and values. ("Nego-feminism" 377)

Nnaemeka explains that Nego-feminism is a term that captures a recurrent feature in many African cultures, namely negotiation. She observes that the principles of negotiation, compromise and balance are shared values in many African cultures. According to her, African feminism "knows when, where, and how to detonate patriarchal land mines...and when, where and how to negotiate with or negotiate around patriarchy in different contexts" ("Nego-feminism" 378). She submits that Nego-feminism is dynamic as it is structured by cultural imperatives and is modulated by ever shifting local and global exigencies. Alluding to an African (Igbo) proverb of the chameleon, Nnaemeka reasons that the dynamism of Nego-feminism makes it goal-oriented, cautious, accommodating, adaptable and open to diverse views (382). Nnaemeka further asserts that Nego-feminism also stands for "no-ego feminism". This implies that African feminism does not preach the hatred of men; that it is accommodationist in nature. These features are similar to the features of feminism espoused by Acholonu, Ogundipe-Leslie and Kolawole in their own notions of afro-centric feminism.

However, we view as untenable, Nnaemeka's renaming of a feminist concept from Africa as Nego-feminism. The reason is because negotiation as a shared principle in many African cultures is tenuous. There are other shared values in

man
of th

Afro
The
reve
and
fem
Fem
cult

as
con
The
cul
div
Th
e.g
mc
ch
Fe
be
en
nc
fu
w
te
A
d
e
c
p
in
c
r

1
6

many African cultures and picking one above the others disregards the importance of the unpicked ones.

Afro-Feminisms as Alternative

The analysis of the four notions of Feminism derived from African culture has revealed the imperative of culture in the formulation of a feminist literary theory and the necessity of providing an alternative in order to bring about a notion of feminism that is compatible with African culture. Our alternative is *Afro-Feminisms* which espouses its feminisms from tenets derived from African culture.

First 'Afro' merely serves as a point of location i.e. Africa. 'Afro-Feminisms' as a term implies the consideration of the culture of the people of Africa in the concept of feminism. Therefore, it avoids privileging one feature over the other. The term is descriptive and it cites feminism within geographical, historical and cultural settings. Second, the term 'Afro-Feminisms' shows a consideration of the diverse cultures in the African continent, hence the pluralisation 'feminisms'. Third, while the word 'afro' serves as a distinction between it and other locations e.g. Western or Euro-American, the word 'feminisms' links it to other similar movements against female and human oppression elsewhere across the 'ever changing globe'. This allows for what Nnaemeka calls 'border crossing' ('Nego-Feminism' 381). This border crossing is necessary for a viable intercourse between Afro-Feminisms and other feminisms so that while it (Afro-feminisms) enriches other feminisms, it too is improved upon. The word thus ensures that it is not alienated from similar engagements. Fourth, unlike writers and critics of the first and second generation of feminist texts, we feel comfortable to adopt the word 'feminism' because of our conviction that the controversy concerning the term 'feminism' may be disappearing gradually. A feminist theory built on African culture gives the concept of feminism a different but acceptable definition. The controversies generated by the use of the term 'feminism', especially by the older generation of female writers are avoided. Afro-Feminisms contributes to global literature in two major ways. First it centralises knowledge production from Africa. Furthermore, in as much as we advocate culture as the informing principle in our theory, Afro-Feminisms, a completely clean break from other feminisms is not possible. Some of the features of Afro-Feminisms are relateable to other feminisms, whether White or African American.

The general features of Afro-Feminisms are prescribed by the African understanding of the relationship between the two sexes and the roles each is expected to play.

1. The structures and systems that are oppressive of the woman include those in the culture and other socio-economic and political structures. These structures are being manipulated by both women and men.
2. These structures are harmful to the generality of society and not only to the woman.
3. Embedded in the culture are structures and systems that permit these oppressions to be challenged and bring about the needed solutions (Acholonu 47; Kolawole, "Womanism and African Consciousness" 27 & 43).
4. African culture conceives of the relationship between the genders as complementary (Acholonu 16- 18; Olajubu 9; Olademo 40- 43; and McIntosh 19, 219 & 240). The men are not regarded as the enemy; it is the structures in the society that need to be changed. Afro-Feminisms is non-confrontational with the men; it is accommodationist as it does not see the men as the enemies but rather as being both beneficiaries and victims of the oppressive structure.
5. Afro-Feminisms incorporates other struggles for liberation into feminism. Ghanaian female writer Aidoo underscores the inseparability of a feminism that is distinctly African from engagement with other challenges.

I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist especially, if they believe that Africans should take charge of our land, its wealth, our lives and the burden of our own development...For some of us, this is the crucial element of our feminism. ("To be an African Woman" 183)

6. Thus, women have a role to play in the public spheres in their societies. African culture does not distinguish between the private and the public spheres as both women and men are considered as active participants in the sustenance of society (Acholonu 32-37; Kolawole "Womanism and African Consciousness" 44-46; Olajubu 9; and McIntosh 19 and 216-221). Olajubu aptly describes the task of an authentic afro-centric feminism thus:

Concerned and developed from a perspective of the human as a holistic as opposed to a dichotomous view of relations, African feminism seeks to incorporate all participants in the enterprise of living, both the physical and the spiritual. It is a humanistic feminism that is rooted in the life experiences of women in traditional societies, not so much in terms of geography as in terms of philosophy. (15- 16)

7.

8

Stiv
tool
the
des
Fer
anc
cor
sy
ex

te:
ex
T
g
n
b
b
a

i

7. Afro-Feminisms prescribes collectivism as against individualism. Collective action has been a domain of power that women have exploited in African culture to obtain certain rights and privileges. These groupings are done under different categorisations- either as daughters, wives, market women or trade groups (Acholony 6, 26-29; Kolawole 22; McIntosh 226).
8. Afro-Feminisms advocates a non-confrontational stance. However this non-confrontation applies to the relationship between the man and the woman; it does not imply that various forms of constructive militancy cannot be used as a weapon to challenge oppressive systems and structures. African culture possesses a rich history of how women have adopted combativeness and sometimes violence to defy oppression. The Aba women used the precolonial custom of 'sitting on men' to protest against taxation.

Stiwanism, Motherism, Womanism, and Nego-feminism are strong ideological tools in the search for a feminism theory that adequately represents the realities of the African woman. However, none of these schools of thought prescribes or designs a method of analysis for literary texts. As a model of analysis, Afro-Feminisms prescribes that culture determines the perspective from which thematic and aesthetic qualities in the texts will be considered. Analyses of the texts will be contextualised in specific African cultures. Thus form, theme, structure, images, symbols, language, conflict, resolution and other aesthetic considerations are explicable within the ambit of African culture.

Afro-Feminisms entails the assessment or explication of feminist themes in texts from the viewpoint of African concepts of feminism and gender. It is expected, therefore, that attention will be on both male and female characters. This results from the African cultural conception of the relationship between the genders as complementary and which also includes the male in its feminism. The men are not regarded as the enemy; it is the structures in the society that need to be changed. One implication of this is the fact that women can be instigators, beneficiaries or victims of an oppressive system. Thus, analyses of texts should also examine the different images of the woman presented in such works.

Afro-Feminisms does not emphasise gender matters only and so, permits the inclusion of other variables that shape human life such as race, ethnic group, and class. It allows for the incorporation of other socio-economic and political challenges confronting both the woman and the man.

Conclusion

Stiwanism, Motherism, Womanism and Nego-feminism are no doubt trail blazers in the search for a feminist theory that adequately represents the challenges and the possible solutions of the African woman. These afro-centric notions of feminism attempt to focus on the African woman's experiences and consequently focus attention on African culture. However, the evaluation of these feminist schools of thought has revealed different levels of adherence to, and compatibility with, African culture. The implication of this is in literary criticism is that the critic could reach a point in the exercise where contradictions between the theory being used and the text could occur. In addition to this is the issue of naming. Motherism and Nego-feminism for instance tend to focus on just one aspect of African culture while Womanism is too closely associated with African American notions of feminism which chiefly address experiences of the African American.

One major challenge in the discourse on an appropriate afro-centric notion of feminism is the heterogeneous nature of African culture. However, it is our contention that there is the need for one encompassing feminist theory that will serve as the base from which other regional African concepts could emerge. These regional concepts could in return focus on peculiarities. Afro-Feminisms that was proposed as alternative is expected to address these challenges.

Works Cited

- Acholonu, Catherine. *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*. Owerri: Afa, 1995. Print.
- Adam, Ezinwanye E. and Egboh, Chinenye M. "Narrating the woes of women in wartime: Examples from Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo's *Roses and Bullets* and Chimamanda Ngózi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*." *Gender and Development in Africa and its Diaspora*. Eds. Akinloye Ojo, Ibigbolade S. Aderibigbe and Felisters Jepchirchir Kiprono. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2019. 31-48. Print.
- Aidoo, Ama Ata. *The Dilemma of a Ghost*. Accra: Longman, 1965. Print.
- Aidoo, Ama Ata (1988). "To be an African woman: an overview and a detail." *Criticism and Ideology*, Ed. K. H. Petersen. Uppsala, Sweden: Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, 1988. 152-165. Print.
- Amadiume, Ify. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. London: Zed, 1989. Print.
- Arayela, Taye. "Gender Issues and Cultural Reconstruction in Selected African Dramatic Literature". *US-China Foreign Language*. 8. 10. (2010): 62-69. Print.
- Arndt, Susan. "Paradigms of Intertextuality: Orature and Writing Back in the Fiction of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo". *The Fiction of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo: Issues and Perspectives*. Ed. Patrick Okolo. Lagos: African Cultural Institute, 2008. 17-65. Print.

- Badejo, Diedre. "African Feminism: Mythical and Social Power of Women of African Descent". *Research in African Literatures*. 29. 2. (1998): 94-111. Print.
- Davies, Carole Boyce. "Motherhood in the Works of Male and Female Igbo Writers". *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature*. Ed. Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Adams Graves. Trenton, NJ: African World, 1986. 241-256. Print.
- Kolawole, Mary Ebun Modupe. "Introduction" *Gender Perceptions and Development in Africa: A Socio-Cultural Approach*. Ed. Mary Ebun Modupe Kolawole. Lagos, Nigeria: Arrabon Academic, 1998. 1-14. Print.
- *Womanism and African Consciousness*. Trenton, NJ: African World, 1997. Print.
- Lopez, Marta Sofia. "Creating Daughterlands: Dangarembga, Adichie and Vera". *Journal of the African Literature Association (JALA)* 2.1 (2009): 83-97. Print.
- McIntosh, Majorie. Keniston. *Yoruba Women, Work, and Social Change*. Ibadan, Nigeria: Bookcraft, 2009. Print.
- Nnaemeka, Obioma. "Feminism, Rebellious Women and Critical Boundaries: Rereading Flora Nwapa and her Compatriots" *Research in African Literatures*. 26. 2 (1995): 80-113. Print.
- "Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing and Pruning Africa's Way". *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*. 29. 2. (2003): 357-385. Print.
- Ododo, Sunny Enessi. "Collectivist Approach to Theatre Production: The Theatre of Olu Obafemi". *Larger than his Frame: Critical Studies and Reflections on Olu Obafemi*. Eds. Duro Oni and Sunday Enessi Ododo. Lagos: Centre for Black and African Arts and Civilisation, 2000. 324-343. Print.
- Ogundipe-Leslie, Molar. *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World, 1994. Print.
- Okoh, Julie. *Theatre and Women's Human Rights in Nigeria*. Port-Harcourt: Pearl, 2002. Print.
- Olademo, Oyeronke. *Gender in Yoruba Oral Traditions*. Lagos: CBAAC, 2009. Print.
- Olajubu, Oyeronke. *Women in the Yoruba Religious Sphere*. New York: NY State UP, 2003. Print.
- Oyewumi, Oyeronke. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota P, 1997. Print.
- Shodipe, Mojisola. "Womanism, Language and the Negotiation of Meaning in Akachi Ezeigbo's *House of Symbols*". *The Fiction of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo: Issues and Perspectives*. Ed. Patrick Okolo. Lagos: African Cultural Institute, 2008. 242-263. Print.
- Sotunsa, Mobolanle Ebunoluwa. *Feminism and Gender Discourse: The African Experience*. NP: Asaba, 2008. Print.
- Tsaku, Hussaini. "Between History and Contemporary Realities: An Examination of Irene Salami Aguloye's *Emotan*". *Feminist Aesthetics and Dramaturgy of Irene Salami-Agunloye*. Ed. Emmy Udegu Idegu. Kaduna: TW, 2009. 301-319. Print.

Walters, Margaret. *Feminism: A Very Short Introduction*. New York: Oxford UP, 2005. Print.

Abst
This
infi
inve
orie
of l
con
tow
bet
reli
soc
soc
lea
de
an

Ir
L
w
v
r
C
C