

African Literature

An Anthology of Criticism and Theory

Edited by
Tejumola Olaniyan and Ato Quayson

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Chapter 72

Stiwanism: Feminism in an African Context

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie

[...]

This very appropriate title was provided by Fatima Haidara and the African students at Virginia Technical Institute, Blacksburg, USA. It opens up the issue of feminism at a very problematic and controversial point in African discourse on gender. People always want to know whether feminism is relevant to Africa. In thinking of Africa, one wonders, "what is an African context?" "What can feminism be in Africa?"

A broad range of attitudes about feminism in Africa today is being expressed by different kinds of persons and groups at different levels. For example, currently in Nigeria, right-wing women, most men, and apolitical women, like to quip that African women do not need liberation or feminism because they have never been in bondage. Progressive, political, and left-wing women, however, are saying that African women suffer subordination on two levels: as women, and as members of impoverished and oppressed classes where women are in the majority. That is the official position of Women in Nigeria (WIN), the organization with which I was involved in the founding.¹ The public position of the Federation of Muslim Women of Nigeria (FOMWAN) is that the woman has been liberated for thousands of years under the Shari'a law, never mind that Islam itself, a religion which demands our respect in its own right, has not been around for thousands of years. The point that the Federation of Muslim Women makes is that feminism is influenced by Western white feminists. They say things like, "it breeds pervasive traits like lesbianism.", (I don't know what is meant by that; "pervasive traits".) "... abstracting the individuals from all concrete and collective bonds; pitting the individuals against institutions, relativising and trivializing the family..."²

The point to note is that religious fundamentalisms in Africa, and fundamentalism as a worldwide movement, are issues to be looked into as they affect attitudes towards women, and the struggle for progressive conditions for women all over the world.

Frist published in *Recreating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, pp. 214–26, 229–30. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1994.

Our title, "Feminism in an African Context," also necessitates an interrogation of itself. We could ask, "what is feminism?" and "what is it in an African context?" What is the reality for African women?

When they think of Africa, most Africans think only of Black Africa or more correctly, if they would be honest, of their own little ethnic groups. When we say, "Africa," we mean "the Yorubas," "the Ibos," "the Kikuyu," "the Luo," "the Toucouleur," "the Serer," or "the Fulani," and so forth. We generalize from the characteristics of our own ethnic groups to describe the whole of the continent.

Some social scientists like to speak of "Black Africa" or "Africa south of the Sahara," but, what does "Black" mean in relation to, say, Libyans, or Egyptians or Moroccans who are white in Africa but are as black as people designated "black" in the United States. Again, North Africans who are considered white in America are darker than some high-colored African-Americans who can pass for white but are considered black in affirmative action forms. Obviously, being "black" is a political metaphor and importantly, skin color is not a useful, necessary and sufficient way to taxonomize Africans.

In view of the history of Africa and cross-cultural links across the Sahara, the reality of cultures and acculturations in Africa, and in view of countries like Chad and North Mali, which have an expanse into the Sahara, what does "sub-Saharan" mean? The term "sub-Saharan" itself is political. To repeat, Africa cannot be taxonomized in terms of color, which extends above the Sahara. Euro-American color notions cannot be easily transferred to a global context. North Africans are Africans. Africans think North Africans are black, but they are often considered white in the United States. Racism is a messy and unhealthy subject.

We must all avoid simplistic statements about Africa's reality, in particular, the reality of her political and social complexity. Therefore, when we speak of an "African context", do we mean all the countries of the geographical continent of Africa? This is what I like to mean when I use the term "Africa". This is a large piece to take on one's analytical plate, I admit. Our question then becomes: What is feminism in the context of Africa as I have defined it? We must define specificities. Again we cannot generalize Africa. Do we mean: a Christian or a Muslim Africa; Africa with indigenous religions; the Lusophone African countries which underwent liberation struggles; South Africa still under siege; independent African countries; Arab Africans; Black or White South Africans; the right-wing Inkatha elements, or white liberals; are the white leftists in the South African Communist Party included; Africans who adhere to pre-colonial values; or westernized Africans, by which we mean Africans with syncretized values?

With regard to color, and the following fact is particularly important for Africans of the diaspora, there are no color purities in Africa; if there ever were since the beginning of time. Everything, biology and culture, has been mixed or shall we say, "dynamized", by Africa's historical movements of peoples. These movements are not only the result of Western influence, as hegemonic Euro-Americans like to think. They have been going on since the beginning of time. Africa has been open to the world since the dawn of history.

In fact, history began with her, as archaeologists are saying. Some Western historiographers and other social scientists like to think and state that indigenous Africans were isolated from each other. In fact, Africa has not been isolated but has been at the heart of human concourse and interactions in those early times when so much was going on, and from which events Europe was isolated. The interactions were between the then civilized peoples of the world: China, India, South America (the Incas, Mayans and Aztecs), Southeast Asia,

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Transformations, pp. 214-26, 229-30.

the Middle East, the countries of the Mediterranean and Africa. Much later Europe emerged from her Middle Ages to learn science (e.g. mathematics), technology, and many arts from the rest of the world. Europe enriched herself from the world of people of color to have her Renaissance. Europe's triumph after the 1400s was not due to superior intellect or courage but to the capacity for acts of unbelievable cruelty and political treachery such as the world had perhaps never known before. It was Europe, not Africa, which was isolated from the world before the 1400s.

We tend to think of Egypt as being outside of Africa. Some of us have been socialized to think of Egypt as in the Middle East. That is the result of political scholarship. Egypt is within Africa and gives to and was influenced by the Sudan. Egypt is also connected to and influenced by, African countries farther South and West. From North Africa, it is only across the Sahara to West Africa. On the other hand, the world connects with, did and still does influence East Africa and South Africa from across the Indian Ocean. These are some of the currents of movements and cultures in which Africa has been the central point in both receiving and giving.

How complex it is to speak of an African context! Africa or Africans cannot be generalized. We must always be aware of specifics while we describe our criteria for taxonomies. We must acknowledge our delimitations and realize always that there are many kinds of Africans. We cannot essentialize blackness, even on the African continent itself. Race, class and gender, among other variables must mediate our discourses as they mediate our understanding of ourselves and each other. Race and class also mediate gender for the three categories intersect each other at points. Let us simplify our task by thinking of the continent of Africa, rather than our own familiar home cultures, and let us try to identify patterns on that continent. Needless to say, such a discussion will not be exhaustive. We can only identify patterns and themes, but we will be extrapolating from the whole continent.

What is my own location in this epistemological cartography? I am speaking as a middle-aged African woman of Yoruba descent; now middle-class but from traditional aristocratic origins, alas; born by Christian and of a color, "black," which is devalued. Yet I do not think of myself as "black" nor do I refer to myself as "a black woman." This is not because I do not love my color or the idea of being black, but because I was not socialized to describe myself physically and in terms of color. Africans do not suffer from "colorism," to use Alice Walker's phrase; they do not suffer from the colorism of the Western world that Gayatri Spivak calls "chromatism."³ We do not have a mentality of animal husbandry; of classing or grading people in terms of how they look: the color of their eyes or hair as if we were running kennels.

Africans, in Africa's non-racially organized countries, that is, outside the settler territories, tend to see themselves in terms of culture; how people think and behave. You are the culture that you carry, despite your color. Hence, a black person in color could be white mentally. It is not that Africans do not recognize racial difference. They see it but they do not assume that a person is necessarily African from the way that he/she looks. They do not privilege one kind of a color over another. They do not privilege whiteness over blackness, nor do they essentialize. I am talking now of the peasant majority Africans, not middle-class Africans. Peasant Africans attribute superiority to whites in the realm of technology. They do not, however, think that the white person is inherently and essentially superior to them as a human being. They know that s/he has certain cultural things which they admire and which they want – the automobiles and airplanes, blenders, to minimize the labor of

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grinding, yam pounding machines – but they do not think that these gadgets make her/him intrinsically superior. The problem of accepting superiority is usually one of middle class Africans who have undergone colonial education. The middle-class African may tend to think that whites are superior. In any case, problems of identity and issues of negritude are issues of the middle-class. The level of the colonial mentality of the African will dictate the level of a sense of inferiority that he or she has. Usually, you will find that the less Westernized a person, the more self-assured that person is.

Because culture, not color, determines identity, most Africans, use many terms such as: h/she is white or Oyinbo or Mzungu or toubab or brofo, to describe a person who is physiognomically black but “white” in behavior and mentality.

In the West, I am a “woman of color.” Personally, I do not know what that phrase means. It sounds like some rare bird or creature of Nature. I am Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, a middle-aged Yoruba and Nigerian woman. I have included middle-aged because among my people as among many African peoples, a woman’s status is mediated and improved by age, economics, kinship roles and by the class she comes from as well as birth and her achievements in her lived experience. Therefore, it is in my interest to emphasize my middle-agedness, in fact, my oldness, and not try to compete with teenagers. In the West, however, I find that the first and constant variable for me is race: a “woman of color,” a “black woman,” a “brown woman,” a “chocolate woman.”

The subject of feminism is no less complex to define than the phrase, “an African context.” The chosen title of this talk is good for another reason: that it raises very common but important controversies in Africa today, namely, “Does feminism exist in Africa?” Should it exist in Africa? What are the definitions of feminism? For us? For me? Perhaps I can reverse this definitional task by naming what feminism is not, in order to confront the notion embedded in the counter-discourses to feminism in Africa today.

In answer to the usual reactions of most African men, right-wing and apolitical women:

1. Feminism is not a cry for any one kind of sexual orientation and I am not homophobic or heterosexual. Sexual practice in Africa tends to be private and considered private. Same-sex sexuality still awaits more attention and research. Homosexuals are not persecuted by the State in West Africa.
2. Feminism is not the reversal of gender roles, “gender” being defined simply as socially constructed identities and roles. It is not only the doing of dishes or the washing of napkins as my Malawian poet friend thinks. I shall share a part of the poem which he addressed to me. I should note that we used to have many arguments and an inter-textual intellectual life in Nigeria.

The poem is called:

Letter to a Feminist Friend (an excerpt)

My world has been raped
looted
and squeezed
by Europe and America . . .
AND NOW—
the women of Europe and America

after drinking and carousing
 on my sweat
 rise up to castigate
 and castrate
 their menfolk
 from the cushions of a world
 I have built!

Why should they be allowed
 to come between us?
 You and I were slaves together
 uprooted and humiliated together
 Rapes and lynchings...

do your friends "in the movement"
 understand these things?...

No, no, my sister,
 my love,
 first things first!
 Too many gangsters
 still stalk this continent...

When Africa
 at home and across the seas
 is truly free
 there will be time for me
 and time for you
 to share the cooking
 and change the nappies –
 till then,
 first things first!⁴

I use this poem at the beginning of my essay on women in Nigeria which is published in *Sisterhood is Global* (edited by Robin Morgan), a collection of essays by women of different countries. Again, I want to draw your attention to the use of the first person in his poem. It is his world that has been raped, that endured the slave trade, colonialism, imperialism, and neo-colonialism. He is the Prometheus figure. He does not yet have time for women's rights. The world has been built by him and he must attend to those pressing issues. His position is the usual one of "divide and rule" strategists. Divide and rule the women of the world who are perhaps united around gender oppressions. Women may differ about strategies and methods, but they do not differ on basic assumptions: that women are oppressed as women and they are oppressed as the majority members of subordinate classes which are also in the majority. But his position is almost typical of most of the men of the continent.

3. Feminism is not penis envy or gender envy; wanting to be a man as they like to say to us. "Well, do you want to be a man? You can join us if you want to." Or, "Whatever you do, you can never have a penis." A car mechanic once told me that I could not fix my car because I did not have a penis.

4. Feminism is not necessarily oppositional to men. It argues, rather, that a woman's body is her inherent property,⁵ "not to be owned, used, and dumped by men," as radical theology feminists are saying.
5. Feminism is not, "dividing the genders," as they say to us in Africa. It is not dividing the race or "the struggle" – whatever that overused word means.
6. It is not parrotism of Western women's rhetoric.
7. It is not opposed to African culture and heritage, but argues that culture is dynamically evolving and certainly not static; that culture should not be immobilized in time to the advantage of men as most men in Africa want it to be.
8. Feminism is not a choice between extreme patriarchy on the one hand or hateful separatism from men on the other.

What then is this feminism? I have made these rejoinders because they touch on the points that some African men make to counter our feminist discourses in Africa. We are accused of the attributes implied by their criticism. Often the argument is that feminism is not necessary in Africa because gender was balanced in an idyllic African past, which is their own creation. African feminists are said to be merely the parrots of Western women. Race and nationalism are used in bad faith to attack gender. Sometimes race, nationalism, and class are brought together to attack gender politics. Feminist concerns are said to be the predilections of Westernized women like myself or Ifi Amadiume or Filomina Steady, for example.⁶ Feminist concerns are, then, not those of the great rural and faithful African women who are "the true African women" who are happy as they are and have always been. But what do research and analysis tell us about these newly discovered and glamorized creatures; "the rural women of Africa?" Certainly not that "rural," poor women are happy with the status quo and desire no change.

Feminism can be defined by its etymological roots. Femina is "woman" in Latin. Feminism, an ideology of woman; any body of social philosophy about women. This definition of feminism gives us enough leeway to encompass various types of feminisms: right-wing, left-wing, centrist, left of center, right of center, reformist, separatist, liberal, socialist, Marxist, non-aligned, Islamic, indigenous, etc. Believe me, all these feminisms exist. Nawal el Saadawi is an Islamic socialist feminist. So, one question could be, "What is feminism for you." What is your feminism? Do you, in fact, have an ideology of women in society and life? Is your feminism about the rights of women in society? What is the total conception of women as agents in human society – her conditions, roles and statuses – her recognition and acknowledgement? Generally, feminism, however, must always have a political and activist spine to its form. If we take feminism to imply all these, is the African woman on the African continent, in an African context without problems in all these areas?

For those who say that feminism is not relevant to Africa, can they truthfully say that the African woman is all right in all these areas of her being and therefore does not need an ideology that addresses her reality, hopefully and preferably, to ameliorate that reality? When they argue that feminism is foreign, are these opponents able to support the idea that African women or cultures did not have ideologies which propounded or theorized woman's being and provided avenues and channels for women's oppositions and resistance to injustice within their societies? Certainly, these channels existed. Are the opponents of feminism willing to argue that indigenous African societies did not have avenues and strategies for correcting gender imbalance and injustice? Will they argue that these aspects

of social engineering could only have come from white or Euro-American women? Are they saying that African women cannot see their own situations and demand change without guidance from white women? Nationalism and race pride, I know, will make our men beat a retreat at this question and they had better beat that retreat. The issue is that there were indigenous feminisms. There were indigenous patterns within traditional African societies for addressing the oppressions and injustices to women.

So, what kind of feminism exists in an African context? In view of all I have said above, in view of all that I have argued as well as the realities of Africa, we should more correctly say: What *feminisms* exist in Africa? Indeed, there are many feminisms, depending on the center from which one is speaking or theorizing. These feminisms have to be theorized around the junctures of race, class, caste and gender; nation, culture and ethnicity; age, status, role and sexual orientation. Certainly more research is needed to discover what African women themselves, particularly, the working classes and the peasantry think about themselves as women, what ideology they possess and what agenda they have for themselves, daily and historically.

Once we agree that an ideology of women and about women is necessary and has always existed in Africa, we can proceed to ask if these existent ideologies remain relevant or need to be changed. Our opportunistic and irredentist compatriots who argue culture and heritage when it serves their interests, should consider whether our inherited cultures should be taken hook, line and sinker, or should be subjected to change where necessary. Should we, when necessary, change the notion that man is always superior to woman, hence, 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? Should we apply the sexist ideas in the Bible, without criticism, with preference for Old Testament ideas and the Pauline section of the New Testament, stressing only the verses on male dominance? Should we adapt Koranic ideas to modern times or continue to beat the recalcitrant woman lightly as said in the fourth Sura of the Koran. (If your woman does not listen, first admonish her then, sexually withdraw from her and finally beat her "lightly.") How light is light? Is not the issue the proprietary right to beat her in the first place? Should culture be placed in a museum of minds or should we take authority over culture as a product of human intelligence and consciousness to be used to improve our existential conditions? Should we preach cultural fidelity only when it does not affect us negatively, which is usually the position of African men who wish to keep only those aspects of culture which keep them dominant?

For the rest of this essay, I shall try to indicate what some of the outspoken African women are saying about feminism in Africa. Some quite outstanding women like Buchi Emecheta, say they are not feminists without saying why. Others like the Nigerian writer, Flora Nwapa, say that they are not feminists, but they are "womanists". There are still other views: the great and late South African writer, Bessie Head, says in her posthumous essays collected under the title *A Woman Alone*, that in the world of the intellect where she functions as a writer and an intellectual, feminism is not necessary because the world of the intellect is neither male nor female.⁷ I think she is deceived or perhaps deluded on this point by the post-romantic and Victorian patriarchal notion and myth about the world of the intellect being sexless. This, women know to be a myth, although it has been sold to all the women of the world. We know how male sexism actually functions in the world of the intellect or in the world of "the life of the mind" as they say. Bessie Head, in my view, expresses a false consciousness often expressed by successful middle-class women of all cultures (including

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African women who proudly and aggressively announce that their achievement has taken place outside of their identity as women). "I am just a writer, not a woman writer," "I am a professor of physics," "an astronaut," "a prime minister, not a woman" and I wonder what is that? What is that neuter thing? But notice that only women engage in that kind of rhetoric. It speaks volumes that only women make that kind of statement. Have you ever heard a man say, "I'm just a professor, not a man." "I'm just a professor," "a mathematician," "a tycoon," "a president of the United States, but not a man, not a man at all." Perhaps we need to deconstruct that formulation elsewhere.

Let us now, however, consider the theories of some of the most visible African women who hold that feminism is relevant to the African context. A summary of their positions indicates some common denominators:

1. That feminism need not be oppositional to men. It is not about adversarial gender politics.
2. That women need not neglect their biological roles.
3. That motherhood is idealized and claimed as a strength by African women and seen as having a special manifestation in Africa. Davies has asked whether African women have specially cornered motherhood.⁸
4. That the total configuration of the conditions of women should be addressed rather than obsessing with sexual issues.
5. That certain aspects of women's reproductive rights take priority over others.
6. That women's conditions in Africa need to be addressed in the context of the total production and reproduction of their society and that scenario also involves men and children. Hence, there has always been an emphasis on economic fulfillment and independence in African feminist thinking.
7. That the ideology of women has to be cast in the context of the race and class struggles which bedevil the continent of Africa today; that is, in the context of the liberation of the total continent.

It is this generally holistic attitude of African women to feminism which often separates them from their Western sisters.

[...]

I have since advocated the word "Stiwanism," instead of feminism, to bypass the combative discourses that ensue whenever one raises the issue of feminism in Africa.

The creation of the new word is to deflect energies from constantly having to respond to charges of imitating Western feminism and, in this way, conserve those energies, to avoid being distracted from the real issue of the conditions of women in Africa. The new word describes what similarly minded women and myself would like to see in Africa. The word "feminism" itself seems to be a kind of red rag to the bull of African men. Some say the word is by its very nature hegemonic, or implicitly so. Others find the focus on women in themselves somehow threatening. Still others say it is limiting to their perspectives, whatever those are. Some, who are genuinely concerned with ameliorating women's lives sometimes feel embarrassed to be described as "feminist," unless they are particularly strong in character. The embarrassment springs from being described by a word which encodes women (in "femina") so directly. So effective are the years of phallocratic socialization! Be a Stiwanist. I am a Stiwanist.

"Stiwa" is my acronym for *Social Transformation Including Women in Africa*. This new term describes my agenda for women in Africa without having to answer charges of imitateness or having to constantly define our agenda on the African continent in relation to other feminisms, in particular, white Euro-American feminisms which are unfortunately, under siege by everyone. This new term "STIWA" allows me to discuss the needs of African women today in the tradition of the spaces and strategies provided in our indigenous cultures for the social being of women. My thesis has always been that indigenous feminisms also existed in Africa and we are busy researching them and bringing them to the fore now. "STIWA" is about the inclusion of African women in the contemporary social and political transformation of Africa. Be a "Stiwanist."

Notes

- 1 *Women in Nigeria Today*, ed., WIN Collective (London: Zed Press, 1985), Introduction.
- 2 Bilikisu Yusuf, "Hausa-Fulani Women: The State of the Struggle," *Hausa Women in the Twentieth Century*, eds. Catherine Coles and Beverly Mack (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991), 90-108. Gives a history of FOMWAM in Nigeria. See also Murad Khurram, "On the Family" *Muslim World Book Review* 5 (1984) for some Muslim positions.
- 3 Gayatri Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies and Dialogues* (NY and London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1990), 62.
- 4 Felix Mnthali, "Letter to a Feminist Friend," the poem will appear in an as yet unpublished volume entitled *Beyond the Echoes*.
- 5 See brochure of the World Council of Churches, on the Ecumenical Decade Solidarity with Women.
- 6 Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (London: Zed Press, 1987), and Filomena Steady, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge, MA: Schenkman, 1981), see Bibliography. Steady, "African Feminism, a Worldwide Perspective," *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora*, eds., Harley, Rushing and Terbog-Penn (Washington, DC: Howard University Press, 1987).
- 7 Bessie Head, *A Woman Alone: Autobiographical Writings* (London: Heinemann, 1990), 95.
- 8 Carole Boyce Davies, "Motherhood in the Works of Male and Female Igbo Writers," *Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1986), 241-56. See also the introduction to the book.

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