

Post Africa(n) Feminism?¹

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Africa becomes split between a dying, traditional past which is at once hugely intrusive and obsolete, and a banal modernity which is obsessed with interpreting an idea of African identity.²

INTRODUCTION

The growing body of literature authored by women in Africa and the African Diaspora over the past four decades has been accompanied by vigorous debates out of which has evolved a body of theories pertaining to African Feminism(s). Theoretical models such as 'Third World Feminism', 'African Feminism', 'Womanism', 'Stiwanism',³ 'Afrikana Womanism' and 'Nego-feminism',⁴ amongst others, have responded to the anomalies exhibited by mainstream feminism, particularly its inability to address the cultural specificities out of which 'other' feminisms are theorised. The focus of this article has arisen out of the realisation that while such theories are invaluable to the development of feminist discourse, they have tended to focus predominantly on the politics of naming associated with the term 'feminism'.

In the process, the term Africa(n) has received very little interrogation and has been readily adopted on the basis of geography and/or historicity. Such adoption, I argue, is intrinsically linked to and centralises colonialism as the basis of ongoing polarities, Western/African; Aggressor/Victim, such that colonialism keeps 'returning' at the very point 'of its departure.'⁵

I will seek to problematise the term 'Africa(n)' as normatively inscribed in the prevailing discourse. The interrogation of the term Africa(n), I suggest, is pertinent to the development of a theoretical model that will complement and enhance activist efforts in present-day Africa and rescue the embattled image of Africa as captured in the epigraph to this paper.

THE AFRICAN CHAMELEON

In a survey on South Africa,⁶ 'black', it is explained, is used to describe 'people of black African descent', even though the ruling party describes

them as 'African', preferring to use 'black' as a collective expression for all people of African, Indian and mixed-race origin.

It is worth noting that in an attempt to redress the problems of racial differentiation brought about by the apartheid government which created 'colour chameleons', the current South African government has adopted the term 'black' as a 'collective expression'. Such a stance can be misleading, however, and tends to exclude 'white Africans' while claiming a homogenous identity for people of Indian and mixed-race origin.

The use of 'black' and 'African' in the South African context attests to the complex nature of the project of defining present-day 'Africa'. This is but one instance that bears testimony to the fact that Africa, normatively defined on the basis of geography and colonial inscriptions of race differentiation, falls short of addressing the plurality that exists in the continent today.

THE CONCEPT OF AFRICA

An age-old continent spanning a vast area of the world map, 'Africa' is a geographic demarcation agreed upon in 1848 by the colonising powers of the Western world. A nationalist whose works are aimed at counteracting the negative image of Africa and the Africans as rendered by the West, J E Casely Hayford dramatically captures this partition and the platform it lays for African-Western relations thus:

It was like the meeting of the gods, the gathering of the Nations, for they had mastered all knowledge and gotten themselves such power as to make men forget the Power beyond, before whom the Nations are as grasshoppers... 'Come let us partition it among ourselves.'... 'This thing is easily done. We shall go to the Ethiopians, and shall teach them our religion, and that will make them ours, body and soul – lands, goods and all, for all time'.⁷

The creation of Africa has been a result of a long historical relationship with the Western world. In broad historical terms, Africa divides into three periods that are not hermetically sealed off one from another. The pre-colonial era in Africa is distinctly marked in history by the slave trade. Tola Olu Pearce, in her discussion of 'Women, the State and Reproductive Health Issues in Nigeria', cites Samir Amin who observes that African societies were 'reduced to the function of supplying slave labor for the plantations of America. Africa lost its autonomy. It began to be shaped according to foreign requirements.'⁸ This had an impact on African societies far beyond economic considerations. It is widely accepted that traditional organising features were disrupted and were remoulded with the advent of colonialism.⁹

In his renowned work, philosopher V Y Mudimbe presents Africa as an idea produced by the West.¹⁰ Mudimbe's work is concerned with how Africa represents itself to the West and the 'Westernised' African. He argues that to answer the question 'What is Africa?' requires that the Western disciplines of anthropology, history, theology and scientific discourse be scrutinised, particularly the way in which they treat Africa. Mudimbe's contention is that these Western discourses have for

centuries been 'inventing' Africa and that such constructions of Africa have tended to elide the cultural complexities of the continent. The idea of Africa then, in Mudimbe's view, is both confusing and confused both by its history and its interpretation.¹¹

He dismisses the representation of Africa in Western scholarship as 'fantasies' and mere 'constructs', arguing that "Senegalese trends are different from Nigerian, Tanzanian, or Mozambican, and each is immersed in its own sociohistorical context".¹² Despite many national differences, however, Mudimbe suggests that there are sufficient basic similarities for the concept of 'Africa' to continue to have meaning.

To the extent that Africa is constructed as a paradigm of difference with regard to the West, the views espoused by Mudimbe hold resonance with those of Martin Bernal.¹³ In Bernal's view, history as it has been written in the West has been altered in favour of the West. Bernal's work is therefore driven by the need to rewrite history in such a way that it refutes the 'Aryan model' of history based on Eurocentrism and racism. In particular, he argues strongly 'against the influence of racism and anti-Semitism on scholarship'.¹⁴

African scholar and novelist Chinua Achebe describes Africa's past as characterised by contact, and in some cases collision, "both historical and immediate, between the traditional folk and/or mythic past of various ethnic groups and their systems and values, and those imported from Europe".¹⁵ The effect has been to strip Africans of their dignity, and so the writer's duty is to help Africans regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost. This viewpoint is based on Achebe's belief that 'art is, and was always, in the service of man'.¹⁶ There is an unselfconscious gendered dimension to Achebe's use of 'dignity' and 'art in the service of man'. This battle to restore 'dignity' in Achebe's terms becomes a very male discourse. Achebe's view echoes the general sentiment of Africa's writers from as early as the 1950s. Writing was embraced as an anti-colonial weapon that would bolster the image of Africa and re-establish Africa's 'lost dignity'. The burgeoning literature was to be a counter-discourse to colonisation. This fact allows me to argue that the way in which gender was constructed during the colonial era had a direct effect on how gender questions would be perceived in the postcolonial era, thus shaping the nature of feminist politics within African literature.

COLONIALISM AND THE GENDER QUESTION

Colonialism is a complex process entailing an intricate negotiation and re-negotiation of power structures. While in the early stages of the creation of independent African nation states (and literature) colonialism tended to be viewed as power imposition by (usually) a European metropole over a helpless, hapless community (usually non-European), more recently scholars have pointed out that the process was in fact rife with 'tangled layers of political relations and lines of conflicting projections and domestications that converged in specific local misunderstandings, struggles, and representations'.¹⁷ As the critic Danielle Marx-Scouras posits, in the era after colonisation, the process of decolonisation:

... does not merely imply seeking to affirm and valorize those traits which differentiate the 'decolonizer' from the coloniser, traits which may be themselves indicative of yet another logic of oppression.¹⁸

Rather, what is important for postcolonial literature is a critical method that will unearth the complexities inherent in the colonial process and reveal it as a double-edged sword aimed at both the coloniser and the colonised.

BEYOND AFRICA

Denis Ekpo,¹⁹ himself an 'African' critic, has argued that 'Africanness' as an identity is constraining. He believes that we have entered the era of 'post-Africanity' in which we should move away from the idea of an 'Africa' if we are to advance.

Ekpo's thesis offers a valuable point of departure for evaluating the nature of African and African-centred feminism(s) as espoused by different theorists to date. While I do not subscribe to the view that 'Africanness' should be jettisoned altogether (hence my adoption of the term 'African' feminism), I argue, after Ekpo, that the idea of 'Africa' as it has been constructed in debates on feminist theories pertaining to Africa has contributed in a significant way to the theories' inability to develop beyond the much debated notion of naming. In discussions on Black and Womanist feminism(s), Africa emerges as both a geo-historical reference point and term for a pan-Africanist connection of people of black ascendancy. This sets up the dichotomy of a struggling Africa against an 'enslaving' Western phenomenon. *Because and in spite of this*, Black Feminist as well as Womanist thought, though largely celebrated by African women, exhibits culturally imperialistic tendencies that configure the African woman as a recipient of knowledge from her more enlightened American sister.²⁰

In this observation, my argument resonates with that of Kadiatu Kanneh. Kanneh's reading of Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (in which 'womanism' is the adopted framework) leads her to conclude that:

Walker's novel moves impatiently towards a modernity that can unproblematically include all peoples, all women, within a humanist framework that, via Jungian psychoanalysis, promises a terrain free of difference. Her claim on an Africa that is inherent to Black Americans manages to dismiss the dominating stance of the United States over Africa, and the social and imaginative inclusion of African-Americans in Western narratives of Africa.²¹

Kanneh's work interrogates African identities by adopting an analytical framework whose underlying quest is to instigate how Africa is presented and read by the West. Whereas my interest is primarily in how Africa represents herself *to herself* in literary texts, the work by Kanneh is crucial to this project in several ways. Kanneh lucidly analyses the meaning of 'cultural identity' so often evoked in discussions on African literature and in the theories on African feminism(s). She recognises that 'Blackness', while a useful analytical tool in the mapping out of the

meaning of 'Africa' and 'Africanness', can at the same time be limiting as a form of identity. Kanneh thus posits that race is 'the founding illusion of our identities'.²² Cultural identity, she rightfully asserts, is 'an ongoing process, politically contested and historically unfinished'.²³

African feminisms have to a large extent adopted a stance that does not acknowledge the 'colour plurality' that exists amongst Africans. The tendency has been to adopt the convenient but problematic view that 'all Africans are Black' and, by inference, that all experiences of black people are 'African'. Such a simplistic viewpoint is in line with the widely endorsed convenient suggestion that 'Africa' is a hapless 'victim' of colonisation and the West. The viewpoint perpetuates the self/other, coloniser/colonised dichotomy, which has too often manifested itself in acts of 'neo-colonialism'. The theories have tended to be situated within a historical outlook that is mainly Eurocentric, whilst African 'culture' has to a large extent been essentialised.²⁴ An enabling redefinition of 'Africa' and 'African' identity necessitates that colonialism be viewed as historical interaction. Such an outlook takes cognisance of 'Africa' as *actor*, partaking in the fashioning of her own history and having *participated* in colonisation. By this I suggest that in as much as colonisation has taken much away from Africa, present-day Africa has also incorporated elements into its culture that were not a part of pre-colonial Africa. Rather than apologise for those aspects of Africa's cultural plurality that are more difficult to accommodate or deem them an eschewal of 'tradition', the recognition that culture necessarily evolves requires that theorists on postcolonial Africa re-evaluate the prevailing notion of Africa as a negative construct to the West.

African leader and philosopher Kwame Nkrumah describes postcolonial African society as comprising three segments: the traditional, the Western and the Islamic. The different segments of postcolonial Africa, he asserts, need to be accommodated as 'experiences of the traditional African society'.²⁵ Nkrumah's ideas are informed by an intellectual map that he terms 'consciencism'. Its thrust is to forge a progressive way forward and away from the conflict of 'African conscience' prevalent in postcolonial Africa. He posits:

Our attitude to the Western and the Islamic experience must be purposeful. It must also be guided by thought, for practice without thought is blind. What is called for is a first step in a body of connected thought which will determine the general nature of our action in unifying the society which we have inherited. This unification has to take account, at all times, of the elevated ideals underlying the traditional African society.²⁶

African society is thus recognisable as an evolving society that has undergone historical experiences that have rendered it hybridised, plural and fluid. It has assimilated new cultures and concepts. The result has been an alteration in the different culture expressions, not least of which is the site of gender. The insight this holds for theorising African feminism is that it *is* important to bring out the impact that the colonial experience has had on gender constructions but, more importantly, it is pertinent to focus on how such historical experiences have resulted in renegotiation, reconsideration and remaking of the African gender construct. What is required is a theoretical framework that can accommodate contemporary African identities. A theory that collapses seemingly immutable

binaries such as male/female is pertinent for addressing gender as a 'changing' phenomenon. In collapsing the male/female binary, such theory allows not only for a plurality of voices across the gender binary, but also recognises the plurality of gendered experience.

CONCLUSION

Debates on theorising African feminism(s), I have argued, have made it evident that the notion of 'Africanity' manifests itself as both *moulder* and *boulder* in the espousal and development of the body of theory. It becomes important, therefore, that the term Africa(n) be revisited to allow for a more fluid and, therefore, more relevant theory of African feminism. Such a theory, it is envisaged, will eschew polarisation of positions, thus enabling, among other aspects, a fuller treatment of the place of men in African feminism. This dimension of African feminism has to date received scant attention.

