FEMINIST AND WOMANIST IDEOLOGIES: AN OVERVIEW

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Feminism

Feminism has different meanings depending on the school of thought concerned. Freedman (2004:1) defines Feminism as “concerns with women’s inferior position in society and the discriminations encountered by women because of their sex.” To Idyorough (2005: 14) Feminism is a belief that women are suffering from subjugation, domination, exploitation, oppression and deprivation in different aspects of life in contrast to men; and also a movement aimed at securing and defending equal rights and opportunities for women.” On the other hand, Hooks (2006: 41) sees “Feminism as a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression.” The proponents of Feminism view patriarchy (chauvinism) as being the cause of real or perceived oppressive ideals against women. Hence, Feminism is indisputably an ideology that seeks to safeguard the interest of women in the society at large.

Fraise (1995 cited in Freedman, 2004: 2) argues that there are debates over when and where feminism was used. According to Fraise, the term ‘feminist’ seems to have first been used in 1871 in a French medical text to describe a cessation in development of the sexual organs and characteristics in male patients, who were perceived as thus suffering from ‘feminization’ of their bodies. The term was then picked up by Alexandre Dumas fils, a French writer, republican and anti-feminist, who used it in a pamphlet published in 1872 entitled l’homme-femme, on subject of adultery, to describe women behaving in a supposedly masculine way. Fraise also points out that in medical terminology feminism was used to signify a feminization of men, while in political terms, it was first used to describe a virilization of women. This description of feminism by Fraise generates gender confusion. He maintained that feminism is used in a modified form in today’s
societies where feminists are sometimes perceived as challenging natural differences between men and women. However, Freedman (2004) explains that ‘feminist’ was not at first an adjective used by women to describe themselves or their actions but it was what we today would call ‘feminist’ thought and activity which existed long before the term ‘feminism’ was adopted. According to him, in the 1840s, the women’s rights movement had started to emerge in United States with the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848 and the resulting Declaration of Sentiments, which claimed for women the principles of liberty and equality expounded in the American declaration of independence. This was followed by Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony’s founding of the National Women suffrage Association. In Britain, too, the 1840s onwards saw the emergence of organized suffrage movements. But even before the emergence of organized suffrage movements, women had been writing about the inequalities and injustices in women’s social condition and campaigning to change it. In 1792, Mary Wollstonecraft had published A Vindication of the Rights of Women and at the same time in France, women such as Olympe de Gouges and Theroigen de Mericourt were fighting for the extension of the rights promised by the French revolution to women.

Haslanger and Tuana (2008: 21) express that from the inception of Feminism in the late eighteenth and early twentieth century in Europe and America, women believe that they are oppressed and fight for equal rights based on the idea of equality of the sexes. Some writers use the term ‘Feminism’ to refer to a historically specific political movement in the US and Europe; other writers use it to refer to the belief that there are injustices against women. These historical appearances of strong feminist movement at different moments were classified by Freedman (2004: 4) in a series of ‘waves’:

Thus, ‘first-wave’ feminism is used to refer to the late nineteenth century and early twentieth-century feminist movements that were concerned (although not exclusively) with gaining equal rights for women, particularly the suffrage. “Second wave’ feminism refers to the resurgence of feminist activity in the late 1960s and 1970s, when protest again centered around women’s inequality, although this time not only in terms of women’s lack of equal political rights but in the areas of family, sexuality and work.

Karl (1995) asserts that women’s right to vote, access to education and paid work, together with calls in favour of changing laws that discriminate against married women, were just some of the issues of concern to the first wave of feminists in Argentina, Chile, Venezuela, Colombia, Mexico,
Peru and Puerto Rico. In some countries such as Algeria, feminist groups formed as a response to Islamic movements or state attempts to change family law. Some Islamist women question and criticize the secondary status of women in Muslim communities, and they blame men for oppressing women and limiting their activities. In Iran, Islamist women are asserting their right to criticize gender discrimination and are using language similar to that used by women’s rights activists in other countries. Karl also opines that, the ‘second wave’ feminism are the present-day feminism that spring up from our mothers, grandmother and great-grandmothers who fought for women’s rights as strong individual women, as part of movements for the right to vote or for education of women, as part of social reform movements, workers’ movements, independence and national liberation and other struggles. The present-day feminism, however, is a struggle for the achievement of women’s equality, dignity and freedom of choice to control their lives and bodies within and outside the home. It is different from earlier feminism in that it seeks more than equality or equal rights with men.

Feminism today according to Mac-Donald (1989 cited in Aina (1998: 65-66), however, seeks to root out the causes of women’s oppression, to empower women to participate in decision making at all levels of society and to transform society through the inclusion of women’s participation and perspectives. Feminism, therefore, encompasses both a political activism and an academic or theoretical stance, both stressing the lived experience and action of women’s lives as crucial to any understanding of the social aspects of humanity and offering a critique of and a remedy for the prevailing male ideology which influences the lives, the ideas, and the physical, emotional, or financial well-being of women. Bunch (1993: 249 cited in Aina, 1998: 66) identifies two major goals of feminism:

The first is the freedom from oppression for women involved not only equity but also the right of women to freedom of choice and the power to control their own lives within and outside of the home; having control over their lives and their bodies is essential to ensure a sense of dignity and autonomy for women. The second goal of feminism is the removal of all forms of inequity and oppression through the creation of a more just social and economic order nationally and internationally. This means the involvement of women in national development, and in local and global struggles for change.

Crawford & Unger (2004: 6-7) state that the most influential feminist theoretical perspectives are liberal, radical, socialist, womanist (woman of color), and cultural feminism. The contemporary
feminist theory also includes marxist, separatism, lesbian feminism, revalorists, multiracial feminism, power feminism, eco-feminism, psychoanalytic feminism, standpoint feminism, feminism studies of men, social construction feminism, postmodern feminism and queer theory and Third-Wave Feminism (Wood 2003; Lorber 2010). To Haslanger and Tuana (2008: 24),

These feminism “differ in their ideology on what counts as justice or injustice for women (what counts as ‘equality,’ ‘oppression,’ ‘disadvantage,’ and what rights should everyone be accorded?), and what sorts of injustice women in fact suffer (what aspects of women’s current situation are harmful or unjust?).

According to Haslanger and Tuana (2008: 22), “Third Wave Feminists” including Black women often criticise Second Wave Feminism for its lack of attention to the differences among women due to race, ethnicity, class, nationality, religion, and emphasize ‘identity’ as the basis of gender struggle. Black women see second wave or contemporary Feminism as located only in United States and also as a prototype for women worldwide (Ajayi-Soyinka, 2005). Black women believe that the Feminist movement neglected their identities and experiences in their struggle for women’s liberation, and as a result, they consider the first-wave and second-wave feminist movements Eurocentric. The middle class white women universalized women’s oppression from their own experiences and life situations, ignoring the effects of sexism, racism and classicism which divide them and African women. According to Bell Hooks (cited in Sotunsa, 2008: 17):

Feminism in the United States has never emerged from women who are most victimized by sexist oppression; women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically and spiritually - women who are powerless to change their own condition in life. They are the silent majority.

Feminism aims to eradicate female oppression from male domination. However, African women felt left out in the Western feminist agenda for women’s emancipation. Consequently, Ogunyemi (1995 cited in Ajayi – Soyinka, 2005: 67) contends that:

Since feminism is inevitably rooted in the democratic and economic systems of the West, which affect Africans adversely, the African women have no viable position in such an affiliation, except perhaps to change its orientation to achieve international equity through the women’s movement.

Black women challenged Feminism and criticized Western feminist for their lack of interest on the experiences of the black race. “Many black women denounced women’s liberation as ‘white female foolishness’ and others reacted to white female racism by starting black feminist groups”
Hooks 1981: 9) in order to articulate their racial and gender identities. Black women wish to use their movement to fight racial and sexual inequality in order to bring about a change in the predominantly white society. Opara (1990: 158) expresses that African woman “would rather identify more with African men in their struggle for social and political freedom than with the middle-class white feminist who ignores the fact that racism and capitalism are concomitants of sexism”. The disagreement among feminists concerning the nature of women’s oppression and the ways to achieve equality for all women gave birth to different feminist theories. According to Ikeokwu (2006: 52), “since the 1960s, Feminism has split again and again until it has become Feminisms, a set of groups, each with its own ideology, identity, and agenda”.

Liberal Feminists, however, have different ideologies, from Marxist or Socialist, Radical, Womanist and so on, about the subjection of women. According to Crawford and Unger (2004), Liberal Feminism relies on deeply held American beliefs about equality. They believe that all people are born equal and, therefore, should have equal rights and opportunities. For the Liberal feminists, women are entitled to full legal and social equality with men. As a result, they fight for changes in laws, customs and values in order to achieve equality for both sexes. This is because they believe that if men and women are given the same environment, the women will perform as well as men. On the other hand, Socialist Feminism believes that the division of society into different groups of people leads to women’s oppression. They are of the opinion that women suffer discrimination based on sexism, racism and classism. Each of these systems of discrimination reinforces the other in such a way that a poor black woman is triply disadvantaged. However, Radical Feminism considers the control of women by men as a main source of women’s oppression. They believe that women as a group are not oppressed by their biology or their social class but by men as a group. They also believe that sexist oppression is one thing all women have in common. Radical Feminists are convinced that women can free themselves only when they have done away with what they consider an inherently oppressive and dominating system. Radical feminists make a radical demand to eliminate male control if women are to be liberated. One of the Radical Feminists, Ann Oakley (cited in Raza, 1985: 129) enumerates different steps to be taken to liberate women:

First, the housewife role must be abolished. Oakley rejects less radical solutions such as payment for housework, which, she argues, will simply reinforce the woman equals housewife equation. Second, the family as
it stands must be abolished. This proposal follows from the first since the housewife and mother roles are part and parcel of the same thing. Abolishing the family will also serve to break the circle of daughter learning her role from mother, son learning his role from father. Third the sexual division of labour must be eradicated in all areas of social life.

Liberal, Marxist/Socialist and Radical Feminists’ ideologies center on Western women’s oppression ignoring African women. Western women viewed patriarchy and social structure as the main sources of their oppression. They reject domesticity and sexual oppression by men and decided, to take an equal responsibility in determining their future. The abolition of family life as solution to sexist oppression by radical feminists is not supported by African-American women who see racism as more oppressive than sexism. The white feminists practiced racial discrimination towards the black people, especially women, because when the white liberationists “refer to ‘women,’ they are referring solely to the experience of white women” (Hooks 1981: 8). Their belief is that “liberation from racial oppression would be all that is necessary for them to be free” (Hooks 1981: 1). However, the separation from the men, which the white feminists advocated in order to be free from patriarchal subjection is seen by African women as absurd because they “have fought with men (black men) and have died with men in every revolution” (Weathers 2005: 222). Black women prefer to unite with their men to fight issues of race, class, and gender discrimination which white women see as insignificant in their movement. As a result, black women create their own ideology which is different from mainstream Feminism to portray their real life as African women. To achieve their motives, Alice Walker advocates ‘Womanism’ as an alternative to Feminism.

**Womanism**

Womanism, like Feminism, is taxonomic. Consequently, it encompasses Walker’s Womanism, Africana Womanism, African Womanism, Stiwanism, Motherism, Nego-Feminism, Femalism and Snail-Sense Feminism. Walker’s womanist ideology which is presented in *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983) addresses African cultural peculiarity. Walker defines womanism in four segments:

1. From womanish. (opp. Of “girlish”, i.e. frivolous. Irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, “you are acting womanish”, i.e., like a woman. Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or wilful behaviour. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered “good” for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up.
Interchangeable with another black folk expression: “you trying to be grown.”
Responsible and in charge. Serious.

2. Also: a woman who loves other women. Asexually and/or sexually. Appreciates and
prefers women’s culture. Women’s emotional flexibility (values tears as natural co
3. unter-balance of laughter), and women’s strength. Sometimes loves individual men,
sexually and/or non-sexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male
and female. Not a separatist, except periodically, for health. Traditionally Universalist, as
in: “mama, Why are we brown, pink and yellow and our cousins are white, beige, and
black?” ans.: “well, you know the colour race is just like a flower garden, with every color
flower represented.” Traditionally capable, as in: “mama, I’m walking to Canada and I’m
taking you and a bunch of other slaves with me.” Reply: “it wouldn’t be the first time.”
4. Loves music. Loves dance. Loves the moon. Loves the spirit. Loves love and food and
Womanist is to feminism as purple is to lavender.

Walker’s views have elicited several responses from scholars. To Kolawole (1997: 21) Walker’s
Womanism reciprocates Feminist struggle for gender equality, but vehemently opposes racial
discrimination. Many African / American women in western society have appropriated it as a way
of affirming themselves as ‘black’ while simultaneously owning their connection with Feminism
and the Afro-American community, male and female. However, the concept of Womanism allows
women to claim their roots in black history, religion and culture (Williams, 1989). This makes
Womanism differ from Feminism in approach by advocating the integration of men into the
struggle rather than separation which Radical Feminism propose (Iweriebor, 1998). Walker’s
Womanism, therefore, is pacifist in approach and not combative like Feminism.

Womanism reflects more egalitarian relations between men and women, much less rigidity in
male-female roles, and more respect for female intelligence and ingenuity than is found in
bourgeois culture (Williams, 1989). The black women want togetherness and closer connection
with men through love and shared struggle for survival and for productive quality of life (e.g.
“wholeness”) in economics, religion, politics, and education. Walker’s ideology also emphasises
sisterhood by informing women to love one another “Regardless.” Women’s love for one another will guard against negative divisions (class hierarchy) among women which can prohibit sisterhood and also avoid the self-destruction of bearing their burden alone but to connect with other women who are concerned about women’s rights and well-being. Walker also advocates against women’s competition for male attention; instead women should appreciate and prefer their fellow women’s culture and value their emotional flexibility and strength. Walker’s definition of Womanism also suggests that no genuine community building is possible when women are excluded (except when women’s health is at stake). African Womanism, to Nnaemeka (1998: 21), “is what white, middle-class feminism is not” which is union between the males and the females as a whole. The radical solution for the abolishment of family and the Marxist fallacy that they speak for all women caused many African women to be ‘anti-feminists’ and opt for Womanism. Patricia Hill Collins, (cited in Nnaemeka, 2010), remarks that many black women view feminism as a movement that, at best, is exclusively for women, and, at worst, dedicated to attacking or eliminating men. But Womanism seemingly supplies a way for black women to address gender-oppression without attacking black men.

Womanists’ insistence on the unity between black men and women is the fact that African worldview is predominantly family-oriented (Kolawole 1997). This view was affirmed by Buchi Emecheta (cited in Kolawole, 1997: 11) who succinctly declares that:

I am a feminist with a small ‘f’, I love men and good men are the salt of the earth. But to tell me that we should abolish marriage like the capital ‘F’ (Feminist) women who say women should live together and all that, I say No, personally I’d like to see the ideal, happy marriage…. African women advocate peaceful marriages, not turbulent ones. To them the family grows out of harmonious marriages that bring about the unity of all people, men, women, children and the extended family, all which feminism lacks. Ama Ata Aidoo’s (cited in Kolawole, 1997: 11) view of Feminism also touches on the centrality of the family in society:

Feminism. You know how we feel about that embarrassing western philosophy? The destroyer of homes. Imported mainly from America to ruin nice African homes.

The failure of western feminists to recognize African women’s specificity has caused many African women to embrace Womanism for their self-expression. They are more interested in a womanist ideology that will address the needs of African women. From Walker’s view that “Womanist is to feminism as purple is to Lavender” we can argue that feminism and Womanism
are dissimilar because Womanism is seen as more broad and effective for Black Feminists than Feminism. According to Arndt (2006: 37), Walker’s concept of Womanism “focuses on Black women’s identity and commitment to gender issues.” Arndt (2006: 38) maintains that Womanism as an aspect of Feminism “is concerned with overcoming not only sexist discrimination, but also discrimination based on people’s racial or socio-economic identity.” Black women welcome Womanism as a means to project their cultural identity as African women. They want to belong to a society where their impact will be felt and recognized like their white counterparts. So, separation from their men was not an issue because African women believe that their struggle cannot be won without the support of their men, notwithstanding that their men are patriarchal in orientation.


> [African Womanism] emerged from the acknowledgement of a longstanding authentic agenda for that group of women of African descent who needed only to be properly named and officially defined according to their own unique historical and cultural matrix, one that would reflect the co-existence of men and women in a concerted struggle for the survival of their entire family/community (1).

Thus, Africana Womanism, like Alice Walker’s Womanism, emphasizes the integration and unification of people of African descent, which makes it different from Feminism. The absence of black women’s experiences in Feminism prompted Hudson-Weems search for an African-centred paradigm for women of African descent. She realized through the African traditional women’s roles, characters, and activities that the phenomenon of Africana Womanism has long been in existence before the term ‘Africana Womanism’. She claims that her ideology will identify and redefine African women’s reality, who they are, what they do, and what they believe in as a people. According to Nnaemeka (2010), Africana Womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African Culture and therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and desires of African women (Mogu, 1999).
The basis of Africana Womanism is on self-naming and self-defining because Hudson-Weems believes that “nothing is more important to a people’s existence than naming and defining self” (Aldridbe (2004 cited in Hudson-Weems, 2004: xii). African women need to reclaim and redefine themselves from the distorted image imposed on them by western writers, especially male writers. This is why Hudson-Weems calls on African women worldwide to use the terminology and concept of literary Africana Womanism, a term that evokes a new paradigm of prioritizing the tripartite plight of race, class and gender for all women of African descent, as a new tool for analysis, to reclaim, rename, and redefine themselves. Her ideology based on African family and black experiences has eighteen features by which Africana Womanism can be described. These include: self-namer, self-definer, family-centred, in contact with male in struggle, genuine in sisterhood, strong, whole, authentic, flexible role player, male compatible, respected, recognized, adaptable, respectful of elders, spiritual, ambitious, mothering and nurturing (Hudson-Weems 2004: xix - xx). She maintains that these key descriptors of Africana Womanism will be more plausible to use in rendering authentic African women within a cultural and literary context than feminism, a superimposed, inapplicable paradigm for black life and its women; and by extension Black Feminism, which does not work within black historical and cultural context. This aspect is where Hudson-Weems differentiates her ideology of Africana Womanism from Walker’s Womanism.

Hudson-Weems contends further that Walker’s Womanism shares a common ground with Feminism and Black Feminisms ‘…purple vs. lavender,’ whose agenda does not express the triple plight of African women - race, class and gender - but focuses only on gender. She asserts that “when the Black Feminist buys the White terminology, she also buys its agenda” (Hudson-Weems 2004: 7). Concerning feminist agenda, Morrison argues that “the early image of Women’s Liberation was of an elitist organization made up of upper-middle class women with the concern of that class and not paying much attention to the problem of most black women” (Hudson-Weems 2004: 9). Hudson-Weems’ notion of ‘Womanism/ African Feminism’ is a duplicate of Feminism. She claimed that Africana Womanism which was coined in 1987 was a result of “the realization of the total inadequacy of Feminism and similar theories (e.g., Black feminism, African Womanism or Womanism) to grasp the reality of African women, let alone give us the means to change the reality” (Hudson-Weems 2004: 8). Unlike Walker’s, Africana Womanism is entirely
different from feminism in that it was formulated mainly for the needs of women of African
descent.

Catherine Acholonu (1995) proposes “Motherism” which “denotes motherhood, nature and
nurture”. According to her, “Motherism is a multidimensional theory, which involves the dynamics
of ordering, reordering, creating structures, building and rebuilding in cooperation with mother
nature at all levels of human endeavour” (Acholonu, 1995: 110-111). Her perspective portrays
motherhood as natural and as the center of African culture. She points out that a Motherist must
be a humanist, a man or a woman who heals and protects the natural cohesive essence of the family,
the child, the society and the environment. Motherhood is the point of unity between women and
men for the well-being of the family and its environs without which Motherism will be impossible.
According to Acholonu (1995: 112),

A motherist could be a man or a woman; the essence of motherism is
partnership, cooperation, tolerance, love, understanding, patience. The
motherist is a builder, a healer, not a destroyer, but a co-creator with
God, a lover of the child.

The foregoing views highlight the fact that the ideology of African Feminism differs in thought
and creed from its western counterpart. African women believe in practical motherhood which has
existed in African culture before the imperialists disorientated the African way of life. African
motherhood is not a separatist, man-heater, or devilish one. Rather, she is humble, obedient and
above all, a lover of men and children. The complementarity of both sexes, especially as it concerns
womanhood is rooted in African cosmology. This is where African Feminism is different from
Western Feminism because it supports male and female complementarity to sustain human
existence.

of Negotiation”. It implies the necessity of challenging given facts by negotiating – a concept
that is at the heart of Igbo and many other African cultures. She also adds a new dimension - “No
ego feminism” – which is to be read as critical allusion to White Western Feminism’s arrogance,
imperialism and power struggles (Nnaemeka, 2004). Ezeigbo (2012: 24) shows that Nnaemeka
builds on the idea of “African women’s willingness and readiness to negotiate with and around
men even in difficult circumstances” to formulate her theory of “Nego-feminism”. She
disassociates her ideology from White Western Feminism and insists on self-naming to match
the approach of the other alternative concepts to Feminism, which is Ogunyemi’s African
womanism and Ogundipe-Leslie’s Stiwanism to develop “Nego-feminism as an African concept.
Nnaemeka describes Western Feminism as ‘Combative’ while its African opposite is prone to
negotiation (Nego-feminism) and collaboration. Ezeigbo (2012: 24) also asserts that Nnaemeka
advocates that “African feminist theory should be built on the indigenous”. Her clarion call,
according to Ezeigbo, underscores and affirms the efforts of earlier theorists to provide
indigenous theories for the interpretation and the criticism of the literature. Moreover, the notion
of “Multi-perspectives, Multi-disciplinarity, and intersections of difference” is inscribed in
“Nego-feminism”.
Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1996), the Nigerian scholar, in her book Africa Wo-man Palava,
developed another terminology, ‘African Womanism,’ which is similar to Walker’s ‘Womanism’;
however, her concept is significant in its focus on content. Ogunyemi (1996: 113) argues that:

Since feminism and African-American womanism overlook African
peculiarities, there is a need to define African womanism. This is
necessitated by African women’s inclusive, mother-centered ideology,
with its focus on caring - familial, communal, national, and international.
Not only is sexism a problem, other oppressive sites include
totalitarianism, militarism, ethnicism, (post)colonialism, poverty, racism,
and religious fundamentalism. They prevent us from a space of our own,
in which to recuperate in order to join the international discourse from
a position of strength. As such, these issues must be addressed, and
ignoring them is problematic....

Ogunyemi’s ideology is more encompassing than Walker’s Womanism. She points out other
challenges that befall women beyond sexism, which women themselves need to thrash out to have
meaningful existence. According to her, African Womanism “believes in freedom and
independence like feminism”, but the difference between feminism and the African Womanism is
“what each sees of patriarchy and what each thinks can be changed” (Arndt 2006: 39), which is
why African Womanism has more components than feminism to encompass African women’s life
and experiences. Ogunyemi (1996) believes that the idea of gender can be treated only in the
context of other issues which are relevant to women. She goes beyond “Walker’s ‘race’ – class -
gender approach” to list ten aspects relevant to the womanist agenda:

1. Global capitalism and consumption that impoverish the poor;
2. the political economics of race;
3. feminisms and other imperialisms-postcoloniality in cahoots (sic)
   with global sisterhood;
4. interethnic skirmishes and cleaning;
5. religious fundamentalism - African traditional religions, Islam; and Christianity;
6. elitism, militarism, and feudalism;
7. the language issue;
8. gender constructions;
9. gerontocracy;
10. in-lawish and other cultural constraints (Arndt 2006: 40).

The above features are pivotal to African Womanism and Ogunyemi believes they should be deployed for the emancipation of African women to make them meaningful. Ogundipe-Leslie (2008: 549) proposes “Stiwanism” for Feminism. (‘STIWA’ is an acronym for Social Transformations Including Women in Africa). She advocates this perspective to tackle imitation of Western Feminism by African women which African men are not comfortable with. African men believe that feminists oppose men and destroy family life. Therefore, they accuse their women who fight for their rights by emulating feminists. Thus, Ezeigbo (1998: 1) aptly observes that: “in some people’s mind, Feminism conjures up visions of aggressive women who try to be like men, dress carelessly and abandon essential feminine attributes”. According to Ezeigbo (1998: 1),

[Consequently] the fear of being branded feminists with the possible adverse consequences this might attract in our essentially patriarchal society has compelled most Nigerian women to deny being feminists or having anything to do with the ideology of feminism.

Furthermore, Ogundipe (2008: 224) notes that “some 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’. Ogundipe’s proposal is clearly a bold attempt to surmount many of the challenges and fears confronting African women and men respectively on the question of Feminism. Ogundipe (2008: 229) explains thus:

I have since advocated the word “Stiwanism,” instead of feminism, to bypass these concerns and to bypass the combative discourses that ensue whenever one raises the issue of feminism in Africa.... The word “feminism” itself seems to be a kind of red rag to the bull of African men. Some say the word by its very nature is hegemonic, or implicitly so. Others find the focus on women in themselves somehow threatening.... 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....
Further, she asserts that African women’s ideology must be different from Feminism to project African women’s social and family orientation. Her proposed STIWA includes African women in the contemporary social and political transformation of Africa. Ogundipe’s (2008: 210) perspective is family-centered because to her:

All theoreticians of African liberation have failed to confront the issue of gender within the family or to confront the family as a site for social transformation. They will talk about changing society, mobilizing Africa, but not about the issue of the relationship of men and women; gender relations. With the modernization of Africa...there has to be a new reordering of society, particularly at the level of family, because of erosions and changes within the indigenous family patterns stemming from new developments which have to be interrogated.

Indigenous African settings have gender roles strictly for men and women. These roles have undergone some changes in the modern society which must be accounted for. Women have taken responsibilities in the families traditionally ascribed to men; a new development Ogundipe thinks will help women to achieve liberation. She believes in women participating alongside their men in the well-being of the family. By this, they will achieve independence and equality with men. Consequently, Ogundipe warns that African women:

must cease to want to exploit men financially or to burden the men within the family while talking about equality. African women need to educate themselves about the rights and responsibilities...in a modern nation-state for the woman as an independent individual and not as a dependent. (2008: 210)

Women taking responsibilities in their families will help in liberating them from the male-dominated social order. Ogundipe’s idea of equality with men is to encourage women to accept responsibility, especially financial responsibility alongside their men in the family. She believes that if women could do this, no African man will object to including women in the social transformation of Africa.


Femalism, a hue of African feminism, is a softer tone than liberal feminism and highly polarised from radical feminism. Unlike womanism which was made popular by Alice Walker and Africanised by Ogunyemi, femalism is essentially African and accentuates the body.

Akachi Ezeigbo (2012) proposes the “Snail Sense Feminism/Womanism’ for African women. Ezeigbo’s snail-sense feminism is based on the result of her research on the Nigerian woman
from the pre-colonial and colonial periods to the present. Ezeigbo examines the indigenous strategies women used and can still use to protect themselves and negotiate around the rugged terrain of patriarchy with its restrictions and subjugations. Women in African cultures – from different parts of Nigeria – often adopt a conciliatory or cooperative attitude towards men. This is akin to what the snail does with the environment in which it moves and exists. Her snail-sense theory is derived from the habit of snails which most Nigerian women adopt in their relationships with men. The snail crawls over boulders, rocks, thorns, crags and rough terrains smoothly and efficiently with a well-lubricated tongue which is not damaged or destroyed by these harsh objects. The Igbo people say, ‘ire ọma ka ejule ji aga n’ogwu’ (The snail crawls over thorns with a fine and well-lubricated tongue). Moreover, the snail carries its house (shell) on its back without feeling the strain. It goes wherever it wishes in this manner and arrives at its destination intact. If danger looms, it withdraws into its shell and is safe. Ezeigbo shows that this snail-sense strategy is what women often use in our society to survive in Nigerian’s harsh patriarchal culture. It is this tendency to accommodate or tolerate the male and cooperate with men that informs her theory of “Snail-Sense Feminism”. She emphasizes that the snail may not be a strong creature physically and can be crushed easily; yet it does not hesitate to climb trees, mount fences, climb up and down rocks, thorny and spiky surfaces. It goes steadily forward. It does not confront objects but negotiate its way past any obstacle. Ezeigbo affirms that a woman cannot but behave like a snail in our patriarchal society. In her opinion, Ezeigbo confirms that the Nigerian woman adopts snail-sense strategy in her relationship with men, just as the woman of the past (the indigenous woman) did in her interactions with people in her community.

Ezeigbo’s (2010) Snail-Sense Feminism differs from other theories because of its emphasis on the individual. The individual must empower herself before she can empower others. She must stand before she can help other people to stand. The pursuit of individual success and development is central to snail-sense feminism. The woman should not just accommodate others, but should ensure that she achieves recognition for herself because self-preservation and self-actualization, especially through education, are crucial to a woman’s success in life. And if she succeeds, the success of the family or the community follows naturally as some female Igbo writers portrayed in their novels. Ezeigbo points out that snail-sense feminism, symbiotically, advocates Western feminism’s individualism and African womanism’s communalism. Ezeigbo
maintains that snail-sense feminism, adopting this habit of a snail, focuses on the individual, but encourages respect and tolerance for the group, with a readiness to negotiate and cooperate with others. Indeed the strength of snail-sense feminism lies in its uniqueness in interrogating existing ideas about sisterhood, female bonding and group consciousness. In the end, it is the individual that constitutes the group. Ezeigbo also points out that negotiation or dialogue is sometimes more efficacious in achieving success in human relations than aggression or confrontation. The emphasis is on the ability of the snail to smoothen rough spaces to enable it to make its movement easy. In like manner, the Nigerian woman, especially the Igbo woman, ought to be wise, sensitive and proactive in her quest for justice and self-actualisation. She further stresses that the African woman should employ subtle means (negotiation) to tackle issues concerning men than aggression. This will help promote dignity and respect for womanhood and also solve the problems of male domination.

Ezeigbo’s (2010) idea of ‘snail sense’ supports dialogue and negotiation between men and women as a way to reconcile issues concerning both genders to enhance cooperation between them. A womanist will ensure peace and harmony in the family (not antagonism which brings about separation) by being “committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. In as much as ‘Womanism’ was created by African-Americans, from the quest by black women in America to better their situation in a white society, many African male and female writers have adopted the theory of Womanism to criticize the writings of black men in the United States as well as African works.

The various strands of feminist and womanist ideologies have one common denominator: To liberate women from obnoxious oppressive cultural practices, including offensive portrayal of womanhood at all levels of social organisation.

REFERENCES


