

WOMANISM: REPRESENTATION OF THE AFRICAN WOMAN

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Abstract

Traditionally, women have been known to occupy subordinate positions in the society. Their roles revolve round the home; Managing the home, procreation, nurturing the children among others. The education of the male child is given prominence over that of the girl child. The need to correct the subordinate position occupied by women led to the birth of the feminist movement in Europe and America in the late 18th century. Although, the proponents of the movement claim to be fighting for the liberation of women globally, one discovers that it is more western oriented, hence the need for "womanism", a movement that takes into consideration the cultural peculiarities of the African woman. Finally, for "womanism" to achieve the purpose of its existence, there is the need for female bonding among African women notwithstanding their class and educational background.

Traditionally in every society of the world, there is always a myth associated with the female gender. Her life revolves around the family. On her lies the responsibility of caring for the home, procreation, as a way of assuring the continuity of the patrimony and nurturing of the children among others. The society attributes to her a subordinate status in relation to her male counterpart, little wonder that in the field of education, the girl-child is ignored while education of the male child is accorded paramount importance. De Beauvoir (1987) observes (hat the achievements of women in every sphere-politics, the arts, philosophy, etc; have been, in terms of their quantity and their quality inferior to that of men because of the socially determined condition of women,

confining them to an inferior position and which influence their ability to act. In the same vein, Woolf as cited by De Beauvoir (1987) insists that in the literary sphere, works by English women were so rare, and generally of inferior quality. In her work *titled A Room of One's Own* she suggests:

The first thing necessary in order to be able to write is to have a room of your own, a place to which you can retreat for a few hours: a place where, without risk of interruption, you can think, write, reread what you have written, criticize what you have done, be left to yourself.

Beauvoir stressed further that "in order to be able to achieve anything at all, you first of all belong to nobody but yourself. She considers women in the traditional Setting as devoid of independence claiming that they are the property of their husbands and children who can come and demand explanations, support or assistance to which they cannot themselves and that in such conditions, writing becomes, if not an impossibility, then at least every difficult task indeed.

In a sort of comparative analysis of the opportunities made available to the male and female-child. Woolf uses Shakespeare as a case study. She imagines what we have happened if instead of Shakespeare, exactly in his position, an extremely talented little girl had been born. She shows that it would have been virtually impossible for her to create anything at all. She would have stayed at home, learnt to cook and to sew, got married and had children; it is absolutely inconceivable that

she would have had the education Shakespeare had. that she would have become an actor and a playwright; she would not have been Shakespeare; she would have been a nobody.

The awareness of the position which society places women and the inevitability of changing the lot of women to make them fulfill their God's given potential led to the birth of the feminist movement in Europe and America in the late 18th century. The movement's failure to cater for the cultural diversities of women worldwide inspired the Black women in diaspora and the continental Black women to come up with the concept of "womanism" a struggle for the emancipation of the African women, in the light of the cultural contextualization of the African society.

The issues to be considered in this work are; The place of the African woman in the traditional African society, her position in the colonial period, the image of the African woman as portrayed by male writers and Western feminist, Feminism and womanism and finally the need for proper feminine bonding in the process of the struggle

The African Woman in the Traditional African Society

Literary works abound as regards the place of the woman in the traditional African society. She is portrayed as one whose major function revolves around the family. Her responsibilities are numerous such as being a mother, wife, and home administrator. Chukwukere (1995) highlights the role of the traditional African woman as being important socially, economically and politically. According to her responsibility of house keeping rests upon the woman for she does the cooking, feeds the family members and keeps the home tidy. Her ability to procreate is given prominence and she is celebrated if she gives birth to male children. This procreative ability guarantees her continual stay in her

matrimonial home for a childless woman is regarded as a "sinner." Girls are also socialized to assume the role expected of their gender in preparation for their entry into womanhood.

Chukwukere also affirms that the traditional woman is involved in farming as her contribution to the sustenance of the household. She keeps a small farm close to her house and plants crops such as vegetables, fruits, maize etc. However, in some communities, women play active role in farming. Corroborating this assertion, Kolawole (1997) insists:

During the Iron Age, Zimbabwe was egalitarian and women enjoyed a high level of empowerment. Women in fact played dominant roles in the economy of the society. Power and wealth remained in the female line. Grains constituted the main food and women were in charge and were respected for feeding the community in addition to being mothers and wives.

Politically, women were a force to be reckoned with. Through the women's association of *mitiri* or *mikiri*, interests are articulated and redress is often sought for injustices against its members. In Yoruba areas of Nigeria, women chiefs hold important political, ritual and religious powers over their subjects. The *Fgbé Iyalode* of Oyo and the *Iyalode* of Ibaclan are important historical figures. Yaa Asantewa, an Ashanti Queen mother in Ghana, was a powerful political figure whose unique status enabled her to control both men and women. She wielded a lot of authority and power that she is believed to have led her people against the British in the 1890-1901 Anglo-Ashanti war. Women have also served as chiefs in Sierra-Leone. (Chukwukere)

Adebayo (1996) corroborates the role of procreation that society attributes to the woman as she asserts that "African culture avers that the moment of fulfillment for a woman is

childbirth" She stressed further that the myth of the omnipresent nurturing mother is everywhere pervasive because of the reproductive service a woman performs in the society. According to her, this view of motherhood conforms with the conventional European view of femininity and the myths of the feminine mystique which coincide with the fecundity of the earth and the assurance of patrimony; and which imply the woman's forfeiting her life for her family and Society. The trivialization of these important roles of the woman has made her status lower than that of her male counterparts not thanks to patriarchal tradition and colonialism.

Image of the African Woman under Colonialism

Patriarchal laws and culture have succeeded in creating inequalities between the male and female genders. Among the weapons used by men to control women is their major control of economic resources especially land. Bride price practice is another weapon which enabled the man to have authority over the woman. Colonialism also contributed in widening the existing gender gaps in Africa in the sense that the colonial administrators did not take girls' education into consideration while establishing schools, Kolawole 1997 opines

The earliest schools for girls in Nigeria were primary schools and domestic science centres for training women to be good wives for the early African teachers and administrators. On the other hand, boys' schools included grammar schools that produced the pioneers of Nigeria as a nation

This assertion is reinforced by Chukwukere (1996) who insists that with colonization, the Europeans promoted the idea that agriculture and cultivation naturally a man's job. Only men were, consequently, taught to use the

new and improve agricultural techniques in farming while women had to contend with subsistence methods of food production. The result was a decline in the level of production by women. In politics, women also suffered. The colonial officers regrettably failed to appreciate the political contributions of women, believing that politics is a man's exclusive domain. Consequently, warrant chiefs-symbols of the destructive elements of indirect rule-were created and women particularly suffered under their arbitrary jurisdiction for some of the warrant chiefs were purported to have forcefully taken women into marriage without fully conforming to the customary requirements which include to some extent, the women's right to refuse a suitor. It is also believed that the chiefs appropriated the women's agricultural proceeds. Colonial masters transferred the view that female roles are restricted to the home as wives and mothers and accorded men priority in agriculture. One cannot but understand the attitude of the colonial masters as regards the place of women in the society. There is a saying that you cannot give what you do not have. The colonial period was a period when women worldwide occupied subordinate positions in the society and the best the colonial administrators could do was to introduce this policy in the educational sector.

African Woman as Portrayed By Male Writers

The trivialization of women's role in the society was transferred into imaginative literature. Before the arrival of the woman into the literary scene, her gender has been

portrayed by the male gender in the light of the limiting role that the traditional society attributed to her. She is given a marginal and limiting role to play. Her late arrival into the literary scene is caused by colonialism where male education was given priority. The first girls' school was established only 50 years after that of the boys: According to Adebayo(1996):

Unequal access to education between men and women, excessive domestic responsibility, societal expectation, as well as the lukewarm attitude of publishing houses to female-authored texts have been adduced as causes for this relative tardiness of female literary creation in Africa in general and in West Africa in particular.

Although most male writers attribute to their heroines limiting and negative roles, a few like Sembene Ousmane (1960) portray their female characters as strong and powerful personalities. In *les Boutsdec Bos de Dieu*. Sembene Ousmane portrayed his female characters as politically active, morally powerful and contribute immensely to the success of the rail workers' strike.

The Representation of the African Woman

The African woman has been portrayed by male writers and Western feminists as voiceless and invisible. However, female African continental writers like D'Almeida, Micere Mugo, Siga Jajne, Carole Boyce-Davies. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie affirm that the African woman is not voiceless if only one cares to search for their voices in the right places such as in ceremonies and in oral presentations, for their voices have only been suppressed by colonialism and patriarchy. On this silence, D'Almeida suggests:

Silence represents the historical muting of women under the formidable institution known as patriarchy, that form of social

organization in which males assume power and create for female an inferior status.

In the same vein. Jajne (1997) suggests the Senegalese concept of intruding in conversation as a panacea to women making their voices known and accepted in male dominated literary circle. She posits:

I would like to offer an alternate reading and locate myself within the concept of "voice throwing" I believe that by "throwing" in one's voice, a disruption of discourse can take place. The act of "throwing" one's voice can create an epistemic violence to discourse that will create a space for hitherto unheard voices the problem that will arise from such an action will be the appropriation of this voice within the particular discourse it disrupts, an act that may or may not render it mute.

Female writers dramatize injustices against women and attract society's attention to them. They are Flora Nwapa. Grace Obot, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta. Marama Ba and Bessie Head among others. Writers and critics of the feminist school have advocated for balancing and redressing of the obscene image of the African woman on the contemporary society. Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta. Zaynab Alkali. Ifeoma Okoye and less Onwueme have influenced the consciousness of the patriarchal societies to begin to see women in the light of the contemporary development.

Feminism : The Quest for Female Liberation

As a reaction to the oppression and suppression of the female gender. Feminism came into existence as "an outgrowth of eighteenth-century humanist thought in Europe and the USA. reinforced by thinkers from other schools of thought, such as utilitarian and Marxism.(Madhu 1994). It is related to the struggle for the liberation of the female gender.

Womanism: Representation of the African Woman

It began in Europe and America in the 19th century when women became conscious of their oppression and marginalization and took steps to redress this oppression. (Sotunsa) The movement has diversities such as Marxist Feminism, Humanist feminism, Liberal Feminism, Radical Feminism, Analytic Feminism and Lesbian Feminism.

One observes that since Feminism originated from Europe and America and especially by middle class white women, it tended to focus on the concerns of this group of women to the exclusion of other groups. Consequently, Black women in the diasporas as well as their continental counterparts came up with alternative shade of Feminism, taken into consideration the cultural peculiarities of this group. Some female writers from the continent, associate with Feminism, claiming that its major concern, is the struggle for the liberation of women while others reject being tagged feminist saying it is another form of cultural Imperialism. This group is uncomfortable with the way female mobilization and self-assertion in pre-colonial Africa is glossed over or effaced from feminist history. Another bone of contention of the group is the assertion of Western feminist that African female mobilization got its inspiration from the West. This statement can be said to be incorrect since Africa has record of strong women in pre-colonial and colonial era who took parts in collective actions to protest against colonial laws that were anti-women. Among issues advocated by Western feminist is lesbianism., a culture that is strange to Africa where the centrality of the family is an issue of paramount importance.

The inevitability of redefining the African woman as regards the struggle for liberation marks the genesis of the nomenclature, known as womanism. In the words of Walker (1983). "womanism" is:

A Black feminist or feminist of colour... who loves other women, sexually and/ or asexually. Appreciates and prefers women's culture, sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female...

Womanist is to feminism as purple is to lavender.

Still on the issue of a concept that is relevant to the African reality, Ogunjipe-Leslie came up with the term. "Stiwanism" an acronym for Social Transformation Including the African Woman. The issue at stake is not doing away with men as Western feminists advocates but lighting a common battle with the men, which is the liberation of all oppressed people in the society.

Conclusion

From the traditional to the modern society, women have been misrepresented by patriarchy, colonial masters, male writers and Western feminists. This misrepresentation either done intentionally or inadvertently has led to the desire to correct this imbalance in the portrayal of the African Woman. "Womanism", which is more or less a re-invention / re-presentation of the African woman came into existence. However, there is the need for female bonding if one is to embark on an authentic struggle for the liberation of the African woman. This implies that all classes of women should unite in this struggle, for it is a struggle that require the concerted effort of all stakeholders.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are hereby proffered in order to correct the wrong placement of women in the society:

1. Government and NGO's should help carry out a general reorientation of people on patriarchal practices through public awareness.
2. Equal opportunities should be given to the

- two genders in terms of education and job placement.
3. The girl-child should be encouraged to develop high self-esteem and to be self-assertive.
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