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Feminism as a Myth: A Study of Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* and Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough*.

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Abstract

Feminism as an assertion of womanhood, a demand for the recognition of the potentialities of women and a call for granting women equal opportunities with men in social, political, educational, economic and religious spheres of life was a apt and a step in the right direction that submits itself to reasonability and realism. But at the stage when Feminism graduated into a revolutionary call for a fight with men, a struggle for equality with men and a demand for unlimited freedom for women and exhortation of single motherhood, among other unattainable goals, feminism degenerates from realism to absurdism and mythicism. These two directly opposing views and practice of Feminism are the concern of this paper which is substantiated with references to the original ideas of the early proponents of Feminism and the demonstration of the second stage of feminism in some African novels by African feminist writers.

The word Feminism seems to be one of the numerous academic concepts that have clearly undergone and continue to undergo tremendous philosophical and ideological metamorphosis to a detrimental magnitude. For example, Feminism in its original and unadulterated conceptualization simply means a general re-assertion by women (especially the educated ones) of their inalienable rights as human beings with equal rights and responsibilities with men. At this stage, it was a diplomatic movement aimed at creating awareness and full consciousness for women to regain confidence in themselves, believe in their potentials and their indispensable roles as partners to men. It also aimed at deflating and erasing in men, the god-like ego and "larger than thou image," which religion, creation story in the Christian Bible and most world cultures have bestowed on them. To buttress the above view regarding the initial objective of Feminism, The Encyclopedia Americana Vol. 29, (231) writers:

The late 20th century has been by a world wide effort by women to gain rights previously denied them. The particular rights sought have varied from one society. However, economic rights, educational opportunities and access to adequate healthcare are common concerns. Social freedom and political participation are also wide-spread goals.

A careful study of the diction in the above quotation shows that Feminism, in its original conception and perception was a legitimate demand by women for recognition and an assertion of their complete humanity in a seemingly male-dominated world. In the same vein, while Owonobi sees Feminism as a movement which has its major occupation as “the improvement of the so-called weaker sex and the need for gender equality,” Chukwuma sees it as:

A concept that stands for female assertion, as effort by women to claim proper treatment and places in the society. Not out of pity and consideration but by right for human dignity. Importantly, it is a fight for recognition for a place under the sun (23).

A thorough and critical analysis of the diction and the semantic implications of some of the phrases and clauses used by Chukwuma to describe Feminism gives an impression of a second stage and extended meaning and usage of the term. For example, such phrases as: “an effort to claim,” “not out of pity but by right,” “a fight for recognition,” obviously indicate a rise in tempo, a movement from diplomatic assertion to a confrontation, a fight or a non-negotiable demand by women.

This confrontational stance is basically contrary to the original aims of the founding mothers of Feminism. For instance, the focus of early Feminists was the women who clearly fell outside paternalistic family system – the unsupported spinster, the married women whose marriage, for whatever reason; it could be desertion, divorce or separation – no longer afforded them any protection. Its aims were civic rights, and access to employment and education. Judged by its own objectives, its achievements were substantial (*Women and Fiction*) (5). Again to substantiate the fact that the present proponents of feminism are derailing and crossing bounds/boundaries, Stubbs wrote:

Conventional notions of marriage and women’s natural sphere were taken for granted as feminists concentrated their efforts on women who as they saw it, for accidental or numerical reasons were not likely to marry. Spinsterhood was still regarded as a misfortune and marriage a norm (5).

The point being made above by Stubbs is that feminism, ab initio, concentrated on ways of helping and improving the less-privileged women, who are unfortunate to either get married and abandoned, separated or divorced by their husbands. But the present stage of feminism seems to be advocating the further betterment of the social status of already privileged women.

It is however, ironical that African concept and brand of feminism as showcased by Mariama Ba and Flora Nwapa advocated rugged spinsterhood and single parenthood as opposed to the original philosophies of early proponents of feminism. This is achieved through the ideas of presenting female protagonists in their novels as heroines, who are independent of men in all ramifications. This is contrary to the role of women as presented by Stubbs in the lines below. According to her:

The true function of women is to educate not only children but men, to train to higher civilization not the rising generation but the actual society. And to do this by diffusing the spirit of affection, fidelity, and purity – as mother, as wife, as sister, as daughter, as friend, as nurse, as counselor, as purifier, as example in a word – as woman (7).

The aforementioned role expectations cannot be played by a woman who seeks to be isolatedly independent as envisaged by Obot who perceives feminism in these words:

Feminism as freedom for women is meaningful if it includes the freedom to associate with whom I like, to spend my money on what I please, to choose the topic and ways of communication, to decide on my own life plans and follow them, to decide what I talk about and with whom, to go and come as I like and go where I like. To choose the type of relationship I like and decide whether it should include sex or not. (51).

From the kind of picture created by Obot with regard to Feminism, it simply implies that her brand of feminism abhors being under anybody's control, influence, supervision or guidance. The above picture renders marriage, loyalty and fidelity in marriage useless and unnecessary, because no marriage (earlier supported and taken for granted by pioneer feminists) can thrive and be sustained under the conditions given by Obot. Now, following from the above expanded and seeming elastic conceptualization of feminism, this paper aims at tracking down the development of feminism from its original level of assertion of womanhood and women's rights to the stage of demand for equal rights and opportunities in political, economic, educational and religious spheres to the extremist height of a fight for recognition and total independence of women from men at the expense of the Biblical, Koranic injunctions and cultural specifications.

In tracking down the radical metamorphosis undergone by feminism, in the course of time, copious references are made to the works of female African literary writers, with particular emphasis on the works of Mariama Ba and Flora Nwapa.

The over all aim of this paper is to practically equate Feminism with a Myth of Feminine Superiority exhibited by the aforementioned writers in the presentation and characterization of male and female characters in their novels. The characterization resembles what one may tag “anti-chauvinistic chauvinism or anti-racist racism.”

In the subsequent part of this work, some African literary writers, particularly Mariama Ba and Flora Nwapa are examined through their works such as *So Long a Letter* and *One is Enough*. For example, in Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter*, men are generally depicted as unfaithful husbands, irresponsible fathers, shameless womanizers or studs/he-goats, who go after any woman on skirt. The men are seen as conscienceless victimizers who are grossly remorseless in their actions against women.

First, there is Ramatoulaye’s spineless husband, Modou Fall, a very successful lawyer and a trade unionist who turned a company executive. Happily married for twenty-five years (25 yrs), he suddenly turned his sexual attention and interest to Binetou, a teenage school girl and a very good friend of his daughter, Daba. Before Ramatoulaye could know the ugly developments in her martial life, Modou had abandoned her and her twelve children and gone to live with his new wife and his mother. This situation left Ramatoulaye with many unanswered questions below: Madness? Spinelessness? Irresistible love? What internal upheaval deranged Modou Fall to make him marry Binetou (22).”

But Modou Fall’s behaviour could not actually be associated with madness or spinelessness, since Ramatonlaye gave a very strong reason in favour of Modou Fall for his action. According to her, Binetou is:

...visibly in the bourgeois milieu, a very beautiful apple ripe for plucking by someone with eyes good enough to see. Her beauty pure, the harmonious curves of her body could not pass unnoticed (54).

The above physical and social attributes of Binetou clearly vindicated Modou Fall from any accusation of madness or spinelessness. He was simply naturally attracted to a thing of beauty that is a joy forever. In her depiction, Ba associates man with grandeur and bestiality. She puts it thus: “Man is one: grandeur and bestiality or animality confused. No gestures on his part is pure ideal. No gestures on his part is pure bestiality (50).”

To associate man with animalistic instincts and a pretentious attachment of grandeur is nothing short of scaremongering. To worsen the situation, Modou Fall had to die as a character for his wife Ramatoulaye and her twelve children to live. It is obviously an unfair depiction.

In a similar vein, another male character, a successful medical doctor, Mawdo Ba is presented as a symbol of evil and an embodiment of irresponsibility. Like Modou Fall, he was happily married to Aissatou, an intelligent daughter of a blacksmith. Now, through the influence of his mother, Mawdo Ba married a very young girl named Nabou. Aissatou decided and quit her matrimonial home. Before she left; she indicted her husband in particular and men in general in these words:

You wish to dissociate love pure and simple from physical love. I hurl back at you the accusation that carnal knowledge cannot be without the acceptance of the heart, no matter how minimal it is. Man is a confused combination of grandeur and animality (50).

In the above lines, Mariama Ba again associates man with the delima of confused ambivalence. Man is both good and bad, a human being and a beast, a god and devil. It is noteworthy that Modou Fall and Mawdo Ba are very highly placed professional (a lawyer and a medical doctor respectively), yet they could not control their sexual and emotional instincts to the point of abandoning their wives and precious children for inexperienced young girls. In the same vein, even Dieng, another male character, wanting and almost pleading and crying to be allowed to marry Ramatoulaye, a widow with twelve children, and who had spent twenty-five years in matrimonial experience, shows that Dieng, lacks choice and decency. It is therefore not surprising when Ramatoulaye subtly insulted him in these words:

I can offer you nothing else, even though you deserve everything. Esteem is not enough for marriage. And the existence of your wife and children further complicates the situation. Abandoned yesterday because of a woman, I cannot lightly bring myself between you and your family (68).

Here, while Ramatoulaye is reasonable, considerate and fair-minded to the extent that she would not like to offend a fellow woman and her children by interfering in their peaceful family life by marrying Dieng, the man Dieng, is willing and ready to abandon his wife and lovely children just to marry a widow with twelve children and twenty-five years post-marital experience. This picture presents him as being irresponsible, careless and idiotic.

From the above presentation of the male characters: Modou Fall, Modou Ba and Dieng as grossly irresponsible, heartless and shameless husbands and professionals, one is compelled to observe that Mariama Ba is not fair with her depiction of these men. She falls into the trap of intentionally painting male characters

black, which was the accusation the female writers leveled against male artists in the depiction of female characters, prior to the emergence of Feminism.

This is anti chauvist-chauvinism. For example, while Modou Fall, Mawdo Ba and Dieng are depicted as inconsiderate and irresponsible men, Mariama Ba's female characters are presented as heroines, spotless women and innocent victims of male chauvinism. For example, Aissatou boldly walks away from her matrimonial home when her husband abandons her and she travels to the United State of America. There, she works as an interpreter in Senegalese Embassy. She leaves for the States to fulfill her dreams of freedom, unlimited and unrestrained opportunity for self-actualization. She does not consider her marriage vows, her children and her husband and parents. Does this really make her a heroine? Mariama Ba demonstrates Aissatou's triumph and success outside the control of any man, when she writes through Ramatoulaye to Aisstou:

You rented a house and set up a home there and instead of looking backwards, you looked resolutely to the future. You make a very good living. You are developing in peace as your letters tell me, your back resolutely turned on those seeking light enjoyment and easy relationship (32-33).

By implication, Ba is saying that while women can live, be happy and succeed without men, men cannot afford to stay without women. And in similar depiction of women characters as heroines, Ramatoulaye easily rejects the juicy marriage offer from Dieng in spite of the fact that she has twelve children to cater for and has no sufficient means to do so.

From the foregoing, one can say without fear of contradiction that Mariama Ba's brand of feminism as seen from her female characters, seems to turn the erstwhile concept of Feminism as assertion of personality, demand for recognition, equal opportunity in education, politics, religion, economy, to a fight, a struggle and an exhibition of superiority of women over men. At this level, Feminism seems to have degenerated into a myth as opposed to reality. Its principles and philosophies at this level are anti-Biblical, Koranic cultural and natural laws or injunctions. Christianity and Islam, the two world most popular religions place women under men and sanctioned the irresistible attraction of women to men and women as little fragments of men.

In addition, a similar literary myth is created and sustained by Flora Nwapa, a Nigerian novelist. In her novel: *One is Enough*, her female characters are not only better than male characters but are completely accomplished, successful and actualized without men. Nwapa's female characters are superior to men to the extent that they can use men for their selfish ends and drop them. For example, in *One is Enough*, she

clearly implies that women can easily get fulfilled without men; that women can comfortably do without marriage and its numerous problems; that a woman can be truly happy and satisfied even though she is not married; that infertility or childlessness does not in any way reduce the value of womanhood and that women can beget legitimate children out of wedlock.

Indeed, Nwapa's aforementioned propositions are mere myth based on imagination and consolation instead of reality. This is true because the above view points are anti-culture and anti-any known religious principles. The propositions cannot work because ultimately, a woman becomes complete and socially relevant, if she is married or has a man in her life either as a husband, companion, friend or lover. For instance, when God says that it is not good for a man to be alone, He also implies that a woman, being an integral part of man, cannot live meaningfully without a man. It is therefore not surprising that most women see their wedding day as their happiest and most fulfilled day. But through Nwapa's *One Is Enough*, she clearly counteracts the existing protocol and inevitable symbiosis between men and women. Let us study the novel critically to highlight some of Nwapa's unnatural and unworkable propositions which constitute the myth referred to in this paper.

The problem in the novel hinges on Amaka's inability to become pregnant in order to bear a child to her husband, Obiora. This failure brings intruders, hatred, scorn and contempt to the marriage. And to justify that childlessness is not an obstacle to womanhood, Nwapa asks a number of rhetoric questions, through the chief character, Amaka. These questions are asked to back the novelist's views about womanhood, marriage, childlessness', happy and fulfilled life for women outside a matrimonial home. For example, Amaka soliloquizes on page 20 of the novel in these questions:

God has deprived her of the greatest blessing bestowed on a woman, the joy of being a mother. Was that really the end of the world? Was she useless to the world if she were not a mother? Was she useless to the world if she were not married? Surely not, why then was she suffering these indignities both from her husband and his mother? (20).

Though Nwapa argues that without marriage and children, a woman still possesses value and relevance in the society, her value and relevance are culturally and Biblically incomplete without marriage to a man, as the Igbo say, "a women's dignity is her husband" (Ugwu Nwanyi bu di). Nwapa does not believe in marriage as the ultimate fulfillment for a woman to attain womanhood or motherhood. She encourages women to have children outside marriage and to beget children out of wedlock to assist them in old age. On page 11 of the novel, she says: "Marriage or no marriages, have children. Your children will take care of your old age. You will be very lonely if you do not have children. As a mother you are fulfilled (11)."

It is interesting to note that Nwapa appreciates the value of children in the life of a woman, particularly in old age, but she seems not to appreciate that children got outside a legitimate marriage are perceived and treated as bastards. And a woman really needs a man to help her become pregnant.

It is pertinent to note that because of her childlessness, Amaka constantly had problems with her husband and his mother. Out of frustration and dejection, she leaves her matrimonial home for Lagos city, where rugged freedom, impersonality, individualism and unlimited opportunities abound.

There in Lagos, Amaka comes in contact with Rev. Father Izu Maclaid, a military chaplain. She gets the Rev. Father entangled in sexual relationship that results in a pregnancy and birth of twins. The relationship with the Rev. Father yielded for Amaka, economic, emotional and fertility advantages. Father Izu gives Amaka heavy contracts that helped to miraculously enhance her economic and social status.

At this level, one appreciates the fact that Amaka regains her personality, womanhood and humanity through a man and not a fellow woman. This accentuates the fact that a woman becoming fulfilled, happy and accomplished without a man, either as a husband or lover is a mere myth. At the second level, and most importantly too, one is worried about Nwapa's depiction of his male characters as irresponsible, uncontrollable and irresistible sexual studs. For example, Obiora, Amaka's husband, is presented as a man who is under the apron string of his mother. He is a man who allows himself to be unduly influenced by his mother. Similarly, Nwapa's presentation and characterization of Rev. Father Izu Maclaid, an ordained man of God of the Catholic Faith, leaves much to be desired. It is appalling, demeaning and dehumanizing for a man of God, who had sworn to celibacy and chastity to degenerate to having sexual relationship, which results in Amaka's pregnancy and the birth of twin boys. So where Obiora failed, perhaps because he is a lay man, a Rev. Father succeeds because he is ordained. The professional insult and scorn that Nwapa heaps on Rev. Father Izu is completed when father Izu senselessly opts to abandon his ecclesiastical career and oath of celibacy, service to God and humanity, self-inflicted poverty and deprivation just to marry Amaka.

Before Father Izu entered into full-sexual relationship with Amaka, the latter had contrived to hook the former with her feminine beauty. Nwapa speaks through Amaka thus:

Amaka herself knew that she had made some impression on the man of God. ...She was going to exploit the situation. What drove her to see father Mclaid was just the contract. Now other things were working in her mind... A priest was also a man, not a god. Perhaps Father Izu had

never been tempted. She, Amaka was going to tempt him. That was the task that must be done (54-54).

The above soliloquy from Amaka indicates her preparedness to tempt Father Izu. She has two goals: to get mouth-watering contracts and to use him to satisfy her emotional thirst. She easily breaks through the Rev. Father's sworn declaration to abstain from women. According to her, "a priest is a man and not a god." Nwapa has, through the unexpected easy submission of Father Maclaid to Amaka's temptations indicted priest (men) for their inability to control their sexual instinct or emotions.

Nwapa portrays Rev. Father Izu as a man of God who cannot control sexual pressures from women. Similarly, Nwapa is perhaps, unwittingly saying that for a woman to succeed in her endeavours, a reasonable man is greatly indispensable in her life. And Amaka acknowledges this when she tells Father Izu:

You do not realize what you have done for me, since we first met.
Apart from the contracts and the money involved, you have made me feel like a woman again. I had failed in practically all my relationship with men until I met you and at the right time so to say (76).

Amaka is right in saying that she had failed in all her relationships with men. For example, her marriage to Obiora was a failure and her relationship with Alhaji was also a failure. And for this reason, Amaka continues to search for fulfillment until she meets Father Izu. By extension of logic, Nwapa is saying that women need men not as husbands or lovers but as instruments which women should use to attain their life goals and self-actualization. Men should be used and dropped by women. In using men, women should maintain their independence and liberty. As Nwapa puts it: "There would be no one to dictate to her, to tell her what she should do or what she should not do, she will bring up her children well." (120).

It is pertinent to observe at this juncture that the above perspective is not the original idea of the founders and proponents of Feminism. Flora Nwapa and Mariama Ba's brand of feminism seems to be encouraging uncontrolled freedom and independence, social delinquency and disobedience to natural laws and tradition. For example, Ramataulaye and Aissatou in *So Long a Letter*, Amaka in *One Is Enough*, Ada in *Second Class Citizen*, Adaku in *Joys of Motherhood* all left their matrimonial homes to get pleasure, freedom and self-satisfaction in the wider world.

It is painfully ironical that Amaka completely forgets the standards she sets for herself when she gets to Lagos initially. According to her in her soliloquy.

She must of course be careful. She was not going to be involved again with men. She had enough. She had not come to Lagos to be a whore.

She had come to look for her identity, to start all over again. Nobody was going to mess up her life any more (45).

But she was not careful rather she had affairs with several men and climaxed it with getting entangled with a Rev. Father. She was not a whore but was not better than a whore. The simple explanation is that she could not do without men. Amaka's refusal to marry Father Izu was make-belief because she had consistently shown that she could not do without men either as husband, friend or lover. She simply refused to marry the Rev. Father because of the criticism and the condemnation that would have followed her as another Delila in the life of Sampson. People would have blamed her greatly if she had dragged Father Izu to the altar the second time for wedding instead of celebrating mass.

Conclusion

Feminism is considered as a myth in this study because it degenerated from its realistic assertion of the relevance of womanhood, demand for recognition and equal opportunities in education, politics, economy and religion to the unrealistic and impracticable height of a struggle and a fight for equality with men, rugged individualism and independence. It is a movement and a philosophy that operates at the mean level of what one may call, "anti-chauvinistic-chauvinism or anti-racist racism." It reversed and upheld what it came to fight against by dehumanizing, mocking and suppressing men.

It is a farce and a myth because in the final analysis, women ultimately need men to fulfill their emotional, sexual, economic, political and other related dreams. This point is accentuated when Amaka tells her mother: "No, mother I have said goodbye to husband, and her mother replied, that is better. Goodbye to husband and not goodbye to men. They are two different things" (85).

Feminism in African context is a myth because female literary writers give unfair characterization of their male antagonists, thereby giving the impression that men are either beasts or black devils without souls and consciences.

It is a farce because men from creation story and Biblical injunction are given an edge over women. For example, Ephesians chapter 5:25 says: Wives, submit to your husbands as to the Lord. For a husband has authority over his wife just as Christ has authority over his church." And in Genesis chapter 2 vs. 18, the Bible says: Then the Lord said, it is not good for a man to live alone. I will make a suitable companion to help him... Then the Lord made the man-fall into a deep sleep and while he was sleeping. He took out one of the ribs and closed up the flesh. He formed a woman out of the rib and brought her to him. So while the New Testament enjoins a woman to be fully submissive to her husband, the Old Testament makes it clear that a woman is a fractional part of man, a companion and a helper and not a competitor or challenger.

And in first Corinthians chapter 11 vs. 3, the Bible again asserts: "Christ is supreme over every man, the man is supreme over his wife and God is supreme over Christ."

The simple logic from the above quotations is that order and hierarchy started from God and extended to mankind.

Finally, Feminism is a Myth because its present conceptualization and practice in Africa is contrary to the original philosophies of the founding mothers as stated by Stubbs below. She opined:

Feminists were concerned with the movement about political rights of a fairly small number of propertied women, about education and about job. But feminism potentially went far beyond these limited demands in its furthest implications, it was likely to question the very basis of social organization, family-and it contained the potential for a direct confrontation with the dominant sexual ideology, which affected everything not just women (133).

The important point here is that Feminism metamorphosed from the level of assertion of womanhood, demand for recognition and equal opportunities in various spheres with men to a direct confrontation as rightly stated by Stubbs. At this level, Feminism becomes revolutionary, antagonistic and a challenge to well established divine order of things. At this height, Feminism becomes a Myth as apposed to reality.

Recommendations

This study recommends that Feminism as a socio-political movement, should be geared towards the recognition of the potentials of women as human beings. It should emphasis that women be given equal opportunities with their male counterpart in various areas of human activity and de-emphasize the issue of achieving equality with men, because from creation time down to the message in the holy Bible and the Koran, women are made to be under men and submissive to men.

Again, the idea of perceiving and pursuing the objectives of as a struggle, a fight and a competition with men folk should be totally dropped, realizing that the relationship between men and women should be complementary, symbiotic and mutual.

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