

Nigerian Feminism: A Typology of African Feminism

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Abstract. Severally, European and North American feminists have often been blamed for imposing the historical and cultural experiences of North America and Europe on African women, and Nigerian women in particular. It is a fact as well as a truism that African and Western societies have different historical antecedents. Historical differences like colonialism and neo-colonialism have grave effects and consequences for the role, position and status of women. Like women all over the world, African women have obstacles and challenges and they are the only one who can set right their priorities and agendas. It is in this vein that, the author carried out a case study in eight different states in Nigeria asking question relating to feminism awareness in Nigeria. The result shows that, all the participants had some ideas of what is meant by feminism. In all their responses, the sensitivity of their positions culturally and traditionally was a re-echoed stance. Hence, the author, going in line with Catherine Acholonu's Motherism, Obioma Nmaemeka's Negofeminism and Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi's African Womanism has coined out what she termed, "*Naijafeminism*" (an acronym for Nigerian feminism), a paradigm and movement which is shaped by Nigerian contexts and experiences.

Keywords: Nigeria, Feminism, Women, Tradition, Motherhood

1. Introduction

African feminists' draw attention to the unique and wonderful experiences of women on the

continent as well as the obstacle they face and the agency they exhibit in their lives. It is important to note right from the start that, most African feminists, and indeed Nigerian feminists are critical of being subsumed and submerged under a global North definition of feminism that has often not represented their concerns and even marginalized or excluded their voices. They use the term, 'feminism' sparingly or with reservations.

Furthermore, most women in Nigeria find the tag, 'feminism' too strong a label to bear. Most of the women in Nigeria, even the notable 'feminist writers' (Zaynab Alkali, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, to mention a few.) will not allow themselves to be referred to, or called feminists. Hence, the use of the term 'feminism' is just for the sake of convenience to identify women who still portrays the characteristics and features of Nigerian women. Nigerian women have detected a huge dose of racist arrogance which characterizes western feminism.

Nigerian feminism should be defined in its own terms, not by western feminists' terms. Professor Bolanle Awe, a Nigerian, a female and the director of the Institute of African Studies has retreated the fact that anyone who wishes to take part in African women's struggle must do so according to their own context and agenda. Emphasizing plurality, Nmaemeka maintains that, 'to meaningfully explain the phenomenon called African feminism, it is not to western feminism, but rather to African environment that one must refer'. African feminism is not a reactive one; it is proactive in nature. It has a

different life of its own rooted in African environment.

Hence, in providing a justification for *Nijafeminism*, the National Council of Women societies in Nigeria, the government-recognized umbrella body under which all women NGOs in Nigeria operates, has declared that, it is a non-political and non-religious organization devoted to the promotion of education, welfare and improved status of Nigerian women. Its agenda has broadened to include, women's legal and political rights and demanding a change in some laws that dehumanize womanhood.

On the other hand, western feminism is alien to Nigeria. This feminism is often considered to be the same with radical feminism, men hatred, total rejection of African traditions and fundamental opposition of marriage and motherhood, and an endeavour, as well as constant attempt to disrupt the power relationship of genders.

This so-called western type of feminism focuses on three important areas. The first is the reality of oppression continuously legitimated by legal rules and regulations, the second is the all-important issue of patriarchy, or the system of masculine authority and the third is the real question of women's sense of justice.

These feminists, over the years have call for vigilance where in, it is important for jurisprudence to tap the power of the more radical versions of feminism. According to them, an effective contemporary feminist critique must be radical in the literal sense and must go to the very root of inequality.

This type of feminism is believed to be a western idea, and Nigeria women don't want to be a party to it.

2. African Theories of Feminism

Although the term feminism is of western origin, and it has been expressed that African women do not wish to be subsumed under the name feminism, it has become imperative to use this term loosely in order to explain certain happenings within the African settings as they relate to women. The two types of feminists' theories in Africa are explained below:

2.1 Intellectual and Popular Feminism

There are two separate feminism in Africa namely, intellectual and popular feminism. The intellectual feminism is loved and promoted by the urban and educated women. They condemn aspects relating to African culture, and they tend towards western form of radical feminism.

Popular feminism on the other hand, is rooted in culture and lived experiences of African women. Here, the foundation of feminism lies in the importance of women in traditional African society in terms of food production as well as women's role in the liberation struggle against colonialism. Popular feminism appeals to African women who consider their culture and tradition vital to their identity. It also endeavours to find practical solutions rooted in the lived experience of African women, many of whom have skills and talents that can economically empower them. This popular movement of feminism caters for the majority of African women, some of whom are not necessarily literate.

It will be reasonable to assume that, the large majority of Nigerian women subscribe to popular feminism even, amidst their differences. The country, Nigeria, is a nation with ethnic, religious and economic diversity. Nigeria is said to be characterized by lots of socio-economic inequalities among their regions, ethnic groups and religions. Nigeria is made up of 374 ethnic groups.

Despite these differences, Nigerian women are united as "*Naijafeminists*"; a paradigm and movement shaped by Nigerian contexts and experiences. This is evidenced in the views expressed by participants in this study.

3. Methodology

The systematic gathering of data for a particular reason and purpose from various sources is known as data collection. The most popular methods of data collection in a qualitative research, like the one going on are interview, observation, documents, audio-visual materials and focus group discussion. In order to collect data, this study employs the use of two approaches:

3.1 Interview

This study employs the use of both structured and unstructured interview model to elicit views and opinions of major social actors on feminism awareness in Nigeria. The use of this interview model will enable the participants to talk freely without being restricted to only the questions prepared by the researcher. This will further enhance the quality of the responses from the participants.

The use of interview in this work also suggests that the views and interpretations of certain social actors are necessary to be looked into in order to answer the questions raised in this research. It further suggests that the knowledge of these social actors, their specified social context as well as their account of that social arena is significant to this research.

3.2 Focus Group Discussion (Participant Observation)

In a way, focus group looks like interviews, but focus group transcripts can be analysed so as to explore the ways in which the participants interact with each other and influence each other's expressed ideas, which obviously cannot happen with one-on-one interview.

In this wise, focus group can be likened with or compared to participant observation, which is another method of data collection in a qualitative research. The main advantage of focus group in comparison to participant observation is the opportunity to observe a large amount of interaction on a topic in a limited period of time based on the researcher's ability to assemble and direct the focus group sessions.

Participants' observation helps researchers to know the perspective held by study participants. Participants' observation usually takes place in community settings i.e., in locations believed to have some relevance to the research questions. Generally, the researcher engaged in participant's observation tries to learn and observe what life is like for an 'insider' while remaining, inevitably, an 'outsider'. While within this community, the researcher makes careful and objective notes about what they see, recording all accounts and observations.

In other words, participants' observation, more often than not occurs in a naturalistic setting.

Participants' observation in a naturalistic setting can only occur in settings where there is something immediately available to see or observe. Participants' observation in a non-naturalistic setting (like the one going on) can be made possible through the use of a focus group discussion, where more social psychological topics such as attitudes and decision making are paramount. In this wise, focus group method creates access to participant interaction on topics that are either difficult to observe naturally or rare in occurrence.

Focus group and participant observation share an overlapping interest in group interaction. While participants' observation is a research that involves social interaction between the researcher and the informants in the milieu of the latter, during which data are systematically and collected, focus groups are a form of group interview that concentrates on communications between research participants in order to generate data. Focus groups encourage research participants to explore the issue that are importance to them in their own words and vocabulary, generating their own inquiries and questions, and pursuing their own agendas and priorities.

This study intends to utilize the contributions of a group as clearly specified above. To contribute to this study are; Non-Governmental Organizations concerning women, League of Moslem and Christian Women, African Traditionalists, Married and Unmarried men and women.

4. Discussions of findings

While the western radical feminism is all against men and African traditional set up, it was the view by the participants that, there was, and still in existence a form of feminism rooted in culture and tradition of Nigerian women.

It was the view of the participants interviewed that, women in Nigeria are still mindful of the role bestowed on them by culture and tradition. These roles are said to be, roles relating to motherhood.

Nigerian Catherine Acholonu introduced the concept of 'Motherism'. She argues that, women

are supposed to be perfect nurturers. Her concept of 'Motherism' denotes motherhood. She vehemently opposes the doctrine of white radical feminism which she considers to be anti-mother, anti-child, anti-nature and anti-culture. She considers the tasks of being a mother to include the nurturing of a child, protecting the home as well as the environment.

The views and aspirations of western cultural feminists can be likened to what obtains in Africa, generally, and in particular, Nigeria. According to cultural feminists, women are more nurturant, caring, loving and responsible to others than men. The ability to nurture and care dictates the moral terms in which women distinctively, construct social relations. Cultural feminism does not only identify women's differences; - patriarchy, to insist on women's differences, it celebrates them. Women's connectedness to, as well as attachment with others, according to cultural feminists is the source, the heart, the root, the foundation, and the cause of women's different morality, different voice, different ways of knowing, different ways of thinking, different genius, different capacity for care, and different ability to nurture- all worth celebrating.

To cultural feminists, mothering and caring are closely related. Women, having given birth to an offspring, and having entered lactation of the same offspring, are naturally nurturing towards their infants. The socialization views and thinking deny argument for nature, instinct and natural nurturance and insist that mothering is a role- something learned. The views of western cultural feminists, it must be stressed, is in line with the Nigerian views of the role of women. In the same vein, Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi believed that, motherhood is part of African culture. She therefore, coined out African Womanism which is deeply rooted in traditional African customs and beliefs.

Remi Akujobi, another Nigerian, expresses the view that motherhood is so crucial, so important in most traditional societies. To her, feminists in Africa read meanings and symbols that are authoritative and empowering to motherhood. The validity as well as substance of womanhood is defined basically by the success of the

children. Success of a woman is seen in success as a mother. It is no longer a secret that the Nigerian woman considers herself a real and accomplished woman only when she proved herself to be capable of producing children. This is so in the sense that, motherhood is a basic condition for social acceptance. Many childless women experience feelings of rejection, castigation and low esteem. Examples abound in many African literatures, especially those written by women. For instance, 'Nnego', in Emechata's 'Joy of Motherhood' never considers or classifies herself a woman until she starts giving birth, 'Efuru' in Nwapa's 'Efuru', is frustrated by her inability to procreate and as such became a priestess. In life, as in literature, motherhood is the only thing in which a woman's worth and importance is determined and measured.

Also, it has been viewed by the participants of the study that Nigerian women have been known to have always fought and struggle against local oppressive conditions. Nigerian women throughout history have responded both individually and collectively to issues they face in an effort to negotiate their lives within difficult and compelling circumstances. There are many ways throughout history in which Nigerian women have exhibited their autonomy. In 1946, a notable feminist in Nigeria, Funmilayo Ransome Kuti, (FRK) led the fight on hearing the way in which market women were heavily and indiscriminately taxed by the local ruler (the then Alake). She, as the leader of the Nigerian Women Union, together with her members, fought the oppression and petition for the Alake's (a king) business to be brought under control. A vigil by a very large group of women led to a demonstration, and as a result, the taxation was abolished in 1949.

FRK, together with another notable feminist of that era, Margaret Ekpo, raised women's consciousness and struggled for female suffrage and political representation. They can be said to be on the same footing with Mary Wollstonecraft, the English philosopher and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, the notable abolitionist, in their fight to liberate English women politically by asserting the fundamental rights of

women including right to vote. There have also been a number of recent examples of women struggle. Community Women's Organizations have organized and carried out a protest in the oil producing region of the Niger Delta. These were well organized protest for the exclusion of their sons from employment in the oil companies, as well as protest resisting the alienation of forest by logging, which threatens their forest dependent livelihood.

Also, prominent among various struggles put up by women in Nigeria, is the fight resisting colonialism. Nigerian women have gear up in their struggle and fight against contemporary feminism which is relatively new and has its foundation in Europe. They do not believe women should be central political leaders. They felt that educated women should assist their husbands in power.

Nigeria therefore, can be said to have developed her own contemporary indigenous feminism which struggles against fundamentalist and oppressive conditions such as female genital mutilation, which is one of the issue affecting Nigerian women and it has affected close to 50% of the female population. The most dangerous form, infibulations, is still being practiced in some areas in Nigeria.

Another oppressive, and indeed a sad condition being struggled against by Nigerian women is forced marriage, which is a marriage, conducted without the consent of one or both parties. It is a marriage in which duress, in whatever form, whether physical or emotional is a factor. FORWARD believes that any child marriage constitutes a forced marriage, because any one less than 18 years of age is incapable of giving a valid consent. Child marriage or early marriage is notorious in the Northern Nigeria where girls marry at the age of 12 or 13. This can lead to serious health hazard, especially VVF and other social deprivations, mostly educational in nature. The mean age at marriage for female children was put at 16.7 years in Nigeria. For North Eastern Nigeria, marriage age was put at 15.2, and for North Western Nigeria, the age was put at 14.2 years. This shows the prevalence of child marriage in Nigeria.

According to FORWARD, poverty and economic transaction has been given as the main

reason for child marriage. Parents often derive economic gains in giving out their daughters (who they consider as an economic burden) to much older and rich men. Some poor families are currently still confronted with the difficult option of selling their daughters into marriage as a means to supplement their income and guarantee their livelihood.

The way widows are maltreated by men in many parts of South-East Nigeria is alarming. As stated by Folarin, there is a particular section of the Nigerian community that takes delight and pleasure in seeing women suffer after the demise of their husbands as if they are the cause of his death. Some wicked acts, amongst others against widows in Nigeria are; a) she can be sent packing out of her husband's house, b) she can be denied inheritance right to his property whether she has children or not, c) she can be made to mourn him for long period of time, d) she can be restricted from moving about, e) she can be given condition that she must not laugh. She must be seen to be in a mournful mood, f) while mourning, she can be made to stay in the front of the house from morning till night time. It should be recalled that, men who lost their wives are not made to go through similar inhuman treatments. Hence, another important area of struggle by Nigerian women is the widowhood rites.

Education and empowerment of women is another struggle which majority of women in Nigeria have embarked upon. Gender bias against women ranges from labour market to the total exclusion from policy making. According to Mamman, this discrimination exacerbates poverty by preventing the majority of women from obtaining the credit, education, training, health services, child care and legal status needed to improve their status and prospects. One clear area of noted imbalance against women has been in the area of education. It is therefore not surprising that women's inadequate access to education has been seen as the source of the various discrimination that they suffer. As a result, there has been a groundswell of agreement that women's lot and general socio-economic improvement of nations can be achieved through the acquisition of sound education and broad empowerment of women.

These views and aspirations of all the participants in this study have further created a concrete stand on which *Nijafeminism* stands.

5. Conclusion

The point being raised by Nigerian women in the guise of *Nijafeminism* is not just about women. It is about creating a brand-new form of social relationships based on equality, mutual respect and justice. Nigerian women have taken action towards achieving this justice, social, economic, environmental and political change. These Nigerian women can be tagged as the progressives. They have challenged and resisted oppressive conditions of the laws by taking action either individually or collectively.

It is clear from the facts given above that there are different issues as well as different values and concerns raised by both Western feminism and Nigerian feminism. In other words, and as rightly pointed out by an author, "It did not occur to the western feminists that, women in other parts of the world had their own culturally specific notion of 'women's right and concerns'".

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