

# African Feminism:

## Resistance or Resentment?

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**Abstract. African Feminism: Resistance or Resentment?** Using specific examples from Nigeria, this paper analyzes the philosophical underpinnings of African feminism. I argue that African feminism is largely flawed by being couched in the discourse of African anti-colonial movement. By so doing it inevitably inherited parts of the cultural setbacks of the movement. My take on African postcolonial discourse is that the line between resistance to the evil of colonization and resentment of the cultural world of the colonizer was largely blurred. There was therefore an overabundance of reactionary impulses. While in agreement with the discourse about the concerns of women's human rights, I suggest that African feminism or rather feminism as articulated by African women thinkers must free itself of resentment in order to focus on creating flourishing communities in Africa. I analyze two of the most recent Nigerian narratives – *Purple Hibiscus* and *Everything Good Will Come* – as examples of works that seek the flourishing of communities with the liberation of women in the background.

**key words:** Africa, feminism, gender, philosophy, post-colonial, globalization

### ***The moral claims of African resistance***

Analyzing the phenomenon of African self-representation, Achille Mbembe, observes that the African postcolonial discourse switches between voluntarism and victimhood. On the one hand, Africans see themselves overwhelmingly as victims of history, and since the continent is a victim of slavery, apartheid and all imaginable negative isms 'Africa is said not to be responsible for the catastrophe that are befalling it' (Mbembe 243). On the other hand, however, Africans claim some agency in the remodeling of their shattered world. This is done by a pronounced reference to some glorious past, to tradition or authentic Africanness.

There is, according to Mbembe, ‘a narrative of liberation built around the dual temporality of a glorious – albeit fallen – past (tradition) and a redeemed future (nationalism)’ (249-250). These two poles, victimhood and voluntarism, indeed, go hand in hand. The claim of victimhood allows in the victim the ease of conscience to appeal not only to an essence that excludes the victimizer, but also to develop a warped sense of moral edge or some degree of inculpability in the manner evocative of Cartesian phrase: I am hurt therefore I am right. Or you hurt me, therefore I am good while you are bad. There arises a feeling which Nietzsche identified as that of resentment, which, he argued, gave birth to Christian morality. I have discussed elsewhere the phenomenon of resentment in African socio-political discourse.<sup>1</sup> For purposes of enhancing my argument in this paper, I would like to sum the core argument of resentment as a source of morality. A victim of oppression feels the hurt of injustice done to him. He wants to avenge but he cannot because the injurer is stronger than him. He sulks and reserves vengeance for the future. Reliving the feeling of hurt and at the same time realizing his weakness allows him to evolve a new standard of evaluation of reality. In sum: (1) the mind is negatively tuned on account of the experience of hurt. (2) There is the need to avenge, and because the injured cannot avenge for fear of aftermath, he or she invents a force that would do it for him or her: God, nemesis, heaven and hell. (3) Summarily, the other is condemned to hell. The person of resentment claims moral superiority, which according to Max Scheler implies some ‘blindness’ to [others’] qualities’ (58). The most important point here is that the morality resultant upon the feeling of hurt is essentially reactionary. The victim no longer bases his idea of good and evil on any standard beyond the fact of his having been hurt, his being the historical victim.

As long as the victimizer, y, lives, he is evil and he, the victim, x, does well to keep reminding the other of his evil nature by different forms

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<sup>1</sup> See Eze, Chielozona, ‘African *Ressentiment* and the Task of Nation Building: Some Reflections.’ *Gefame: Journal of African Studies* Vol. 1, No. 1 (2004) <http://www.hti.umich.edu/g/gefame/> for a somewhat deeper discussion of resentment and how it plays out in African postcolonial discourse.

of blame. And – important in his moral arsenal – as long as the victimizer, y, is evil, he the victim, x, cannot be as evil, therefore, he, x, is good. Any time the victim blames the victimizer either by collecting the wrongs of the past in passable concepts: colonialism, racism, sexism etc the victim rehashes this moral power taxonomy. That blame is an expression of helplessness which is at the same time an affirmation of a presumed strength. Every attempt is made to establish and maintain essentialist difference between both; the victim is preserved from all reference to the victimizer because it is in this difference that his moral superiority is established. There is a form of reverse racism because of reference to perceived essentialist differences. This, to my mind, is what Achille Mbembe refers to when he points to ‘dual temporality of a glorious – albeit fallen – past (tradition) and a redeemed future (nationalism).’ The return to tradition is only a consequence of reactionary moral partitioning of the world, and of course, the failure to cede to some weakness or fault in the humiliating act of defeat. The valorization of the victim – his inimitable past, his innocent present – leads to a glossy, if illusory painting of the future. In the end, however, the future which is no more than a gradual unfolding of the present remains a shade of reality.<sup>2</sup>

African feminism partakes of the illusory moral edge resultant upon the reliving of the feeling of hurt and the hidden but impotent wish to wreak vengeance.

### ***African feminism and anti-colonial struggle***

African feminism is often defined by identifying what it is not; it is not European feminism. This definition via negativa, has of course, historical justification given the degree of animosity with which it was greeted by the African menfolk. Glo Chukukere documents the African feminist conundrum with examples from Nigeria. On the one hand, African women express the need for them and their condition to be better. On the

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<sup>2</sup> I discussed this at length in my already cited essay.

other hand, most of them react rather aggressively when feminism is mentioned. According to Chukukere, one gets varied expressions such as:

The word liberation doesn't arise here at all because we were never in any form of bondage.'

'Please don't confuse Nigerian women with that nonsense.'

'Feminism is for developed countries like America and Great Britain. Our women here are all right... no problem (Chukukere 134).

And while people shy away from feminism and Women's Liberation, the theoretically more troubling issue, however, is rooted in larger concern of the society. There cannot be global sisterhood, that is to say, global feminism because women in the West and in Africa have diverse experiences. The reason as Glo Chukukere formulates is thus:

the liberation of women in Africa is linked to that of the entire continent from colonial and neocolonial structures. Western schools of feminism, such as Marxist, Socialist, and radical are part of the history of those countries' political development and reflect their concerns with class contradictions. This scenario is not exactly the case in Africa, in general, and Nigeria, in particular. For Nigerian women, ours is an anti-colonial, non-separatist movement (137).

Strictly speaking there is nothing wrong in the good-natured, motherly instinct exhibited by the African woman in her claim that she cannot be free unless the 'Mama Africa' is free from the shackles of colonialism and imperialism. It is to be understood in line with the proverb: no mother is healthy when her child is sick. I think, however, that this is flawed. The implication of the above adopted approach is that the African woman should bear the excruciating pain of fractured existence and its injustices while standing by the side of the African man in their fight against imperialism. Rigorously considered, nothing prevents the African woman from demanding respect from her husband or brothers even while they all fight against imperialism. In that regard therefore, if Western concepts such as Marxism, Capitalism or Socialism could help improve the standard of life for the African woman, then why would she avoid it precisely because Africans did not make such experience? Yet, the strength of African feminism, as I pointed out, seems to be poured in a type of choral repudiation of Western negative isms. Besides this repudiation, however,

there does not seem to be an articulate vision of the African woman beyond mere reiteration of the traditional roles women play albeit in glossy, celebratory language. There is sadly the case of what Olufemi Taiwo identified as the poverty of theory. 'Every time African scholars are forced into these sterile but needed efforts to assert that we are or we think,' he argues, 'the urgent tasks of identifying and explicating what we are or what we think remain undone or only partly done' (Taiwo 45).

To be sure, Taiwo points out the 'imperialistic arrogance' (52), present in Western feminists theorizing about African women so that African women were beasts of burden; they did all the work at home while the men did nothing. This also constitutes African women's burden of self redefinition and their need to free themselves from others' image of themselves, and, in the words of Oyeronke Oyewumi, do feminism on their own terms. But are they really doing it on their own terms?

### ***African women and the production of glossy past***

In Achille Mbembe's above cited text, the fact of Africa privileging of victimization indeed ultimately reveals itself as a claim of voluntarism albeit through the backdoor. He writes:

Philosophically, the Hegelian thematics of identity and difference, as classically exemplified in the master-bondsman relationship, is surreptitiously reappropriated by the ex-colonized. In the move that replicates an unreflexive ethnographic practice, the ex-colonized assigns a set of pseudohistorical features to a geographical entity which is itself subsumed under a racial name (244)

In her address to the first Conference on Women in Africa & the African Diaspora (WAAD I), 'Zulu Sofola takes time to remind her largely women audience how African people 'have been subverted culturally, psychologically, materially, and intellectually' (Sofola 51). Describing the processes and implications of what she terms the de-womanization of the African woman, she claims that the African woman

assailed by Western and Arab cultures, [...] has been stripped bare of all that made her central and relevant in the traditional African socio-political domain. Even though both male and female children of Mother Africa were assailed by

the invasion of the male-centered and male-dominated European and Arab cultures, the female suffered the greater damage. (52)

She concludes her exegesis on victimhood by asserting the helplessness of the present African woman. 'Demotion of African womanhood,' she writes 'has produced the contemporary African women who are to a large extent disoriented, weakened, and rendered ineffective and irrelevant' (52). This, at the risk of sounding redundant, equals to denying agency to the African woman of today. Certainly this is far from her intention. Rather this is done to allow her room to dwell on the past achievements of African women, the dignity of tradition. Party of her address is garnished with reference to uplifting aspects of history beautifully rendered in the rest of her historical essay, in the following phrases: 'monarchical co-rulership' of women (55); 'female line of power and authority' (56) in traditional Africa. She concludes in a somewhat predictable way: 'One would have expected nothing less from women in the diaspora who themselves were undoubtedly descendants of warrior queens, monarchs, women intelligence spies, economic magnates, and powerful daughters of the land' (60). Her argument is organized in the following sequence: a) establish the disruption of great past b) dismiss whoever brought it about c) be the harbinger of a strong future.

It is understandable that all this is aimed to instill new life into the African woman of today. To my mind however, it does not do any analytical job of elucidating the condition of the African woman. Ama Ata Aidoo in her essay 'The African Woman Today,' even takes some steps further to claim that the present poor African woman who is shown to be beyond her years with drooped, withered breasts is not far from the cliché of Western photojournalism. There is no doubt that the Western media are hungry for exotic sensationalism, and mostly report news of famine and poverty and disease about Africa. Ama Ata Aidoo rightly observes that it is a sorry pass on the daughters of Africa. But in her bid to redress that image she tells her listeners that these daughters of Africa are all

descended from some of the bravest, most independent, and most innovative women this world has ever known. We speak of the lady Tiy of Nubia (ca. 1415-1340 B.C.E.), the wife of Amenhotep III and the mother of Akhenaton and Tutenkhamen, who is credited, among other achievements, with leading

the women of her court to discover makeup and other beauty-enhancing processes. Her daughter-in-law was the incomparable Nefertiti, a black beauty whose complexion was far superior to the alabaster with which she is now willfully painted. (39-40)

Preceding the above glorification of African women's putative ancestry according to Aidoo, is the belief that the African woman of today is a 'media creation.' She does not exist because it is impossible for her to exist given the glorious past. However, even if she does exist, Aidoo's thought goes on, the reason must be the 'result of the traumas of the last five hundred years' encounter with the West, the last one hundred years of colonial repression, the current neocolonial disillusionment, and a natural environment that is not behaving like an implacable enemy' (41-42).

The confusion apparent in the above thought has absolutely nothing to do with the thinker's inability to recognize simple contradictions. Rather it is one of the results of existential and ethical denials which in turn are the obvious consequence of resentment and delusions or cultural relativism. I talk of ethical denial because it is obvious that the individual women are not challenged to look inward, face up to the difficult situations of the African woman, this real human being out there, my mother, sister, my neighbor. Existential denial incorporates the negation of the wishes of this single human being beginning from the affirmation of simple pleasure to the right to avoid pain. Before I discuss this in a somewhat greater depth, I wish to consider some of the ideas of two of the most vigorous theoreticians of Nigerian feminisms: Oyeronke Oyewumi and Nkiru Nzegwu.

### ***Feminism as an anti-racist ideology***

In the introduction to her edited collection of essays, Oyeronke Oyewumi declares that African women have taken steps to define themselves, their interests and concerns. This, she claims, is done 'on our own terms, and can put behind us once and for all a culture of misrepresentation and marginalization which absorbs so much of our creative energy. We will

continue to define ourselves and our concerns on our own terms' (Oyewumi 22). This is no doubt a dignified goal, and as Olufemi Taiwo pointed out in the already cited paper, the worthwhile goal of self-definition must be carried on by Africans. Oyewumi's essay, 'The White Woman's Burden: African Woman in Western Feminist Discourse,' to my mind achieves less than the stated goal of self definition. Rather it falls into the same old quicksand of ideological attack of the West. She declares: 'It is the discursive domination of the West that I call into question' (27). Perhaps it would have been better to weave a solidarity among African women to interrogate the African patriarchal system rather than attack the West by sandwiching their theories, as I pointed out in the introduction, in the cracks of the wall of Western imperialism. I cite her in full in order to demonstrate in clear terms what I am concerned about.

The historical context within which Africanist discourse was produced was a period of unprecedented European expansion and domination of non-European peoples. In Africa, it was the period during which the Atlantic slave trade flourished, imperialism thrived, and the framework for eventual colonial domination was put in place. Nor surprisingly, the tone, content, and form of this literature were imperialistic and racist, designed to justify and rationalize European plunder and domination. Africans were projected as inferior to prove their need for the 'guiding hand' of Europeans. (26)

It is a surprise that this type of mental disposition would practically carry African feminism into the 21<sup>st</sup> century especially considering the ravages of ethnic-related conflicts in the preceding century.

Nearly in the same frame of mind, Nkiru Nzegwu examines in her essay, 'Oh Africa: Gender Imperialisms in Academia,' the 'varied forms of gender imperialism that arise from the denials of one's cultural rights and cultural personhood' (99). I have to point out that her goals in the essay are in no way divergent to the plight of, nor do they further the cause of the African woman. Strictly speaking, it has nothing to do with African feminism broadly conceived as the betterment of the African woman's life. When Nkiru Nzegwu declares that her political struggle was to disrupt imperialism, guard against its exploitation of her experience and 'resist its racist erasure' of her personhood and because of that she had to be alert to 'its multiple sites and continually changing forms,'



she, it could be argued, uses her personal experiences to fight the cause of the African women. Thus she constantly questions the basis on which she was being invited to participate in events. She critically evaluates 'the convener's agenda as well as the operative modalities for selecting the speakers' (101). Effectively using her experience in the academia, she examines 'how that relationship influences authorial production of knowledge and what tacit gender images and expectations rule in that setting, many of which I am expected to uphold' (102). Invited for a panel discussion, she had to think through what imperialism had done to her in North America. Addressing an predominantly white audience, she argues:

Many things are still painfully difficult in your white system. The pain derives from the forced mutilations, identity destructions, oppressive psychological manipulations that take place each time one functions in your system. Even in this mundane public act of sharing my experiences with you, I still undergo innumerable metamorphosis and translation. [...] I have to suppress large parts of myself and familiar ways of speaking [...] Then I have to switch languages and translate my visceral thoughts into cold foreign words that leave out the spirit of my talk (still I hear: oh, you have an accent. Where are you from?). [...] I have to swallow my anger, and valiantly find some lessons that I could offer the sea of white faces to let you know that I value you, that you are blameless. (104)

In establishing the pervasive racism/imperialism, the African women also implicitly declare their impotence, victimhood. No wonder then that Olufemi Taiwo bemoans the absence of theory among both the European women writing about Africa and the African women responding to these writings. And while we effectively sympathize with Nkiru Nzegwu, we fail to glimpse what she thinks of herself as a woman. She is presented here merely as a victim of a faceless form of injustice. The African woman, for sure, is not one who asks for pity, for Nkiru Nzegwu's presentation, it appears to me, seeks nothing more than that. But behind this seeming appeal to pity, as I pointed out in the explication of resentment, is a hidden dogged will to establish some kind of superiority – that of the conquered. Every blame, as Mbembe explained earlier, is a claim for power albeit through the backdoor.

In the same vein that the African woman blames the West, she makes conciliatory gestures to the African man in the name of womanism.<sup>3</sup> But neither the critique or racism, nor the warm gestures of womanism ever makes demands on the African woman. Simply stated, it fails to show the African woman as one who possesses a mind of her own. In fact the African mode of feminism discussed so far does not aim to elucidate or solve any problem; it merely provides alternatives to Western feminism with the flawed goal of vindication of the African world. In this, it tows the path of anti-imperialist struggle and does nothing to explore the African woman's personhood. All explanations tend to protect the endangered African community. In sum, African feminists fail to give a robust image of the African woman that the African man is bound to respect.

### ***Woman, where art thou?***

In the face of the above conundrum, in the jungle of assertions and denials, one searches in vain for the African woman. One is left to wonder what good there is in the African amorphous war on racism and imperialism with regard to the issues facing the African woman.

While the African women were busy challenging the anonymous evil of imperialism, it took the American, Alice Walker to plumb in her literary works the fate of individual human beings of female gender in Africa. In her novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, she highlights among other issues the devastations that the old practice of female circumcision leaves on the body and soul of individual women on which it was done. A number of African women saw in it a false representation of Africanness, and promptly subsumed it under the general neo-imperialistic patronizing by the West.<sup>4</sup> The issue of concern here is much more the reactions from

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<sup>3</sup> See Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi's African Wo/Man Palaver for an in-depth discussion of Womanism – an idea whose goal is to establish healthy relationships among people, despite ethnic or gender differences.

<sup>4</sup> See Nontsasa Nako 'Possessing the Voice of the Other: African Women and the "Crisis of Representation"' in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, &

African women which, to my mind, underscore the burning wish to deny and rationalize the poor condition of the African woman and thereby evade direct confrontation with issues of interest. Answering the question about female circumcision, Buchi Emecheta declares:

I did not treat it in any of my books because in our area it is not all that important. I was in Nigeria for three months and I saw only boys being circumcised. Like I said when people have left Africa for a long time, they get excited over irrelevant things. Reading some of her books [referring to Alice Walker] you would think that as soon as you get to Africa, every girl is snatched and circumcised. That is the type of picture she is painting and we are very offended about it here in London because it is not that important. [...] You see, Africa is so vulnerable. So she wants to write about something sensational to bring Africans down. (Ogundele, 454)

We observe Emecheta's use of the first person plural. The offended people are probably the African community in London, and perhaps more particularly the women. Her declaration that Africa is vulnerable puts her in a defensive position. The defense of Africa as a collective becomes more important than the discourse of issues pertaining to the flourishing of human beings considered as individuals with diverse feelings and wishes. Buchi Emecheta's answer is surprising not only because it is an outright misrepresentation of the stark realities of many African women,<sup>5</sup> but more so because it comes from a person who, in her fictions represented the African man and African culture in harshest terms ever imaginable. She qualified the African person as lazy, African culture decadent and used adjectives such as beast, apelike to describe her fellow African. This took place in the time when such could have come from sworn racists. She writes in her novel, *Second Class Citizen*: 'All that Francis needed to be taken for a gorilla was simply to bend his knees' (86). *Second Class Citizen*, it is argued, is a fictional biography of Buchi Emecheta, and the novel was written shortly after her arrival in London.

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Oyeronke Oyewumi, 'Alice in Motherland: Reading Alice Walker on Africa and Screening the Color 'Black' in Oyeronke Oyewumi, *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*.

<sup>5</sup> This, of course, negates such narrative of lived experience as Waris Dirie *Desert Flower* and her current UN-supported campaign to eradicate female genital mutilation in Africa.

The idea I am trying to convey is that contrary to what Buchi Emecheta said about the negative views and sentiments towards Africa by Africans who have been far removed from the continent for a long time, that is, those who begin to see Africa the way the West see it, I argue that it is exactly the Africans who have stayed long in the West, who feel the pressing need to protect the 'vulnerable' African and therefore evolve glossy images of the continent. These glossy images include outright denials of the flaws of some of the cultural practices such as female genital mutilation. However, the fact that Emecheta did not see girls circumcised in her three months stay in her country does not mean that such practices were not done. And if it was still done even on 1% population of Nigerian women, then it is worth writing about.

In an attempt to answer the question, 'Woman where art thou?' it is expedient to examine some of the pictures of the African woman. For this, I rely on *Things Fall Apart*, regarded by many as nearly authentic as possible in the fictional depiction of the pre-colonial African society. *Things Fall Apart*, while giving a realistic depiction of African life, part of which is the place of women in society, undertakes a rather impersonal deification of women. The earth goddess is seen as representing the respect accorded to women. Chielo is a priestess of Agbala (75), a profession which places her above men in that culture. But what does it all say to the concrete African woman? Adewale Maja-Pearce puts it succinctly:

It is not enough to say, as Achebe does in *Things Fall Apart*, that pre-colonial African societies recognised the importance of the female principle in terms of the society's pantheon, or that Okonkwo's punishment is in part explained by his offence against Ani, the earth goddess; it is not even enough to say that Ani 'played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity', if the position of women as human beings is then denigrated to the extent that Okonkwo's crime is not so much that he beats one of his wives, but that he does so at an unpropitious time. (24-24)

Recognizing the role of goddesses as controlling the lives of people has no existential relevance. It is comparable to calling Africa 'Mother Africa' and thereby giving African women the impression that they were taken seriously by the continent.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the image of the woman as Rose Ure Mezu has argued, is nothing to write home about.<sup>6</sup> A scene that speaks much about the place of women in that society runs thus:

‘Who killed this banana tree?’ he asked.

A hush fell on the compound immediately.

‘Who killed this tree? Or are you all deaf and dumb?’

As a matter of fact the tree was very much alive. Okonkwo’s second wife had merely cut a few leaves off it to wrap some food, and she said so. Without further argument Okonkwo gave her a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping. (27)

The beating took place during the feast of New Yam Festival. It is not difficult to understand the pain and humiliation Okonkwo’s wife must have undergone. The situation has not changed for most families in that culture even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. While in the West women have achieved some degree of right to sue their abusive husbands – alas after years of fight for liberation – some African women appear contented to first of all destroy Western imperialism before a woman could have the right to be happy.

### ***Female genital mutilation: What it is not***

When Osman Conteh, Sierra Leonean writer was asked why he chose to write about female genital mutilation in his country even though he is man and he answered that a happy woman was an asset, he could not have expressed a greater and deeper truth.<sup>7</sup> Happy, fulfilled woman, indeed, fulfilled individuals are assets to their societies and if we could help remove what impedes one’s happiness or life fulfillment then it would be

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<sup>6</sup> See Mezu, Ure Rose. ‘Women in Achebe’s World,’ <http://www.uga.edu/~womanist/1995/mezu.html>.

<sup>7</sup> At his reading during the Conference of European Association of Commonwealth Literature in Malta, March 21-26. He won the Macmillan Writer’s Prize for Africa (2002) for his children’s novel, *Unanswered Cries*.

a mistake to sacrifice such individuals on the altar of perceived societal dignity. Reading Waris Dirie's memoir<sup>8</sup> about her genital mutilation, and the ordeal she underwent to escape being sold to marriage, puts all arguments for or against female genital mutilation into their right perspective. Discussions about female genital mutilation is not about ridiculing the vulnerable Africa in the West. It is not part of neo-imperial evil machination against Africa and it is not even about a person making a cheap name for herself by approaching such a sensational issue. It is all about the dignity of the individual. And while Buchi Emecheta, an Igbo, denied that female genital mutilation was still practiced, another Igbo, Okumephuna Chinwe Celestine born in 1977, and who still lives in Nigeria and does not have the perceived burden of being apologetic about Africa writes:

Reasons for that include; custom and tradition, religious demand, protection of virginity, prevention of promiscuity, increasing sexual pleasure for the husband, family honour, aesthetic reasons, purification, enhancing fertility, giving a sense of belonging to a group and increasing matrimonial opportunities. (Okumephuna Chinwe Celestine)

She writes further that unlike in most other parts of the country, the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria circumcise their girls at an early age. It would appear to be a belaboring of the obvious to hint that the implication of female genital mutilation or female circumcision as it is often euphemistically called is simply the objectifying of women. Women should be guarded against promiscuity; they should not experience pleasure. This seems hardly a revelation against the background of cultures in which women have meaning as human beings only to the degree to which they give birth to boys. It is male issues that give meaning to a woman in Africa. Reasons range from the fact of having someone who would sometime challenge the bullying husband, to having a person through whom the woman could have a share in the husband's property. Unlike in the West where a bereaved spouse inherits the deceased partner's property, women in most African societies cannot inherit unless they have sons. It is not even they who inherit, but their sons. It should therefore not be a surprise

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<sup>8</sup> See Waris Dirie. *Desert Flower*. London: Virago, 2001.

that the majority of Nigerian women writers are rather obsessed with the theme of barrenness as Flora Nwapa rightly observes:

African women writers have been accused of dwelling too much on barrenness. They were told by male critics to write on other 'more important' themes. What are these other important themes? [...] A wife is more often than not betrayed and abandoned by her husband if she does not have a child. (96)

Barrenness therefore appears to be the point around which African women's discourse rotates. This will understandably irritate literature lovers outside the culture, and perhaps if surprisingly, even men within. In clinging to the issue of barrenness, the African woman wants to be seen, heard and taken seriously as a human being, and not as objects or means to an end. In the face of this constellation therefore, why then should an African woman claim to wage war against imperialism or colonialism while the African man never sees her as his equal. It is comparable to some African soldiers fighting side by side with French and British soldiers against the Nazi army, yet these African soldiers would return to the colony to once more address their former fellow soldiers as *massa* (master).

African feminists allowed themselves to be dragged into believing that imperialism attacked African essence. Their mistake, however, is falling into the delusion of defense of African world as though it were infallible. As I said elsewhere, the most far-reaching consequence of forms of delusion on African cultural discourse is that age-old cultural practices gain halos of impeccability once they are perceived as being attacked from without. Like in the case of sati practice in India, the critique of human rights abuse in Africa promptly attracts defiant, 'No-Saying' attitude from most African defenders of culture. Esther M. Kisaakye demonstrates that the predominant argument for the justification of practice of polygamy in Africa is cultural:

polygamy is natural to Africa and is deeply entrenched in African society. Underlying this argument is the notion that monogamy is a Western value and its 'imposition' on Africa would be an attempt to impose those values on the African community. (277-278)

The same holds of the defense of female genital mutilation. 'In any of the communities practicing FGM,' she writes, 'proponents have argued that the practice is so deeply imbedded in the value system of the communities that its abolition is likely to be seen as an attack on the age-old respected cultural practices and beliefs of the communities' (272). Corinne Packer quotes one Somali woman thus: 'If Somali women change, it will be a change done by us. When they order us to stop, it is offensive to the black person or Muslim person who believes in circumcision' (Parker 346).

In this largely reactionary attitude to reality it is evident that the will to live lacks. The African woman is made to believe that her desires, dreams, feeling of pleasure and pain are inextricably tied to the collective. On the one hand, it is true that she cannot thrive as a member of a particular community without that community. Nevertheless, it need be stated that the feeling of pain or pleasure is not a gift to the individual by the community. It is the duty of the community to see to it that the individual experiences the least amount of pain and the greatest amount of pleasure, for it is around these two principles that life revolves. At the risk of sounding paternalistic, it seems rather more appropriate to demand of the African woman to forget about allusions to goddesses, Nefertiti or queens and warriors of the past and demand respect for her body and mind. And as an African woman, her primary audience is the African man, her immediate community. That, to my mind, is the beginning and goal of feminism whether radical or conciliatory. It does seem to me however, that this is exactly what the new generation of Nigerian women writers is out to do. Lola Shoneyin's poem 'She Tried,' catches how women are pushed to inferior status in a typical patriarchal society such as Nigeria. The persona tells about how society would not allow a woman to be doctor, lawyer, teacher and writer. 'So, she tried to be a woman//They pat her on the back//And showed her the kitchen, the garden//...and the bed' (13). In the same vein, Unoma Azua compares herself with a bird, and not wanting to be a singing caged bird, she declares:

'I need no cage  
I need air  
And more air.



In the next stanza she compares herself to a fish.

‘I am a fish  
I need no poo  
Not just rivers  
But oceans to ride on tides’ (15)

While there are many young female poets such as Shoneyin and Azuah, I am particularly interested in the narrative works of Sefi Atta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, especially their novels: *All Good Things Will Come* and *Purple Hibiscus*.

### ***Conclusion: Young generation of Nigerian women in search of self***

*Purple Hibiscus* is a tightly woven narrative about a family abuse, but that which, according to Obi Nwakanma, in Vanguard review

goes further and beyond, into the realm of the psychotic, of dispossession, of young erotic awakening, of the clash of worlds, the old African world in final transition, and the new evangelized unconscious linked to its powerful psychological sources, and its forms of alienation present in the pathology of self-hate. (Obi Nwakanma)

It is in the interstice of the paterfamilias’s psychosis, his brachial exercise of power and the young girl, the narrator’s erotic awakening that we locate the finely nuanced feminist thrust of the narrative. The narrative achieves its power largely through what it does not allow its characters to do. We are brought closer to the family and are allowed to see how Eugene beats his wife to the degree that she has miscarriages; then how he, in the belief that he’s keeping his daughter from sin, practically destroys her; beats her, pours hot water on her feet (194). We are made to challenge the wife to do something: run away, say no, do anything to free yourself from that man. And in her annoying lethargy, we begin to wish she had heard about the worth of women, or feminism. Her daughter Kambili, falls in love with a man who possesses the exact opposite of her father’s qualities: Father Amadi. ‘I wished I were alone with him. I wished I could tell him how warm I felt that he was here, how my favor-

ite color was now the same fire-clay shade of his skin' (221). Father Amadi successfully foils the ugly image of the African man created by Eugene. Eventually Eugene's wife poisons him. Of course the goal of feminism is not to poison men, and we would have wished that she made clear her wish. Nevertheless, this wish is translated in her daughter's appreciation of another man who had affirmed her the way she was. In falling in love with him, she tells us about everything her mother's generation would have wished for from their husbands. Feminism understood within Kambili's world is perhaps nothing more than the wish to be affirmed as a regular human being. That is indeed what she saw in Father Amadi's skin color. Fire-clay shade! The mention of clay reminds us of mud, humus from which humanity is derived. In Chimamanda, African women have one specific demand from their men, and this demand is wrapped in their appreciation of men, their bodies and minds, their humanity. Can the men ever give this affirmation back to women? It is not a complicated demand, I think. The flower, purple hibiscus, the narrator tells us, does not need too much care. Just a little quantity of water. Not too much and not too little.

Seffi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* also explores intricate family issues in which women are forced to take decisions for themselves.

Enitan Taiwo and Sheri Bakare are friends brought up in different family setups. While Sheri is a biracial child whose father brought her home from London and who was then raised in a polygamous, Moslem family, Enitan is raised in a Christian, ostensibly progressive family; her father taught her to articulate her opinions and to stand by what she believes in. While one learns to avoid the strictures of tradition, the other confronts them headlong with the belief that her situation, that of women and the nation in general can never get better unless these issues are confronted, and the system fixed.

That would, however, demand sacrifices. Enitan, the narrator, is well aware of that, and she is dead determined to go ahead with a Nietzschean conviction that freedom is not just 'freedom from' but 'freedom to,' freedom to assume responsibility. With this, Sefi Atta sets a

broad canvas upon which she, produces a strong narrative that is particular in its detailed Nigerian experience and universal in the ethical issues that inform it. Sheri is gang raped as a teenager. She never fully recovers from the trauma. Enitan's mother has a mental breakdown because of her husband's philandering. Enitan, herself, has her own heartbreak from her otherwise trusted friend, Mike whom she visits one day only to find another girl lying half naked on the sofa where they had made love not quite a week before. But she finally finds a man who isn't a philanderer, but who had his own share of idiosyncrasy, which Enitan has to deal with till she takes a profound decision that would salvage her sanity. Here lies the future of African feminism: the ability of the African woman to take her life in her own hands. It is being proactive rather than reactionary.

*Everything Good Will Come* subtly redefines African feminism by presenting us with a woman character who knows what she wants. Enitan never bases her happiness on what others think. Rather she is ethically informed and, armed with her fierce intelligence she believes whoever has a voice must use it 'to bring about change' (259). Enitan believes that the ability to make a change in society begins with that to affect a change in the family; the ability for a woman to simply speak out as she does: 'I can't tell a lie-you're hurting me. I've tried my best.' (256) In this utterance she appeals to the humanity of the man. She calls on all to learn to care. 'We have all played a part in this mess, not caring enough about other people, how they live. It comes back to you' (228).

With this, Sefi Atta seems to suggest that feminism is all about caring about the other as a human being. This goal is not to dethrone man or enthrone woman on the seat of power. Rather it is to create a community in which human beings flourish.

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