

Exploring the 'Other' – The importance of African feminism

Oluchukwu Eseka

The universal emancipation of women is the central goal of all feminist action (Ebunoluwa, 2009). Feminist theory, therefore, is meant to act as a lens through which we can begin to analyse the gender discourse globally. However, does a universal goal necessarily call for a universalist theory? In essence, African feminism is paramount for non-western inclusion in the feminist conversation because one cannot deny that the roots of mainstream feminism are inherently western. Without inclusion, feminist scholars will continue to silence the struggles unique to African women. By acknowledging feminism's connection to the enlightenment, the tension between culture and equality, and its distinction from womanism, we can begin to actively include an African perspective in a theory that has historically disregarded it.

Feminism's connection to the enlightenment means it has subconsciously othered the experiences of African women. With the roots of feminism lying in Europe and North America (Ebunoluwa, 2009), the historical connection between the Enlightenment and feminism has long been acknowledged in academic scholarship. Enlightenment feminism has been the backdrop to all successive forms of feminist theory (Taylor, 1999); although this may not seem problematic, one must not forget the racial bias present in the works that defined the enlightenment and consequently enlightenment feminism. As a result, mainstream feminist theory is inherently western and therefore an ineffective tool in analysing African gender discourse. One cannot deny that the scholarship that came out of the enlightenment defined the international platform today, with the core values of reason, equality and rationality being the building blocks of modern society and the search for gender equality. However, the influential nature of enlightenment literature was used as a tool in justifying the othering of African peoples and their struggles. Through the exaltation of Europe's ability to reach a seemingly higher plane of rationality, all other forms of society became the inferior 'other' (Said, 1978). John Stuart Mill, for example, advocated for political gender equality whilst believing that 'civilization' was a pre-requisite for self-government (Mill, 1869). With Mill's words in mind, governments were able to justify the removal of a community's autonomy if it didn't meet the European ideal of 'rational society', a concept that disproportionately affected the lives of African women.



If feminism grew from this racist backdrop, it is illogical to argue that there are no remnants of this marginalising mentality in the feminist conversation today. Feminism has fallen – consciously or not – to the legitimization of the self versus other, margins/dyads within feminism itself (Nnaemeka, 2005). This logocentrist binary embedded in feminism is likely due to its roots in the enlightenment. How is mainstream feminism meant to analyse the struggles of African women if it has been built around a structure that consistently silences and marginalises the very people it is trying to analyse? Therefore African feminism is imperative if we are to understand the nuances of African gender discourse. Only with a lens void of this colonial bias will we be able to see the struggles distinctive to the African female struggle. With this ability in hand, feminist scholars will not only be able to understand what African female emancipation looks like, but will also begin to truly acknowledge the biases present in mainstream western feminism and begin to decolonize feminist theory.

Moreover, the presence of a well-developed African branch of feminism would open the doors to African women who have felt a contention between their cultural heritage and western feminism. Emancipation does not look the same for all women, as western feminism doesn't take into account the effect differing socio-economic and political environments have on female emancipation. Non-western women often feel pressure to choose between their cultural heritage and feminist beliefs (Lazeg, 2005). In many African states, feminism is often seen as a 'western' ideal and fundamentally incompatible with African culture principles. However, it could be argued that this belief only exists because of the detachment of mainstream feminism to the gender discourse in Africa. The gap in the feminist market is clear; an African variant of feminism would refute the notion of feminism being exclusively 'western'. There will be no more need to choose between culture and gender equality because the African branch of feminism will take into account the pivotal role that culture has to play in their gender discourse. Furthermore, feminist theory written by Africans will be easier to disseminate across the African continent. That direct connection between scholar and reader will be significantly stronger as their analysis could come across as more genuine and therefore easier to accept. Clearly, the presence of African feminism will enrich feminist theory as a whole, as the reach of the theory will be significantly broader. The power of mutual heritage should not be overlooked.

It could be argued that the development of Womanism dulls the case for African feminism, as it focuses on the black female experience and fully embraces the impact race has on gender inequality (Ebunoluwa, 2009). However, it is dangerous to assume that this would provide an effective lens when analysing African gender discourse. Womanism is centred around the experiences of African American women and the experiences of African women and African American woman are different fundamentally (Ebunoluwa, 2009). The word 'black' is extremely elastic and it is troublesome to accept that all black women experience the exact same struggles regardless of their cultural heritage and historical background. Womanism, for example, would be more focused on race, whereas Africans are more focused on economic disparities and the effect that it has on their women (Ebunoluwa, 2009). If we want to properly achieve female emancipation in African states we cannot resort to tokenism and assume that a 'Black' feminist theory is sufficient. The presence of womanism is not enough to erase the need for African feminism. African feminist scholars instead should use womanism as an example of a feminist theory that takes the core values of feminism and adapts it to the needs of their subject matters.

Ultimately, the development of African feminism is paramount for feminism to achieve its goal of true emancipation for all women. With its development, not only can we begin the process of riding feminist theory of its western bias and comment into an era of global feminism.

Bibliography:

Ebunoluwa, S. M., 2009. Feminism: the quest for an African Variant. *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 3(1), pp. 227 - 234.

Lazeg, M., 2005. Decolonizing feminism. In: O. Oyewùmí, ed. *African Gender Studies - A Reader*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 67- 81.

Mill, J. S., 1869. *On liberty*. 4th ed. London: Longman, Roberts & Green.

Nnaemeka, O., 2005. Rethinking Pedagogy and Epistemology. In: O. Oyewùmí, ed. *African Gender Studies, A reader*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 51-66.

Said, E. W., 1978. *Orientalism*. 6th ed. New York: Pantheon Books.

Taylor, B., 1999. Feminism and the Enlightenment 1650-1850. *History Workshop Journal*, Volume 47, pp. 261-272.