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**Feminism and Intra-Gender Relations in Africa: A Theoretical
and Conceptual Framework**

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Abstract

Feminism is the principle that stipulates that women be given political, economic and social rights equal to those of men. It is also the movement that seeks to raise vibrant women who will be culturally influential and politically powerful. Therefore, it seeks to demand for representation and recognition of women and to wage war against sexual discrimination in the labour force, in education and all works of life. This paper aims to assess the ideology of feminism and feminist criticism, with the view to affirm its success in Africa over the years while focusing on intra-gender relations among women as reflected in Gynotexts (literary texts written by women). It is discovered that the relationship between female characters in gynotexts if left as it is does not promote the feminist ideology but is inimical to it. This is because the lack of healthy sisterhood, though not inherent, but is constituting a distraction to the actualization of the goals of the feminist movement in Africa.

Introduction

Feminism deals more with the woman's place in the society than with efforts of an organized women's movement to change her place. This is why most definitions of feminism is in line with organized groups that have tried to change the position of

women, or ideas about women. The *Oxford Dictionary* views feminism as the act of “supporting of women’s claims to be given rights equal to those of men”. Adebayo is of the opinion that “...feminism brings to mind the idea of challenging male hegemony (1).” This she links to the activities of militant women who made concerted efforts to combat the unequal distribution of socio-political and economic power. This emancipatory movement has its root in Europe and America but over the years, it has evolved into so many groups and spread all over the world going by different names as it caters for the peculiar needs of women from different regions of the world. Feminism can be viewed from different perspectives, which could be ideological, sociological, psychological, religious, and even an intellectual revolution. The different perspectives mentioned above, have developed over the years and eventually given birth to feminist criticism. The insistence of women in claiming their basic rights to make choices and to be judged as individuals is done in a bid to break away from all oppressive constraints of their lives.

Feminist Literary Theory

The evolution of different theoretical approaches to literary studies has come over the years to handle different spheres and facets of human life and experiences. Klarer (1999) captures this development thus, “Feminist literary theory starts with the assumption that ‘gender difference’ is an aspect which has been neglected in traditional literary criticism and therefore, argues that traditional domains of literary criticism have to be re-examined from a gender- oriented perspective” (97). Therefore, the concern over gender issues, gender discrimination and sexual polarity can be said to have given rise to gender theory and feminist literary theory. Feminist criticism is viewed by Klarer as the most productive and revolutionary movement of the younger theories of literary criticism in general and contextual approaches in particular. Its focus is the liberation and emancipation of women. Although this does not seek to place the women as superior over men, rather it is a call for women to be given equal chance and opportunity to prove themselves as capable.

Foregrounding this revolutionary literary theory at inception were issues such as the portrayal of women in literary texts by male authors and the general treatment of women in the society. This accounts for the reason why feminist criticism concentrated on stereotypes or distorted portrayals of women in a literary tradition dominated by men. Furthermore, feminist criticism aims at challenging the domination of language by masculine expressions and to seek equity. Parsons (82) acknowledges Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* as the founding text of twentieth century feminist literary criticism, along with some other essays by Woolf. The premise of her argument is based on Woolf’s profound statement that “a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction” (4). Thus, in identifying the social and economic obstacles facing women, Parsons is of the opinion that:

The demands of the domestic household, the laws that denied married women ownership of funds or property, and a lack of educational opportunity, made it almost impossible for a woman before the nineteenth century to take up writing as a profession. Writing requires time, privacy and literacy, and women suffered from too little of all of these things (82).

Zilboorg (9) reemphasizes the importance of literacy for anybody that wants to be a writer. This is in line with the views of Parsons which is a reaffirmation of Woolf's declaration. Zilboorg (10) adds that for some few women that dared to write, they were not bold enough to sign their names on their works so either left it as Anon (Anonymous), or adopted male pseudonyms that hid their identities. Mary Ann Evans wrote as George Eliot, and so did the Bronte sisters (Charlotte, Emily and Anne) who initially published as Currer, Ellis and Acton Bell. This means that women were ill equipped and lacked the financial capacity and enabling environment to engage in writing.

Elaine Showalter's Lecture, 'Towards a Feminist Poetics', has played an important role in the feminist struggle and has been a point of reference for many books on feminist criticism. Lodge (307) credits the impetus of contemporary feminist criticism as derived from the women's Liberation Movement of the late 1960's. He further adds that the revision of orthodox 'male' literary history was the initial efforts of feminist critics, exposing sexual stereotyping in canonical texts while reinterpreting or reviving the work of women writers. Thus it was discovered that a reinterpretation of the stereotypical portrayal of women could not be achieved except by more concerted effort on the part of women. This means that the women should not just be readers, but they should evolve as writers. Gunew, (224) features a translated version of "The Laugh of the Medusa" by Helene Cixous, as she expresses her views on the evolution of women's writings, and what it can achieve for the gender movement. She is of the opinion that "Woman must write herself: Must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies". This means that the success of feminism and its criticism rests on the women who have to be bodacious enough to write about women and recreate the image of women through their development of strong female characters who will correct the portrayal of women in texts written by men. The great need for the woman to have a voice through her writing is reiterated by Cixous as she attempts to stir the spirit of the women to be fighters and not dwell in the past which reduced them to being the servants of the militant male, living as the shadow of men. Cixous in (Gunew 226) concludes that women should break out of the snare of silence and passivity by "writing, from and towards women and by taking up the challenge of speech which has been governed by the phallus"

Hence, the 1960's and 1970's recorded a lot of call by women to fellow women to speak up through their writings, decrying the position enforced upon them as "The other". This gave rise to Showalter's "Gynocriticism". Feminist criticism is divided into two distinct varieties. The first division is concerned with 'woman as reader' and the second is concerned with 'woman as writer'. This division as done by Showalter in, (Rice and Waugh, (eds). 92), reflects the woman as reader thus expressing the woman as the consumer of the male-produced literature. Their subject matter includes a consideration of the images and stereotypes of women in literature, the omissions and misconceptions about women in criticism. It also views the fissures in male-constructed literary history, paying attention to the exploitation and manipulation of the female audience and analysis of women. "Woman as writer", is the second division of feminist criticism according to Showalter and is concerned with the woman as the producer of the textual meaning. Its focal point is linguistics and the problem of a male dominated language, psychodynamics of female creativity, literary history and it also studies particular writers and works, (Rice and Waugh, (eds) 92-93). In other words, the woman as a writer is a general focal point of feminist activists, and is seen in Showalter, and also in the works of Helene Cixous.

Elaine Showalter through her contribution has succeeded in shifting the focus of attention from 'woman as reader' to 'woman as writer'. This is an attempt to give the woman a voice and a platform to express herself and the experiences of other women from a feminine perspective. This is equally an opportunity for the woman to correct the stereotypical image of the woman as expressed by the male authors. The success of Showalter's efforts has brought about the discovery of past generations of British women novelists which she classifies into three stages, (Blamires 376). They are the feminine, feminist and female phases. The feminine phase (1840-1880) illuminates the woman in a new light, by their efforts to march the intellectual achievements of male culture, through the representation of women in what was assumed their proper womanly role. Writers in this age include the Brontes, George Eliot and a host of others. The succeeding feminist phase (1880-1920) was the age when women affirmed themselves and strongly protested against the unjust treatment of women. The accommodating posture of femininity was rejected and the women asserted themselves in determined efforts for political and social equality even though they were still dependent on masculine aesthetics; Blamires (37). In the female phase, ongoing since the 1920s, there has been the rejection of both imitation and protest which were the feature of the Feminine and Feminist phase. There emerged a new focus on female experiences as individuals capable of creativity. There was a redefining and sexualizing of both external and internal experience (Rice and Waugh (eds.) 101). This stage now marks the acceptance of the world polarized by sex, and the literature produced in this phase became a representation of woman's experience and view of life.

Having assessed the contribution of different female writers and critics to feminist literary theory, it can be asserted that the two questions that have been an issue in feminist criticism have served as the driving force for this revolutionary literary theoretical field. The first question is on the representation of women in literature, which has drawn attention to the stereotyping of female roles in writings by men. It has affected and influenced woman who read these texts by imposing traditional roles upon them. This is translated as the problem of the *woman as the reader*. Secondly, the established theory of form and practice is predominantly a male product, leading to the question of what the female writer would do to survive in such a climate. This is the problem of the *woman as a writer*; Blamires (375). On the whole, the main focus and driving force of feminist criticism is to fight the passive and subjective position, forced on women. Simone De Beauvoir's, "The second sex" (Blamires, 1991) found the origin of female subservience to men in the age-old dominance of man and not in natural inferiority. In Beauvoir's views:

... Whereas a man 'never begins by presenting himself as an individual of a certain sex', a woman has to define herself as a woman from the start. The masculine is regarded as the very type of humanity and woman is seen as relative to man. Women as a body lack the cohesion to assert themselves against this categorization. While art, literature and philosophy are essentially 'attempts to found the world anew on a human liberty, that of the individual creator', women are so moulded and indoctrinated by tradition that they are prevented from assuming the status of being with liberty. Meanwhile a conspiracy is kept alive which implies that women by nature lack creative genius (374).

These words capture the origin of the female as subservient and the use of language in achieving this. Traditional rules and culture are mainly used to keep women under domination, and religion has often been used to ensure this continued domination of women by men. The religious texts are frequently misinterpreted to help in the continued suppression and domination of women by men. Another major problem that faced women's writing at inception is self-trivialization. Women were taught to destroy themselves thus they feel that their work is not important, not worth publishing, preserving or even finishing at all. (Zilboorg, 10).

By the late 1970's, feminist criticism seemed to have reached 'a theoretical *impasse*'. This is Elaine Showalter's view as reflected in her lecture, "Towards a feminist poetics". However, what looked like a "theoretical *impasse*" has turned out to be an "evolutionary phase", (David Lodge 2000:307). From the mid-1970s, critics drew attention to neglected authors in the English tradition, which propagated a new literary history. Focus on the revision of the canon eliminated the activities of this movement until the late 1970s when it was weakened and also diverted as a result of the influence

of the French feminists, (Klarer 97). The incursion by the French feminists is the period Showalter calls 'Theoretical *impasse*'. It brought about the shift of the attention of feminist criticism in the early 1980s to textual-stylistic reflections.

Feminist criticism seeks to challenge the way language is dominated by masculine expressions and to rethink the canon, aiming at a rediscovery of texts written by women. It aims at revaluing women's experience, examine representations of women in literature by men and women, and also to challenge the representations of women as 'other', as 'lack' or as 'part of nature'. Also, power relations are examined and questions of the difference between men and women are raised, noting if it is biological or socially constructed (Peter Barry 1995:134). Women do not want to be regarded as weak, inferior or dependent and they want to be accorded some respect. This revolutionary movement came in different phases over the years but their focus is the same: the liberation and emancipation of women. Although they do not want to assert their superiority over men, they want to be given equal chance and opportunity to prove themselves as capable.

Feminist Criticism and the African Woman

Feminist criticism being a revolutionary movement is also a global one. It aims at challenging all the stereotypes that are associated with women. However, certain cultural issues affect the feminist movement in Africa. The African woman is faced with a greater challenge than women from other parts of the world. This is greatly because of African culture which generally celebrates men giving them the superior role as the head with the woman as a wife and a mother without a voice. The attitude towards women is reflected in the African novel, which by extension affects feminist criticism in Africa. Katherine Frank in an article "Feminist Criticism and the African Novel" opines that "One of the most controversial issues in contemporary discussion of African Literature is whether or not various western critical approaches and methodologies are suitable for or even adaptable to African writing" (34). This is largely because the African culture and its demands, has affected the acceptability of feminist criticism in African literary studies. In this same article, Katherine Frank further expresses the exclusive domination of African literary studies by men, which renders the woman voiceless and choiceless. They are never heard nor accorded a space in literary anthologies. This is a reflection of many African culture where women are meant to be seen and not heard. They are expected to be passive and supportive of the menfolk and not be assertive.

Thus the African woman has a greater struggle against domination and subjugation because of the circumstances that surround her (Gender, Race and Culture). This is why feminist criticism had a very slow impact on African Literature. According to Frank feminist critical theory in Africa started with stereotypical feminist criticism

because it wanted to challenge the negative image of women in African literature. Other approaches she identified include stylistic, generic and archetypal approaches. Initially, there were very few female writers, but with time the awareness has grown and more women have written. They include the first generation of women writers like, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head and Mariama Ba. Through their writings, they reflect on the condition of the African women, showing traditional life with all the hardship and oppression. In their books, the traditional African woman is portrayed as the property of the man that is “exhausted while still young by ceaseless childbearing or broken-hearted and humiliated by bareness”, (Frank 45). In other words, the female African writers, like their western counterpart seek to re-write the literary history acknowledging the contribution by women. They also seek to challenge the domination of language by men thereby adhering to Elaine Showalter’s three phases of feminine, feminist and female phase in the development of feminist criticism.

Another way of understanding feminist criticism and the African woman is by taking a proper look at the role of the African women in life and literature. It is obvious that the treatment that the African woman gets in life would obviously be reflected in the literature from the continent. It is also important to note that the treatment of the African women in texts written by men (Androtext) would be different from that in texts written by women (Gynotext). The traditional African society is portrayed as a man’s world and so women do not stand a chance nor are they given attention. Their role as wives and mothers restricts their serious involvement in societal affairs and the lack attainment of these two roles leaves them totally unfulfilled. Chukwukere (2) takes an introspective look at the African women, their life and portrayal in African literature. She analyses the portrayal of the African woman in texts written by men, juxtaposing it with texts written by women. The notable fact is that the woman’s major functions revolves around the family as mother, wife and administrator. Their importance and stability is determined by their fertility especially their ability to bear sons. She also has the responsibility of contributing to the family’s economic needs.

In addition, Chukwukere expresses the female dilemma as their struggle to survive in a man’s world and in most cases; she is uneducated and not accorded any respect. This is a reflection of Woolf’s (1929) assertion on the need for a woman to have time, space, money and literacy to evolve as a writer. The woman’s dilemma affects her success as a writer and her ability to compete favourably with the male established writers. Chukwukere (306) is of the opinion that “Social and academic limitations combine to force the female writer into second place within the literary arena. Being a late comer, she has not participated in creating a tradition but is again forced to respond to specific literary directions already established by male writers”. This is the dilemma of the female African writer but with more women participating in

literary writings, the portrayal of women has been changed. Through writing, the awareness of women about the difficulties that women face in a male dominated society has been raised. This has awoken the desire in women to achieve self-fulfillment outside of the roles forced upon them by the society. Emenyonu in “The Feminist Trend in African Literature”. Outlines some of the attributes which the woman is forced to accept which include: facile lackluster, unfulfilled without children, handicapped if all children are female, docile, subsumed of will, indeterminate, dependent, gullible, voiceless, weak and lower in status. They are subjugated, intimidated, neglected, brutalised and regarded as incapable of doing anything right. These are some of the derogatory names and attributes forced on the African woman.

Feminist criticism and the African woman have the ideological focus of female assertion. The contribution is from both the male and female authors which go a long way to show its significance. It is believed that destiny and fate has bestowed these limitations on women (Chukwuma 132). The economic dependence of women on men ensures their continued subjugation. Therefore, economic independence of the African woman becomes a source of liberation for her. Marriage and motherhood become the focus since both attributes are the traditional place of women in the African society. So, the writings by female authors deployed the marriage institution as the test of feminism. According to Chukwuma (137) African female authors disclaim being feminist because of the fear of being termed accultural and iconoclastic. She further observes that “African Feminism unlike western feminism does not negate man rather it accommodates them. Men are central to their lives and so their continuous presence is assured” (139). This shows a great difference that marks out feminism in Africa. Being a “man’s world” the writers are still very careful so that they would not be accused of Feminism, which would portray them as being insubordinate or attempting to usurp the place of men. Hence, the feeling of indispensability situates them centrally in the life and affections of the man, making them accommodate the man as their source of strength and influence.

The progress of feminism in the African context is linked to the discovered awareness by women that they are indispensable to men. This feeling of indispensability by the woman and also the ability to be economically independent gives the African woman the boldness they have to fight the discrimination and subjugation that they have been suffering. However, the realization of their indispensability and economic independence does not make them to negate men as western feminists do. As Chukwuma opines, the men are accommodated by the African women. This marks a clear cut difference between feminism in the western world and that obtainable in Africa. It also brings to mind “*womanism*” (emphasis mine) which is a term that would better suit the African brand of feminism. Moreover, Chukwuma’s article states that even the female authors in a bid not to be termed accultural or

iconoclastic, disclaim being feminist. In other words this brings about the need for a re-definition or re-conceptualisation of what to call the African woman's struggle against the stereotypical image and the domination they suffer.

Another woman that has contributed immensely to the African women struggle is Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo. In her paper "Reflecting the times: Radicalism in recent female-oriented fiction in Nigeria" (Emenyonu 1990), she expresses the spirit of radicalism in educated women, who are the intellectuals, and it approaches female reality and the "woman question" with a sense of purpose. This is because of the autonomy, assertiveness and also the growing self-respect that these women have because of their intellectual attainments. She further identifies some of the themes and motifs recurring in female writings, and argues that "The major tension in the life of the women is the pain of being women. The pain is a consequence of excruciating experiences emanating from acts of humiliation, victimization and subjugation women suffer at the hands of men" (151). Some of the recurrent themes explored are the theme of barrenness, betrayal and abandonment. These are key issues foremost on the mind of women be they single or married. The common experiences of the African woman, and the focus of the female writers is reiterated in these words. The peculiar experience which predominate the life of the African woman and writer is traceable to African culture and tradition, and the role it has apportioned to the woman. Moreover, a lot of female writers and critics in their works focus more on the "woman". A lot of them avoid the ideological name "*Feminism*". Hence, the call for mutual interdependence of male and female is an African *womanist* view and not a western feminist view. Ezeigbo (148) concurs to this adding that it is a consistent theme in the works of female oriented novelists in Africa who now share the view that both men and women need each other. However they still uphold the importance of the need for women to maintain a reasonable measure of social and economic independence.

In other words, the African woman as a writer does not view the man as indispensable, rather, they view the two sexes as mutually interdependent. This is not so with western feminism whose main focus is to stop the domination and subjugation of woman. Their writings are revolutionary and in some cases radical, having a common focus of giving the woman a voice to demand for her rights. The need to strive for "positive radicalism" is reiterated in Ezeigbo (149), who argues on the need for the female writers to show and create authentic and realistic female characters that would provide their female readers with satisfactory role models.

Despite the revolutionary attributes of feminist criticism, it is discovered that the movement has been faced with different obstacles. These obstacles in most cases vary from one region to another. The concern of this paper is on the African type of feminism which would be better called *womanism* and the impact of intra-gender relations on the movement. A lot of problems and opposition that the African female

faces are attributed to the culture and tradition of Africa, which has clear cut roles for the woman as a wife and mother, and does not expect them to raise their voice against the man. Ogundipe-Leslie (Jones, 6) in “The female writer and her commitment” identified two major responsibilities of the female writer as being a woman, and the reality of a woman’s view. She further examines some of the stereotypes of the African woman, one of which is the conception of the women as “Phallic receptacles”. Leslie (10-11) concludes that: “The European notion of femininity is even less applicable to Africa where women have adopted all kinds of roles not considered feminine in Europe... But many of the African female writers like to declare that they are not feminists, as if it were a crime to be a feminist.” This denial of the title “feminist” by African female writers is due to the intimidation that the African women are subjected to by men over the issues of women’s liberation and feminism. Prominent African female writers like Ama Ata Aidoo, Bessie Head, Flora Nwapa, Zaynab Alkali, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo, and Mariama Ba have all at one time rejected the title, feminist. However, their works are filled with feminist issues as they have tried to recreate the image of the African woman. In their works, they have been able to develop strong female characters who try to spurn patriarchy but are accommodative of men and do not throw away marriage. This serves as a reaffirmation of the earlier identified problem, which is the dilemma of the female African writer. Still in Jones (17), Frank expresses the contradiction which is the real source of conflict in African Feminism. She opines that feminism is an individualist ideology which is in contrast to the communal nature of African society. This is a dilemma of the African woman writer as she is caught between her allegiance to her culture, African identity and her aspiration for self-fulfillment (17).

Therefore, having identified the presence of contradictions and conflicts in African feminist criticism, it is glaring that the women have to seek to resolve these conflicts through means that will be acceptable culturally. Thus, Womanism is an African replacement for feminism and is concerned with promoting a culturally acceptable feminist ideology in Africa. However, a look at the intra-gender relations of African women, which is reflected in their writings expresses an issue within the gender that is capable of thwarting the African woman’s efforts to be emancipated and empowered. Frank (15) makes the submission that: “...women must spurn patriarchy in all its guises and create a safe, sane, supportive world of women: a world of mothers and daughters, sisters, and friends.” This is a call to break down all barriers existing within the camp of womenfolk so as to join hands together to push forward and achieve the feminist aspirations. Themes like barrenness, betrayal and abandonment are recurrent in texts like *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Ba, *The Stillborn* by Zaynab Alkali, *Sweet Trap* by Zulu Sofola, *House of Symbols* by Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo and *Second Class Citizen* by Buchi Emecheta. All these are female authored texts and the intra-gender relations reflected in the books makes it glaring that the feminist movement in

Africa can thrive better and achieve more with an improvement in the intra-gender relations of the female characters portrayed by the writers. Things like the mother-in-law syndrome, rivalry between mother and daughter or co-wives and general animosity expressed by women towards other women though not inherent, but can hamper of success of womanism in Africa.

Conclusion

There obviously, is a strong presence of feminism in Africa irrespective of the name it goes by. The African feminist movement tries to have a more accommodative posture to men and marriage, but regardless, it is still quite radical in nature. Thus, the evolution of womanism has helped to resolve the cultural issues that bedevils the feminist movement in Africa making it more accommodating of men rather than man-hating. However, the intra-gender relations of the female characters in texts written by women exposes a conflict capable of negating the smooth sail of the movement in Africa. Therefore, to secure that the African woman is fully and truly emancipated and empowered, womanism and all other afrocentric alternative to feminism should ensure that it addresses the conflicts affecting this ideological movement, one of which is poor intra-gender relations. In line with Frank's call (1987:15), the women in Africa should establish a healthy and supportive cycle of women who will stick together at all times to fight patriarchy and all its constraints rather than allow cultural and environmental factors break their bond of sisterhood thereby rendering them ineffective.

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