

INDIGENIZING THE GENDER DISCOURSE: THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE

BY

MOBOLANLE EBUNOLUWA SOTUNSA PhD

DEPARTMENT OF LANGUAGES AND LITERARY STUDIES
BABCOCK UNIVERSITY, NIGERIA

Email: bolasotunsa@yahoo.com

Phone: 07552525953 +2347060584508

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ABSTRACT

The search for a meeting point between theoretical gender analysis and practice as well as the awareness that the west (Euro-America) cannot speak authoritatively for African women in gender discourse forms the basis for the on-going search to properly situate and locate the peculiarities of African women experiences in gender discourse . This paper discusses the various ideological positions of African female writers and critics in gender discourse. It also examines the reasons for the negative response to feminism by some Africans and interrogates the extent to which womanism delineates the indigenous African women experiences and world views. The paper concludes by outlining some principles for an indigenous African womanist stance which is a synthesis of various ideologies of African females.

“Oju orun to eye fò” The sky is big enough for all birds to fly (without colliding). Again, *“oko ki je ti baba oun omo ko ma l’ala”* meaning “a farm cannot be jointly owned by a father and child and be totally devoid of boundaries.” This is the essence of the need to particularize the experiences of Africans in gender discourse.

BRIEF BIO DATA

Mobolanle Ebunoluwa Sotunsa is a Senior Lecturer and the Head of Languages and Literary Studies Department, Babcock University, Nigeria. She holds a doctorate degree in Literature from the Department of English, University of Ibadan, Nigeria. She has authored several articles and a book **FEMINISM AND GENDER DISCOURSE: THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE**. Currently, Mobolanle Sotunsa is a visiting scholar at School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS), University of London where she is putting finishing touches on her research on Yoruba Drum Poetry. Her areas of specializations are African Oral Literatures, African Women Writings, Literary Statistics and Development Literatures. Mobolanle Sotunsa's ongoing researches include Literary- Cultural Approaches to Eradicating Girl Trafficking in Nigeria and Literature as a Tool for Development in Africa.

THE QUEST FOR AN AFRICAN VARIANT

African females were portrayed as a 'voiceless' lot who as a result of patriarchal subjugation remained silent victims of oppression. However, this portrayal is no longer the case as the imagery of 'voiceless ness' of African females have been debunked by the number of African females engaged in gender discourse in recent years. All the genres of literature are explored as avenues by African female writers to add their voices to gender discourse. Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head, Nawal ElSaadawi, Zaynab Alkali, Mariama Ba and Ifeoma Okoye, Chimamanda Adichie, Chydy Njere, Akachi Ezeigbo are among the numerous African females engaged in fiction writing. Tess Onwueme, Micere Mugo, Zulu Sofola, Efua Sutherland and Ama Ata Aidoo are foremost African female dramatists while 'Molara Ogundipe Leslie, Abenia Busia, C. O. Acholonu, Maagoye M. Oluche are engaged in delineating African women's experiences in poetry, among other things. African females are also actively involved in the field of literary criticism and theory. The leading African female critics and theorists include 'Molara Ogundipe Leslie, Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Katherine Frank and Mary E. Kolawole.

It is claimed that gender discourse, as an academic discipline, evolved with the theory of feminism. However many African females feel uneasy about using the term feminism to denote the African female experience . It has been claimed in some quarters that Africans did not learn

engaging women issues from feminism even though there is the absence of a label to brand this experience. This is so because there are glaring differences in the perception, world-view and experiences of African females and their Euro-American sisters who evolved the concept of feminism. The awareness that the west (Euro-America) cannot speak authoritatively for Africa, as well as the need to integrate theory with practice forms the basis of the search for alternative terminologies which adequately addresses the specificity of African female experiences. The search for a different theory or concept which is peculiarly African is criticized by some female Africans while others feel that the quest for a different terminology that more adequately addresses the specificity of African women's yearning as opposed to an imposed or dogmatic position is a wholesome one. (Kolawole, 1997: 22).

IDEOLOGICAL POSITIONS OF AFRICAN FEMALES IN GENDER DISCOURSE

African females in gender discourse can be classified into three broad groups. The first group consists of African female writers, scholars and critics who identify themselves with feminism. The group deems that the term feminism is adequate to express issues pertaining to women everywhere. As such they see no reason for evolving an alternative concept to substitute feminism. **Nonetheless African females in this group often assert their indigenous African world view.**

The second group comprises those who are cautious of the implications of the feminist tag. It is note-worthy that some members of this group eventually subscribe to the use of the term in the absence of an appropriate alternative concept to articulate their ideological position. Members of this group are quick to point out the differences between their African brand of feminism and the mainstream feminism of the west. Usually, members of this group append African to feminism to delineate what they consider peculiar to African women from women of

other global regions. This gives rise to the term African feminism.

The third group consists of African females who choose to proffer alternative concepts to the theory of feminism. These new concepts are an attempt to indigenize the theory of women in gender discourse. Such concepts are rooted in the peculiar experiences of the African females. Indigenous concepts that have been suggested include African Womanism by C. O. Ogunyemi; Motherism by C. O. Acholonu, and Stiwanism by Omolara Ogundipe Leslie.¹ More recently, Obioma Nnaemeka proposed nego- feminism and Akaachi Ezeigbo proposed snail sense feminism. These concepts shall be examined in detail later on.

Ama Ata Aidoo is one of the foremost versatile African female writers. Her writings include fiction, poetry drama, as well as essays and reviews. Ama Ata Aidoo identifies boldly with feminism. She sees nothing wrong in being regarded as a feminist because feminism is basically concerned with the emancipation of womenfolk from all oppression. In her view, the betterment of African women is a prerequisite to the complete independence of the African continent from imperialist domination. Ama Ata Aidoo declares:

When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I would not only answer yes but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist especially, if they believe that Africans should take charge of our land, its wealth, our lives and the burden of our own development because it is not possible to advocate independence for our continent without also believing that African women must have the best the environment can offer. For some of us, this is the crucial element of our feminism. (*Criticism and Ideology: 183*)

She believes also that “the position of a woman in Ghana is no less ridiculous than anywhere else. The few details that differ are interesting only in terms of local color and family needs (Morgan (ed.), 259).

Although Aidoo identifies boldly with feminism, she feels that the legacy of African women's struggle for emancipation is rooted in the African heritage and is not an imposition from the Western world. According to her:

African women's struggling both on behalf of themselves and the wider community is very much a part of our own heritage. It is not something new and I really refuse to be told I am learning feminism from abroad. (Criticism and Ideology: 183).

Abena Busia is another African female scholar who does not shy away from feminism. In the interview with Mary Kolawole (1997: 8) she is quoted as saying:

I am comfortable with the term 'feminism'. If we concede the term feminism, we've lost a power struggle. As a strategy, we might be conceding grounds that we shouldn't ... Feminism is an ideological praxis that gives us a series of multiple strategies (of reading, of analysis) and what those strategies have in common is that the woman matters.

Abena Busia nevertheless admits that "her way of conceptualizing her world as an African is different from that of North American women." (Kolawole 1997: 8-9)

Another African female scholar, Aduke Adebayo (1996:3) is of the opinion that feminism is an adequate term for describing women's experiences both in Africa and elsewhere. She contends:

The term "feminism" when shorn of its variegated cultural attachments and excesses still possesses a core programme that adequately synthesis's women's experiences worldwide...Feminism is superbly able to describe issues pertaining to Women..

Nawal El Saadawi, the Egyptian medical doctor and writer is among African females who are able to clarify the points of similarities and differences between African feminism and western feminism. She credits western feminist movements for devoting great efforts to the

cause of women everywhere. However she maintains:

For although there are certain characteristics common to these movements all over the world, fundamental differences are inevitable when we are dealing with different stages of economic social and political development.(The Hidden Face of Eve, ix).

For Saadawi, these differences are rooted mainly in the gap between the developed and underdeveloped worlds. For according to her:

In underdeveloped countries liberation from foreign domination often still remains the crucial issue and influences the content and forms of struggle in other areas including women's status and role in society. (ix)

Saadawi does not endorse the depiction of the African women's oppression by western feminists as being worse off than that of Euro-American women. Western feminists portray women in African and Arab as suffering from a continual submission to medieval systems. They point vehemently to rituals and traditional practices such as female circumcision as evidence of the barbaric oppression to which only women in Arab and Africa are subjected to. This attitude leads to a kind of superiority complex in Euro-American women who think they are better than their sisters in Africa or Arabia. Although she condemns female circumcision, Saadawi quarrels with such feelings of superiority on the part of western feminists. She argues, "Women in Europe and America may not be exposed to surgical removal of the clitoris. Nevertheless they are victims of cultural and psychological clitoridectomy." (xiv).

Referring to the Western feminists' isolation of female circumcision as proof of a worse kind of oppression that African and Arab women are subjected to, Nawal El Saadawi states:

I oppose all attempts to deal with such problems in isolation or sever the links with the general economic and social pressures to which women are exposed, and with the oppression which is the daily bread fed to the female sex in developed and developing countries, both of which a

patriarchal class system still prevails (xiv).

The only viable manner which African and Arab women can achieve their emancipation in Saadawi's opinion is through the formation of a formidable political force. She affirms:

Freedom for women will never be achieved unless they unite into an organized political force powerful enough and conscious enough and dynamic enough to truly represent half of society. (xv)

Buchi Emecheta, the prolific African female writer appears wary of being called a feminist. However by reason of the tendencies in her works and critics' insistence that she is a feminist, she reluctantly accepts the tag of feminism. In the interview with Umeh, as quoted by (Kolawole 1997:11) Emecheta says:

I am a feminist with a small 'f'. I love men and good men are the salt of the earth. But to tell me that we should abolish marriage like the capital 'F' (feminist) women who say women should live together and all that, I say no. Personally I'd like to see the ideal, happy marriage. But if doesn't work, for God's sake, call it off.

Obviously Emecheta is horrified at the idea of lesbianism which some western feminists propose as a viable weapon of female bonding. Although Buchi Emecheta believes in marriage, she thinks that bad marriage should end in divorce.

Chinkwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi, a literary critic and theorist has proposed the use of the term womanism to replace feminism in African gender discourse. In Ogunyemi's view, womanism is a more authentic term expressing the African female's experiences. Nevertheless from her definition of womanism, Ogunyemi situates the concept of womanism within the experience of blacks generally. According to Ogunyemi as quoted by Mary Kolawole (1997:36):

Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideal of black life, while giving a balanced

presentation of black womandom. It concerns itself as much with the Black sexual power tussle as the world power structure that subjugates blacks.

Like the African-American women and other none-whites, Ogunyemi's rejection of feminism is based on certain tendencies in white feminism which she considers unacceptable to the black/African women. Ogunyemi in 'Women and Nigerian Literature' (*Ogunbiyi ed., 64*) asserts further:

As an ideology, feminism smacks of rebelliousness, fearlessness', political awareness of sexism and an unpardonable (from the male viewpoint) drive for equality and equity between the two sexes

She further explains:

Womanism is black centered. It is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism. Unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between the black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand. It is also interested in communal well being thus extending its ideology, towards a Marxist praxis.

There have been other efforts to posit a theory that is indigenously African in gender discourse. C. O. Acholonu's concept of Motherism spring from African females attempt to indigenize the gender theory. In her book *Motherism* (1995) Acholonu posits the concept of Motherism as an African alternative to feminism. Implicit in the concept, is the centrality of motherhood in the African female experience.

Much has been written about motherhood in African literature. In most cases the image of the mother is often idealized as an epitome of self sacrificing love, endurance, nurture, provider of warmth among other virtues. In negritude literature, the mother is often presented as an object of reverence, a symbol of patience and longsuffering. Africa is undeniably family

centred. At the heart of the family unit is the mother who nurtures her offspring and imparts to them the socio-cultural values of the society. In African culture, motherhood occupies an exalted position.

However, some African female writers have debunked the myth of motherhood as the ultimate fulfilling role for the African woman. They present the bitter experiences that often characterize motherhood. Emecheta's *The Joy of Motherhood* (1979) and Flora Nwapa's *This is Enough* (1964) are works in this trend. Such demystification of motherhood makes it difficult to speak about African motherhood in an absolute sense.

Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie (1994:1) proposes another term as the African variant of feminism. She names this ideology Stiwanism. In her words:

Stiwa means "Social Transformation Including Women of Africa." I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation. It is not about warring with men, the reversal of role, or doing to men whatever women think that men have been doing for centuries, but it is trying to build a harmonious society. The transformation of African society is the responsibility of both men and women and it is also in their interest.²

Ogundipe realizes that the radical or militant posture of Western feminism has no place in the African context. To effectively rid the African society of all forms of oppression especially sexist oppression, diplomacy is essential for African women. It is this diplomacy she attempts to display in evolving her concept. Ogundipe states:

I have since advocated the word "Stiwanism" instead of feminism, to bypass ... the combative discourses that ensue whenever one raises the issue of feminism in Africa. The new word describes what similarly minded women and myself would like to see in Africa. The word "feminism" itself seems to be a kind of red rag to the bull of African men. Some say the word by its very nature is hegemonic or implicitly so. Others find the focus on women in themselves somehow threatening ... Some who are

genuinely concerned with ameliorating women's lives sometimes feel embarrassed to be described as 'feminist' unless they are particularly strong in character ... (22-23)³

Ogundipe-Leslie is noted for her radical posture. She had earlier condemned the rejection of the term feminism in strong terms by asking whether it was a crime to be a feminist. However she later found it expedient to adopt a new stance in her proposed stiwanism. According to her:

The new term describes my agenda for women in Africa without having to answer charges of imitativeness or having to constantly define our agenda on the African continent in relation to other feminisms, in particular white Euro-American feminisms which are, unfortunately, under siege by everyone. This new term allows me to discuss the needs of African women today in the tradition of the spaces and strategies provided in our indigenous cultures for the social being of women (23) ⁴

Nnaemeka proposed the concept of negofemiism. This concept implies basically the idea of negotiation embedded in the African woman's actions and an absence of a stubborn sense of self or opinionated personality. According to Naemeka (2002: 12):

Many years ago when I coined the negofeminism as a name for "African feminism", I was inspired by the philosophy of give – and-take and negotiation that is at the heart of Igbo culture (as is the case in many African cultures)...For me negofeminism stands for the "feminism of negotiation" as well as no ego feminism". The former is embedded in Igbo culture, the latter critiques and cautions against the ego trip that engenders feminist arrogance, imperialism, and power struggles. However, the cultural dimension remains the dominant force.

Similarly Akachi Ezeigbo advocates what she tags "snail sense feminism". Central to Ezeigbo's concept again is the idea of negotiation. She explains ⁴ that her idea of snail sense feminism stems from her fascination with the characteristics of the snail. The snail is a seemingly fragile animal but it climbs stones, rocks and hills in its engagement with the environment.

Where it cannot climb over any obstacle directly, it proceeds to get around the barrier. It eventually arrives at its destination albeit slowly or later than it may have done if there was no obstacle. Implicit in Ezeigbo's explanation is the belief that if the snail does not apply some caution and proceeds to tackle the obstacles directly, it will wear itself out, get damaged and may be destroyed in the process. Ultimately it will fail to achieve its goal. This logic validates the notion of "Better late than never". It must be noted that negotiation in negofeminism and 'snail sense feminism' "does not imply compromise by women from a position of weakness. Rather it is employed as a weapon to manage and maneuver circumstances in order ultimately accomplish a set goal. This brings to mind the principle of "stooping to conquer".

REASONS FOR THE REJECTION OF FEMINISM BY SOME AFRICAN FEMALES

The reasons why some African females tend to reject feminism as the concept which denote the African female experience in gender discourse are many and varied. One of the reasons is the fear of the appropriation of the voices of African females by the existing feminist discourse. A number of African women recognize the fact that self assertion by African women did not begin with their knowledge of feminism. Mary Kolawole (1997:10) speaks of her maternal grandmother whom she says "was not a feminist but simply a strong African woman. African women like Kolawole's grandmother did not learn feminism from the west. The history of female self-assertion in Africa goes beyond feminism. By subscribing to feminism, African females may unconsciously be supporting the view that feminism is the theory which teaches African females self awareness and assertiveness. African females' distinctive voices might get swallowed up in the louder voices of their Euro-American counterparts in gender discourse.

Similarly, some African females are opposed to the use of the term feminism because of the tendency of regarding them as merely imitating their Euro-American counterparts. This

rejection of feminism is based on what some scholars describe as ‘parroting’ (Kolawole: 1997). Parroting will negate attempts by African females to inscribe themselves in gender discourse.

Micere Mugo in (James 1990:98) sounds a warning to African females on the need to avoid appropriation of their voices or parroting white feminist. She insists:

There is nothing wrong with singing about women but I think that we must be careful to define and specify which women we are singing about. I insist that we must sing and sing again about our mothers and those in the rural areas and their poverty

The issue of cultural relevance is an added major reason for the rejection of feminism by several African females. Many issues that are of primary importance to western feminists have no cultural significance to the African woman. In fact, some proposals of western feminists actually negate cultural values which many African females consider positive. Kolawole (1997:12-12) observes:

The role of patriarchy as it undermines women’s sexuality is dominant in radical feminist discourse. Many such scholars have proposed very overt demonstrations of sexuality and sexual freedom. They often probe conventional concepts of biological and reproductive roles. Shalsasmith Firestone suggests a neutralization of reproductive role in line with lesbian calls for in vacuo reproduction. Others like Marge Pierson envision a utopia, in which male and female have the option of “agendered” childbearing.

It is obvious that ‘agendered’ child bearing, lesbianism and vacuo reproduction are not issues that are of immediate concern to African women in addition to the fact that such issues are considered culturally negative and irrelevant in the African world.

Besides these reasons, many African females prefer a different terminology from feminism because of the need to gain the support and acceptance of the African men for their ideology and social movement for the emancipation of the African women. Either correctly or

erroneously, majority of African men regard feminism as an imperialistic imposition on African women. Feminism is regarded as a rebellious posture which teaches African women to revolt against cultural norms at the same time that it sets them against their men folk. Since many African women realize the need for the support of their men folk in realizing any true emancipation from all oppression, they seek to adopt a conciliatory position that does not whip up negative sentiments in the men.

It might appear that there is a contradiction in African women seeking the support of their men folk in the fight for the emancipation of women from oppression. In my view, the African woman is not necessarily fighting for equality with man. What the African woman wants is respect and recognition of her person as a complete human being. She also desires recognition and appreciation of her unique role as a woman in her family and the society at large. Zaynab Alkali as quoted by Nduka Otiono (1996:148) says “Equality between men and women doesn’t arise at all. Men are like the brain and the women, the heart.” Since African women are seeking recognition and appreciation of their roles, they need the support of the men in order to achieve their aim.

In addition, the pro culture stance of African women may also appear as a self contradiction because the culture as it stands now can be viewed as a man determined social construct. Nevertheless, African culture in its totality is not anti woman. Although, some aspects of the culture are unfavourable to women and some otherwise good aspects have been abused by men in order to subjugate women, the culture cannot be totally disregarded. The culture of any society constitutes its distinctive identity. Any groups of people who lose their culture also lose their identity. The African woman recognizes this fact. This explains the reason for their pro-culture stance. A positive culture should be dynamic. African women hopefully can prevail

on the society to give up negative cultural practices while upholding positive aspects of the culture.

The various hindrances to the cultural relevance and acceptance of feminism in Africa therefore are largely responsible for its rejection by some African females. The rejection of Euro-American feminism does not, in any way, indicate passivity towards the problems and oppression of women in Africa. Most of the women who reject feminism are the same ones who are actively engaged in activities that promote the emancipation of African women from various types of oppression and help them to better their lot. Kolawole (1997:8) opines:

From personal discussion with several African sisters, they are not rejecting the process of fighting for women's self definition and self-assertion, but have problems with the definitions and conceptualization of feminism as it is being transmitted from the West with the presumption that this perception of women's issues is universal and relevant to all women globally.

African females who identify cautiously with feminism, as well as, those who prefer other terminologies recognize the uniqueness of the African woman's experience. Even those who identify boldly with feminism do not deny the fact that there are some differences in the experiences, conception and worldview of Africans and other races.

Susan Arndt (2002) investigates the dynamics involved in African gender discourse. Like me, ⁵ she interrogates the question of feminism in African gender discourse, teasing out the apparent seeming contradictions in the various ideological positions of African women writers and critics. However in contrast to my position, Arndt concludes her discussion by asserting that "the concern of African wo/men to transform existing gender relationships can best be described as African –feminist" (23). She avers that based on the premise of "whether it is called feminism, womanism, stiwanism or negofeminism, what is needed is an international dialogue that

recognizes both commonalities and differences and challenges hierarchies that govern feminist practice I consider it legitimate to describe Africans' commitment to gender issues as feminist". (69)

Arndt's insistence on labeling gender discourse in Africa as feminism (although qualified) undermines and deconstructs her arguments about the dynamics of African gender discourse. Arndt, like early western feminists, is answerable to the accusations of imperialism. How else can one explain the insistence on describing the whole spectrum of female gender discourse with one label "Feminism"? The notion that feminism is the sole permissible, suitable and appropriate global label for gender discourse is debatable and problematic. This phenomenon gave rise to the pluralization of feminism as feminisms thereby describing all attempts at gender discourse as an outgrowth or variant of feminism. There are definitely various strands of feminism in the west justifying the term feminisms however, the attempt to divorce feminism from its origins and practice in order to expand its focus as the essence of global female concern is essentially a futile and ineffective imperialistic endeavour. Other conceptualizations of gender discourse are equally valid even when they share similarities with feminism(s) and masculinities.

The attempts of African women and women of other regions should be viewed as **glocalizing** gender discourse in apposition to globalizing gender discourse. By "**glocal**" I mean exploring indigenous or regional issues in a global space. Feminism(s) **cannot and should not dominate the global gender space**. In a similar vein, the assertion that feminism is the genesis of gender discourse is questionable. Various African female critics have emphasized that they did not learn feminism from Europe or America. Historically Africa women have been engaged with gender issues. According to Arndt (2002:31) 'I... hesitate to argue that any traditional association of African women was feminist in nature. A feminist organization is more than a mere assembly of

women....” Arndts view, one can argue, is simplistic, myopic yet paradoxically correct. Indigenous women organizations may not be feminist but they are not mere assemblies of women. These organizations were Africa’s unique media engaging women issues in indigenous ways that don’t necessarily have to conform to feminist standards nevertheless they foreground African women’s attempt to conceptualize gender discourse.

THE NEED FOR A SYNTHESIS

There has arisen a need for African female writers and critics to synthesize the assortment of ideological propositions and concepts in order to properly situate and locate the peculiarities of their experience in gender discourse. This need arises because of the intersections between the local and the global in contemporary times. Another reason is the apparent inability of Europeans to interpret, understand and value ideas and experiences that are not labeled.

Many African female critics and writers have adopted Womanism as the umbrella theory representing African females’ brand of feminism. However a clear distinction has not been made between African American Womanism and a truly indigenous African Womanism. In many cases, the two types of womanism are lumped together. Although C. O. Ogunyemi probably conceives her womanism as a concept peculiar to Africans; her Womanism fails to distinguish distinctly between the broad based African American womanism and continental African womanism. Ogunyemi’s definition;

Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the Ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom (24).

As reported by Arndt (2002: 38), in recent years, Ogunyemi has had to append African to her conception of womanism to distinguish it from African American Womanism.

Similarly, Mary Kolawole, does not distinguish between African American womanism

and African womanism. In her work, *Womanism and African Consciousness* (1997: 34) she insists on the singleness of concept:

Any African woman who has the consciousness to situate the struggle within African cultural realities by working for a total and robust self-retrieval of the African woman is an African or Africana womanist.

I uphold Kolawole's ideal of self naming for the African women in gender discourse. African American womanism cannot adequately describe or address indigenous African women's concerns for the reasons discussed below among other reasons.

DIFFERENCES IN CULTURE BETWEEN INDIGENOUS AFRICANS AND AFRICAN AMERICANS

African American womanism essentially addresses the African -American women's reality and hardly, if at all, pays attention to indigenous African women. No doubt, there are similarities in some of the experiences and world views of these two groups of women. Nevertheless, certain fundamental differences still exist. These differences then necessitate our quest for either a fusion of the existing theories in order to accommodate the apparent peculiarities, or evolve a set of new theories to cater distinctly for the African woman. Femi Ojo-Ade's (1996) suggestion in the light of our position is apposite here:

Since a line of distinction has been drawn and rightly so between Black woman's condition and that of her white counterpart in the west, a similar line should be drawn between the former's condition and that of the African woman (24).

Africans have not undergone the experience of slavery which underlies the experiences of African Americans. Although Africans were subjected to colonialism, one is bound to agree with Femi Ojo-Ade that "colonialism must be considered a child's play against the dehumanization of the earlier experience." (6)

Another difference in the experience of African women and African American women is the issue of cultural practices. The Africans in Diasporas attempted to preserve their cultural roots. To a large extent, they succeeded, but due to the conditions in a foreign land and the imposed condition culminating in psycho-social alienation, the preserved culture underwent serious transformation such that what remained were mere fossils of derived cultures.

Instances of diversity in culture can be seen in the attitude of Africans and African Americans on the issues of sex and the family, and divorce and single parenthood which does not attract much disapproval among African Americans like it does among Africans. Correspondingly, the prevalence of polygynous marriages in Africa is another point of difference between African and African American women. Polygyny is alien to, and therefore an unwelcome practice among African Americans among whom a higher rate of separation and divorce seem to exist. An African female who succumbs to a polygynous marriage may be criticized by the standards of a theory that does not take into consideration the constraints which African women experience as a result of the prevalence of polygyny among the African men.

Yet another instance of difference in cultural practices between Africans and African Americans is the issue of bride-price. Although, the custom of the bride-price has been abused and bastardized by various people, it is not meant to be a negative culture. Bride-price is actually meant as a symbol of the value of females. Husbands who pay bride-price are supposed to consider it a sign of love for their wives. The giving of bride price, when rightly understood, was to help the husband value and treasure his wife. However, as a result of the abuse of this culture and distortion of the philosophy behind the practice, the bride-price concept has been grossly misunderstood. Paying the bride price is now equated to 'buying' the bride.

In the absence of a correct understanding of such African culture and traditions,

misconceptions and distortions are bound to exist. This has been the case since there has not been any clear distinction made between theory which applies to African Americans and indigenous Africans.

There is danger in allowing African Americans dominate a discourse which should address specifically the need of 'black' woman, particularly, African females. Feelings of superiority and condescension may creep in as a result of misunderstanding of some cultural practices which are not shared by the different groups. Usually, in practice, the stronger party monopolizes jointly owned property. This, I suspect, could happen in the case of Womanism unless care is taken. According to the Yoruba "*oko ki je ti baba oun omo ko ma l'ala*" meaning "a farm cannot be jointly owned by a father and child and be totally devoid of boundaries." This is the essence of the need to particularize the experiences of Africans in gender discourse. (Sotunsa 2009)

An appropriate African female ideology does not underscore the similarities it may share with African American womanism or Western feminism. However, merging together the experiences of different groups of people without recognizing their differences is unsafe. Nellie V. McKay (1993:279) points out:

At this time we need to begin to think seriously than we have done until now of learning to respect differences and strive to celebrate those things that we hold in common without denying the differences.

Similarly, Mary Kolawole opines;

Self naming is very central to African world view. In many African cultures, naming almost assumes a sacred status. One doesn't just name a child in traditional African society. Diverse considerations such as family traits and achievements, lineal peculiarities or divine guidance determine a child's name. A stranger cannot be allowed to name the child since he does not have adequate knowledge of

these paraphernalia of naming. The Yoruba's believe strongly in this as an aspect of their philosophy Oruko n roni Oriki n ro eniyan Naming affects the individuals; Encomium shapes personality. (26)

This, in Kolawole's view, is the heart of the search for new terminologies of self definition.

INDIGENOUS AFRICAN WOMANISM

Since it is obvious that African American womanism has failed to adequately address the specificity of African female experiences, it becomes imperative that a line of distinction must be drawn between the two apparently similar but dissimilar theories. Generally, African female critics appear to be tolerant of African Womanism as a fitting description for African female experiences in gender discourse despite proliferations of conceptualizations.

One of the challenges of synthesizing gender discourse in Africa is the practice of authorship claims which is alien to African oral literatures. Although oral literature is considered as a communal property, a bard must have created the initial version of the poem. Nevertheless various bards over the years contribute and modify the oral poem until it becomes a communal property. Since African oral poets were not insistent about authorship rights every one owned the poem and was free to adapt it to the needs of his/her performances (Sotunsa 2005). A similar pattern in the evolution of African female gender discourse might be beneficial to all interested parties. It is high time for gender discourse in Africa to be synthesized. It should be noted that the synthesis does not preclude the recognition and acknowledgement of an assortment of concepts which make up the synthesized whole. Nevertheless, the essential features of the various African concepts should be blended to create and generate a synthesis. In the process, even the points of variance should be crystallized. Africans ought to be left to choose to either have a common label or not. However in the globalization dispensation, it is becoming

mandatory especially with the tendency of the West to take advantage of the situation to label African conceptualizations as feminist.

African females should expand and jointly uphold Ogunyemi's African womanism. Indigenous African womanism is a plausible conceptualization for synthesizing African women's ideologies for multiple reasons. First it affirms its commonalities with African Americans while distinguishing itself and foregrounding indigenous Africans' distinctive issues. Secondly the term womanism foregrounds feminine issues and hints at the affinities it shares with feminism(s) in gender discourse. Thirdly, it upholds one of the earliest attempts by an African to make a room for African gender discourse in the global space. African women can jointly own this concept, develop it, modify it and expand it with many other indigenous conceptualizations.

In spite of the differences in the ideological positions of African females, the following concerns and features seem common to all proposed ideologies. They recognize the uniqueness of the African female experience. Furthermore they seek to establish a theory that is culturally and socially relevant to African women. The concepts appear to embrace the idea of negotiation in various degrees. The ideologies also share the desire for men participation where possible. Finally, the ideologies advocate the inclusion of economic and political issues in their agenda.

A synthesis of the various existing concepts in Indigenous African Womanism, we hope, will help in properly situating, locating and foregrounding African women issues in gender discourse.

NOTES

1. This paper reproduces portions of my book *Feminism and Gender Discourse: The African Experience* however I have developed in this paper more eloquently, the call for a synthesis of conceptualizations arguing for a development of Ogunyemi's African Womanism. I have equally challenged boldly the notion of feminism(s) as the sole conceptualization of women concerns in gender discourse in addition to updating literatures and critiquing Susan Arndt's stance on African feminism.
2. Ogundipe-Leslie, 'Molara in "A Matter of Structure", an interview with Professor Ogundipe-Leslie, *West African* 26th/3rd March, 1996) quoted by Aduke Adebayo in *Feminism and Black Women's Creative Writing: Theory, Practice and Criticism*. Ibadan: AMD publishers, 1996.
3. Ogundipe-Leslie, 'Molara in *Recreating Ourselves* 1994 as quoted by Kolawole Mary in *Women and African Consciousness*, Treton NJ African World Press, 1997, (22-23).
4. *ibid*, p 23.
5. *Feminism and Gender Discourse the African Experience* shares with Susan Arnts's *The Dynamics of African Feminism* the classifying of African women writers' ideological positions. However, my book as documented in its preface is a revision of my M. A Thesis written in 1998. It was in no way premised on Arndt's publication which was not in existence at that time.

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