

African Culture and Lesbian Feminism

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ABSTRACT This paper seeks to critically examine the claims of lesbian feminism in the quest for women liberation in a patriarchal society and in relation to its compatibility with culture and human value with particular reference to Africa. The paper analysed the significance of heterosexual relationships in Africa as a major domain where women affect the human race. And notes that the most unique, distinct and unequivocal value of women in Africa is the target of lesbian dissolution. It then charges African women to beware of falling prey to an unpopular pedestal in their struggle for liberation while encouraging them to maintain heterosexual relationships for the purpose of procreation alongside a capacity for public life which will dialectically enhance liberation.

INTRODUCTION

Africa has been drifting in cultural dislocation engendered by its contact with the western world and intermingles of cultures in the web of colonialism and neo-colonialism, veil in today's globalisation. The fear, therefore, is often entertained whenever there is relatively new social order in Africa as to be critical about its ability and tendency to plague the long battered culture into further devastation.

Informed by this disposition and perhaps, provoked by certain kind of considerations, gender discourse through the medium of feminism has vehemently been opposed as a foreign ideology which is quite un-African. It is the view of most people (conservatives, as they are popularly called) that feminism is a means of imperialism which does nothing except to stand culture on its head (Mlacha 1986).

There is a sense in which one would be right to say that the early major attempt to theorise the gender issue in Africa equated it with feminism. It is usual for every academic field to have its emancipatory stage. But it may not be correct to think of feminism as not having African origin because of the universal nature of the problem of women marginalisation, which initiated the ideology. In human cultures, there are activities that are culture specific and others as culture universals; gender issue belongs to the realm of culture universal, hence, feminism as

a means of gender discourse may not be annihilated by culture. Jayawardena (1986) has done quite enough in his attempt to demystify the idea of conceiving feminism as a foreign ideology to Africans. He arguably makes clear that feminism like socialism has no particular ethnic identity but a universal ideology for liberation and social change. Its aim is to set free the woman from exploitation, oppression and patriarchal structures for social reproduction and society development.

In pursuit of this global feminism, several strands have emerged; more are still emerging and will continue to emerge. All these strands are geared towards examining issues relating to women's marginalisation and/or oppression by their men counterparts who are the primary suspects, and the society at large. The various strands have varied understandings of the woman problem and tend to proffer solution(s) that could promote women in all spheres of life (Vincent 1992), in accordance with the problems identified. However, it is imperative to scrutinise the ever increasing strands of feminism against outrageous solutions that may question and pose a threat to the co-existence and social relationships between the sexes; which may further compound problems for the African woman and the larger society. Part of the reasons why this effort is essential is anchored on the fact that the maintenance of social stability is the product of the extent to which certain norms are upheld by members of any society, of which, its disregard may be counter-productive.

This is the concern of this paper as it attempts to evaluate the strand of radical lesbian feminist solutions to the woman problem. Underly-

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ing this discussion is the attempt to examine the suitability of lesbian feminists' agitations for women freedom, given African cultural context and human values in the female.

FEMINISM

Feminism refers to a belief in and commitment to equal rights and opportunities for all human beings; though with particular reference to women given their protracted history of deprivation. It is regarded as a platform for agitations for women liberation and attainment of substantive freedom. Feminism like socialism is a universal ideology for liberation and social change. Its aim is to set free the woman from exploitation, oppression and patriarchal structures for social reproduction and society development.

LESBIANISM

Lesbianism has often been shown interest from the understanding of male homosexuality. The concern is increasingly high as the mass media, magazines and books, as well as religious bodies like the Anglican Communion world wide warns the world about its threat to Christianity, civilisation and morality (Ogedegbe 2006; Walker 2004). This, however, is not the concern of this study; rather, the less talked about practice of lesbianism involving the female homosexuality as a protest against female oppression and subordination in marital relationship is our focus here.

The history of lesbianism among the radical feminist is relatively recent. But before now, there have been other forms that lesbianism relationship have taken in the countries where its practice was prevalent. Nichols (1990), using the work of Faderman (1981), treated the matter considerably when she describes the 'romantic friendship' common among upper-middle-class women of the previous two centuries. During these years, a number of single, childless women lived in lifelong companionship with other women that often enabled them to live more career-oriented or at least intellectually oriented lives than would have been possible in traditional wife/mother roles (Faderman 1981). From account, some of these women left behind (diaries, letters and so on), Faderman concludes that many "Boston marriage", as they were of-

ten called were emotionally passionate, intimate relationships comparable to heterosexual marriage but often probably with a genital sexual component. However, the women involved in these companionships did not consider themselves lesbians; indeed, for much of this time or period neither the word nor the concept lesbianism existed (Faderman 1981).

Radical Lesbian Feminism

There is the need to draw parallels between the career-oriented lesbian and today's radical lesbian feminists because the latter is a revolution embarked on by women as a means of resisting male dominance and supremacy, and societal constraints experienced in heterosexual relationships. In this regard, lesbian feminism is an extension of radical feminism which is a contemporary phenomenon generated by women's liberation movement of the late 1960s (Jaggar 1983). This makes lesbian feminism definable as a political choice of women against patriarchal powers.

Lesbian feminism traced women marginalisation or oppression in the institution of marriage and heterosexual relationship which defines the role of a woman as wife and mother. Unlike other feminists like the liberalists, socialists and so on, radical feminists do not conceive of women oppression primarily in relation to the world outside the home. For them, woman oppression does not consist primarily in the lack of equal job opportunities or in exclusion from full participation in the public world. Rather, women oppression is rooted primarily in the so-called intimate relations: in sexual and procreative relations in the home, which finds extension in other spheres of life that the male culture defines as personal rather than as political (Jaggar 1983).

Based on radical feminists' analysis, marriage is one primary and most fundamental of institutions oppressing women, since it sanctions the most widespread forms of forced motherhood and sexual slavery. They therefore canvassed that the first condition for escape from forced motherhood and sexual slavery is escape from the patriarchal institution of marriage. Consequently, radical feminist urge women either not to marry or to leave their husband if already married (Jaggar 1983).

It is imperative to discuss in brief the form women oppression in African marital relation-

ship assumes. Undeniably, women in Africa are victims of patriarchal social relationship their marginalisation is without match anywhere in the world. The indices of oppression play themselves out on a daily experience. Forced motherhood for instance, is well practiced in most African communities. It is very prominent in Nigeria, especially in the northern part where they often justify the act as a measure against girl prostitution. Ogundipe (2002) holds this view when he says, in Nigerian societies where early marriages are practiced, "pre-teenage girls are married off to much older men in what is no better than cradle snatching". They are forced into motherhood as they become children who bear children. If they are lucky and very fast, they make adjustments in terms of understanding their roles as wives and mothers, even when they are not mentally and physically mature to play these roles. Those of them who are unlucky suffer Vesico Vagina Fistula (VVF) from too early birthing which leaves them incontinent, smelly and abandoned by their much older husbands (Ogundipe 2002). In some other parts the practice is prevalent, for instance among Esan people of Nigeria pre-teenage girls are married off to much older and richer men sometimes as a means of raising fund to train the male child. One would have expected the practice to wane out with the passage of Child Right Act of 2003 in Nigeria which rose the marital age of females to 18 years minimum, in spite of this, Senator Ahmed Sani Yerima, former Governor of Zamfara State, justified his marriage to 13 years old Egyptian girl on the basis of practising his Islamic religious belief.

In African cultures, marriage defines the woman's world as a subordinate world of total submissiveness, while man's world is the dominant world. This confirms the claim that marriage is a means of man's aggrandizement in Africa. Mbiti (1969) and Emiola (1997) both agree that marriage involves a change of status. It confers on the man greater political and social status as he acquires control over his wife and his offspring. This control is legalised in several customs and norms, which incapacitate the African woman. These iniquitous customs are frequently justified on the assumption that, customarily, the power of bride price payable on the woman entitles the man to determine her place in mist of his estate. Emiola (1997) says, this view is common among the social scien-

tists, though, Emiola does not subscribe to the perception that bride price can serve as a means of purchase in this essence.

Tarisayi (2002) reiterated the view that marriage reduces the woman status when he writes about Zimbabwe women. Tarisayi (2002) is here quoted:

A woman appeared weak as she left her father's place to get married. In African patriarchal society, the woman had higher status and power in her family of origin as she adopted new and humbling roles in the new family, which she enters by conjugal union. This was a way of regulating power in traditional society

Having being made powerless in this type of transition, she is further put on check in and out. Such checks range from infidelity in marriage, widowhood rites and other taboos. In African patriarchal societies, fidelity in marriage is expected to be observed absolutely by the woman alone and not the reverse. Felix (1996) corroborated this point in his discussions about fidelity in Ibibio marriage in Nigeria. In his words:

In Ibibio tribal society, it is widely agreed that wives should maintain absolute fidelity to their husbands. The Ibibio women probably would concur in that deal and they would perhaps like to add that husbands should be equally faithful to their wives. However, the latter view does not obtain whole hearted male support.

Felix (1996) further adds that men are able to enforce this because they are the dominant group. As he puts it:

Men are the dominant sex in Ibibio land. Like in every other male dominant society in Nigeria, the Ibibio men impose their dominant views on their wives. The view that wives should be faithful to their husband receives ancestral sanction.

Any act of unfaithfulness is severely punished on the woman through humiliating rites; while the man with whom the act is committed is left unpunished except when it involves a brother's wife (Isiramen 1997). Even in her innocence, she is falsely accused, harassed and forced into what Okojie calls 'cold confession'. Improved communication has taken the humiliation beyond the perimeters of the immediate community to a global news as such cases are often now feed into the internet and flash in popular and widely read news papers and magazines as

news extra like “President Zuma’s wife dating her bodyguard” (Newswatch Magazine 2010).

It is the same woman who is expected to maintain virginity until marriage. Lack of virginity discovered after marriage in African societies attracts societal stigma and in some cases, leads to divorce according to Mbiti (1969). In fact, the male custom decrees who can go where, in what clothing and with whom (Martha 1995).

Another way of subduing and dehumanising women is through domestic violence. This is manifested in the prevalence of wife battering and cultural ideologies supporting a husband’s right to beat his wife or wives; which are enshrined in poor police response to wife battering (Ogundipe 2002).

Furthermore, patriarchal ideology defines women in a way specific to their sex, as beings whose special function is to gratify male sexual desire and to bear and raise children. This point is often referred to as the reason why women’s sphere is usually the private life with domestic tasks, while men alone are considered equal to the task of shouldering the burden of public affairs (Jaggar 1983). Domesticating the woman leads to devaluation of womanhood in a patriarchal relationship, and sidelines her in social reckoning (Uroh 2001). Bisilliat (1983) agrees with this view that, the only source of woman esteem lies in her power to reproduce society, and play the role of a mother, yet, this domestic task is devalued in the male dominant ideology.

Worse still is the practice of widowhood rites in most African societies. Under widowhood rites, women are subjected to unimaginable humiliation, poor health hazard and a number of other dangers. Many of today’s scholars often talk of widowhood rites in Africa as a past experience and a practice of primitive societies which has now disappeared with the advent of Christianity, modern civilisation with their attendant purifying and socialising factors (Onimhawa 1998). Contrary to this view, the Inter-African Committee (IAC) sponsored six researchers, carried out research on widowhood rites in Nigeria across eleven states in the six zones into which Nigeria is administratively subdivided, came out with the results that many ethnic groups in today’s Nigeria still tenaciously hold on to this dehumanising rites and practices (IAC Nigeria 2000). The fight against widowhood rites is a little effective only among the educated women who are less than 5% of women

population in Nigeria. By implication the practice is yet very much prevalent in Nigeria. The widowhood rites are similar in most communities in Nigeria, though not necessarily the same. The tradition is that when a man (especially young) dies, it is assumed that the wife or wives killed him either by fault of her unfaithfulness or otherwise. In some cases, such a woman is subjected to swear an oath to prove her innocence, which involves drinking the bathed water from the corpse or feeding on the same pounded yam used to feed the corpse for the purpose of his quick revenge on her. Thereafter, she will be made to sleep on bare floor and disallowed to take her bath; brush her teeth for upward of seven to nine days and within these days eat in unwashed and dented plates (IAC Nigeria 2000). As earlier said, there are variations in these practices. What makes the practice an undeniable oppression on the woman is that there are no widower hood rites. Even if a woman dies a day after marriage, it is never assumed that the husband could kill his wife. “Even in the midst of current experiences of husbands using wives for money rituals”, women are however the killers, not men. This is an abuse of womanhood.

No single volume such as this can exhaust all the inhuman treatments faced by women in heterosexual relationship. I do not subscribe to seeing every of such incident as an oppression, but somehow a “necessary evil”. Frankly speaking, relationship involves give and take from both parties. Some traditional practices are only offensive when health hazard is involved and also when it is one-sided.

Now, let us see what lesbian solution to the above enumerated problems would be. As the name implies, lesbian means a woman homosexual according to Chamber Dictionary. From the meaning of lesbian comes the solution, that woman must practice homosexuality as an escape from patriarchal intimate relationship. As they succinctly put it, women must live...

In a world devoid of male power and therefore sex roles, who you lived with, loved, slept with and were committed to would become irrelevant. All of us would be equal and have equal determination over the society and how it met our needs. Until these happen, how we use our sexuality and our bodies is just as relevant to our liberation as how we use our minds and our time (Jaggar 1983).

The institution of marriage to the lesbian feminists is the worst of social institutions that survive patriarchal relationship. Just listen to a lesbian:

I realised that when I was married, I was bought off. I had accepted being subservient, sexually available and keeper of his home in return for some degree of economic security and social acceptance. I had become a fat hen who gave up her freedom for regular corn (Jaggar 2003).

Lesbian feminists further stressed that since women's oppression is basically biological, "our liberation requires a biological revolution". They, therefore, urge women to forsake their biological role of raising children and enjoin the society to embrace artificial reproduction made possible by development in technology. This, they believe will ease the unrecognised burden of child bearing and thus enable womanhood to play their role in the society. Women, they say must be free to determine their own social roles. This would amount to dissolving the 'role system' in its biological aspects (Ibid). In ancient Greek, Plato expressed a similar view when he considered women as capable of being distributed into the various three categories — guardian, soldier and artisan as the composition of an ideal state. Plato holds that it is possible for women to function as much as men in the three segments of a state if and only if women are not crippled with birthing and raising children. All women need is a level play ground with equal access to education.

The question is, can lesbian feminists' agitation yield the desired freedom to African women? Differently put, can an African woman desert heterosexual relationship and shun her biological role of child bearing and yet be accorded a value? What value? We shall answer these questions shortly.

African Culture and the Suitability of Lesbian Feminism

Feminism as an ideology has permeated the walls of Africa as an ideology for social change. However, the question remains, will lesbian feminists' perspective promote African women status in all spheres of life? To answer this question, let us examine the place of marriage and heterosexual relationship in African culture.

It is frequently argued by scholars like Ali Mazuri, Chris Uroh and others that to say 'African

culture' is to over-generalise, since Africa is a continent with variations in culture. Though I do not intend to over-generalise, but I do know that certain concepts and traditional practices are generalisable in Africa. With this assumption, we may ask, what is African culture? Culture taking alone is here defined after Taylor (1872) as that:

Complex whole, which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, moral, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man (or woman) as a member of society.

From this definition, African culture could mean the totality of the existential activities of a people who are geographically defined within the continent called Africa.

In African culture, if an existential activity is paramount, it is the concept of marriage. For African people, marriage is the "focus of existence" says Mbiti (1969). Mbiti (1969) further stressed that:

Marriage is a drama in which everyone becomes an actor or actress and not just a spectator. Therefore, a marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. Otherwise, he who does not participate in it is a curse to the community, he is a rebel and law-breaker, he is not only abnormal but 'under-human'. Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person concerned has rejected society and society rejects him in return

Mbiti's view is corroborated by Okumagba, writing on Urhobo people of Nigeria, as he observes that "marriage is a social obligation which must be carried out by every young man" (Emiola 1997). This same belief permeates the lengths and breadth of African culture. This marriage is heterosexual; hence, homosexual is a taboo in the words of Mbiti.

Marriage in Africa is not needed for sexual pleasure as such; rather, the African man would frown at marriage for companionship (Lanre-Abbas 2008). "Marriage and procreation in African communities are a unity", says Mbiti (1969), without procreation, marriage is incomplete. Procreation is a means of which the individual contributes the seeds of life towards man's struggle against the loss of original immortality. For Mbiti, husband and wife are biologically reproduced in their children, thus perpetuating the chain of humanity.

From the above analysis, marriage and procreation are the bedrock of African culture as the end of human existence. The question again is, will lesbian feminists' perspective promote African women status in all spheres of life? It is frantically difficult, if not impossible for lesbian feminists perspective to yield the desired goal of women liberation in Africa. This is because for a woman to abandon heterosexual relationship, as well as shun her biological role of child bearing in Africa is to make herself a curse to the community, a rebel and a law-breaker, and abnormal and under-human. By her actions, she rejects society and society rejects her in return (Mbiti 1969).

The power to reproduce the human society is an exclusive power and responsibility of women assigned by nature through the gift of the womb. And this is where she derives her human value, since she can protest an unrecognition of her value. In fact, it is her major, if not only source of power, such that a withdrawal of same would expunge her from the stream of humans in a sense. Without reproduction, there is no other distinctive way women can make contributions to and affect the community of humans, it is an essential nature of women and its denial is contradictory. Dime (2004) describes the woman thus:

"The WOMAN means the WOMB of mankind; ... The ancients called the female WOMAN because she is the WOMB from which life emerges. She brings all life into existence and sustains it. All infants, after floating for nine or so months in the great WOMB ocean literally emerge.

Perhaps, it is this disposition that compels some lesbian feminists to raise children even without marriage. The fact remains that while a woman must play her roles as wife and mother, her human value must not be undermined. Underlying lesbian feminist agitation is a devaluation and play down of these roles by those who are supposed to accord them value. They complain that women become dependent on men for physical survival because of the weakness caused by child bearing. Even when pregnancy is not desired, women are expected to tend men's daily physical and emotional needs, just as they tend the needs of their children. They concluded, yet all of these are not valued (Jaggar 1981). Bisilliat (1983) holds a similar view when she asserts that:

A woman's only source of power lies in swelling the number of male-line, in bringing children into the world, in reproducing society. However, this infinite power, her only sources of esteem, the role of mother, is at the same time devalued in the male dominant ideology. She is capable of nothing but motherhood. Thus, what she is granted on one level is immediately taken away in another.

Although this is undeniably true, that patriarchal relationship sidelines womanhood in social reckoning, a withdrawal of some roles would not serve as a better option for liberation; any attempt to abandon this unique function of a wife/mother will further erode her human value and limit greatly her opportunity to protest her rights. As Onimhawo (1998) warned in his review of the book: *Authentic Dignity of the Nigerian Woman*; that African woman must be liberated but within acceptable limits. It has to be freedom with responsibility, so that the struggle would not become an exercise in self-contradiction.

Man according to Protagoras is the measure of all things, "those that are for that they are, and those that are not, for that they are not". We are in the age of value, women must prove themselves capable of both private and public life as Isiramen (1997) urges Nigerian women, as a way of deriving their authentic dignity. By so doing, men cannot but acknowledge and accord women the desired social recognition. The private and public affairs do not negate each other, but compliment. A liberated woman is one who is able to combine both successfully through the instrument of education.

CONCLUSION

That feminism has permeated the walls of Africa cannot be denied. It is because African culture is compatible with the ideology as a social change which must recognise however, the limit of culture. This disposition necessitated the urge to scrutinise the ever-growing trends in feminism against any outrageous solution(s) that may be counter-productive to African women in their struggle for freedom. In this regard, the trend that came under consideration is the radical lesbian feminists' perspective. The paper haven carefully examined lesbian feminists solutions to women oppression in heterosexual relationship, submits that the solution

cannot yield its desired goal in Africa given the place of marriage and child bearing. An average African would condemn out rightly the idea of artificial means of reproduction like the test tube baby, human cloning and the rest. Worthy of note is that African woman's capability to perform successfully the roles of a wife/mother and at the same time participates in the public sphere will accord her, her human value and social recognition. In this regard, the health hazards involved in dehumanising treatments faced by women in marital intimacy in the name of tradition, like forced motherhood, widowhood rites, wife battering, etc, would disappear one day through committed and dialectical enlightenment. African women would do themselves a favour if they don't pretentiously embrace radical lesbian feminists' perspective as a solution to women achieving freedom in the supposition of cultural dynamism in Africa.

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