

Overview of Feminism from Global Perspective

by

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Abstract

Feminism has called for multi-dimensional views globally operating under different theoretical frameworks with the aim of developing a better understanding of the conditions that underwrite power relationships between men and women across different societies. This paper aims to give an overview of what feminism entails, patriarchal culture and its effects on women and feminism and its relationship to gender power within the socio-cultural context of women writers. Through textual research, the author of this paper examines the interrelations of feminist theory, language and gender which have generated lots of controversies amongst different writers. Therefore, while this paper explores the historical perspective of the feminist theory, its relevance and development among women of different societies, it concludes that irrespective of culture and race, feminism shares the same global view which helps a woman become the knowing self.

Introduction

Since the 1970s, feminism has offered theoretical frameworks upon which women's role and position in the society has been explored from various perspectives such as socio-cultural, historio-political, linguistic and ethnic. All of these perspectives have factored strongly in developing a better understanding of gender relationships and social (in) equalities in western and non-western societies which has partly been influenced by psychoanalytical theory.

The word feminism is often misunderstood and has been defined by different scholars in a way that suits the situation in which it is being used. There is a popular myth on the ground that feminism implies anti-male attitudes and radical acts of protest. However, as Woods (2003), Baumgartner and Richard (2000) have already recognised, if defined as a movement for social, political and economic equality of both women and men, 71% of men agree with the principles of the feminist movement. This shows that majority of men are pro-feminist and the popular misunderstanding of western feminism lies with theory rather than the movement's actual goals, values and achievements. Baumgartner and Richard (2000, p. 50, 54) assert that feminism (is) a word that describes a social justice movement for equality and human liberation. "By feminists we mean each and every politically and socially conscious woman or man who works for equality

within or outside the movement". According to these two, feminism opposes oppression of any woman, man, lesbian, gay, the elderly people, child and so on. Similarly, Woods (2003, p.5) identifies feminism as an active commitment to equality and respect for life. While Wood believes that not only does feminism seek to respect women, it respects the earth and all human and non-human forms of life. Rowbotham (1992) observes that feminism should be viewed as a concept that studies an image of woman in the male dominated society, with a view to advocating equal treatment of women to men and, ultimately, cultural change. Rowbotham's view describes the function of feminism in literary studies where the issue of masculine literary history is addressed by the re-examination of the male texts that does not show patriarchal ideologies prevailing over the way women are represented.

Hollows, (2000, p.3) defines feminism as a form of politics which aims to intervene in, and transform the unequal power relations between men and women. Expounding upon this, Ramazanoglu (1989, p.8) offered a tentative definition of feminism as 'various social theories which explain the relations between the sexes in the society and the differences between women and men's experiences' theories 'which are also a political practice'. Tentatively because the definition might change at any given period of time to include more of the female issues from different point of view, continent, class, race and sexuality, this explains the prospective inclusion of the invisible women been addressed.

However, today's feminism is not only identified as a political discourse, but as a movement that involves economic, sociological, cultural theories and philosophies which are concerned with the issue of gender differences. These theories and philosophies advocate equality for women; campaign for women's rights and women's interests in the society. This highlights Hogelands' (1998) view of seeing feminism as a kind of literacy, a way of reading both texts and everyday life from a particular stance. As a movement, feminism has not only altered predominant perspectives in a wide range of cultural areas especially in the western society that varies from different cultures to laws, it has revealed the politics of men and women as a collective act. This shows the extent at which sexist stances are to men's advantage and are used to reinforce male power over women. Nussbawn (1991, p.19) identifies that:

feminist theory has been understood by theorists as not just fancy words on paper, theory is connected to proposals for social change. Thus feminist scholars have engaged in many concrete projects: the reform of rape law, winning attention and legal redress for the

problems of domestic violence and sexual harassment, improving women's economic opportunities, working conditions and education, winning pregnancy benefits for female workers, campaigning against the trafficking of women and girls in prostitution, working for the social and political equality of lesbians and gay men.

Nussbawn sees feminism as a theory that has given women a sense of self identity within the patriarchal system whereby their othering, emotional, irrational, weakness and fragility are replaced with reason, strength, discipline and independence through some changes made to the socio-cultural laws. To simplify Nussbawn's observation of feminism, Walker (1992) recognises that the history of feminism can be divided into three waves which encompasses different commitments at each wave. Walker identifies the first wave as the study of women in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the second wave as the 1960s and 1970s, while the third wave extends from 1990s to the present day. All of these identified waves are movements from which feminist theory has been framed. Feminist theory therefore is the extension of feminism into theoretical or philosophical discourse which aims to understand and analyse the nature of gender inequality. This theory explores women's roles and experiences through art history and contemporary art, women's aesthetics, discrimination against women, stereotyping, sexual objectification, and oppression within patriarchal framework.

Feminism in Waves

The first wave feminism refers mainly to women's suffrage movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in the United Kingdom and United States of America. Originally this period of women struggle focused on the promotion of equal contact and property rights for women and the opposition to chattel marriage. This involves the husband owing his wife and children of their union in a legal relationship similar to that of slavery. By the end of the nineteenth century, this movement went further to focus on the right of women's suffrage also called political franchise, giving women the right to vote. By 1918, the suffragists' campaign became successful, the Representation of the People Act 1918 was passed that granted women over thirty years of age to own houses and in 1928, and the vote was extended to all women over twenty-one. American first wave feminism led to amendment of the constitution in 1919 granting women the right to vote in all states. Woods (2003) records that some cultural feminists gave speeches arguing that women should be allowed to vote because it would curb the

corruption of political life. Women's moral virtue, they claimed would reform the political world that had been debased by the control of immoral men. This rhetorical strategy eventually carried women to victory in their struggle to gain political franchise.

While feminists such as Maltida Josly Gage (1826–1898) lobbied for this franchise, feminists such as Voltairine de Cleyre (1866–1912) and Margaret Sanger (1879–1966) were actively campaigning for women's sexual, reproductive and economic rights. Faludi (1993) views that the first wave feminism was coined retrospectively after the term second wave began to be used in describing more recent feminist movement that focused as much on fighting social and cultural inequalities as political inequalities.

Second wave feminism refers to the theories that emerged in the United States between 1990 and 1995. It has often been suggested that it followed from the earlier phase of feminism involving the suffragettes in the United Kingdom and United States of America where movements sprung from different sources, pursued different goals and used distinct rhetorical strategies to achieve its aims and objectives. Second wave feminists like Estelle Freedman and Carol Hanish encouraged women to see their personal lives as deeply politicised, reflecting sexist power structures. Owing to the belief that the 'personal is political', what had previously appeared to be individual, private problems that an individual woman endured in isolation was now recognised as shared by women in any patriarchal society. This group of feminists distinguished between the public realm of politics and the private realm of the family whereby the feminists saw the family as avenue of oppression to womanhood. Weedon (1987) observes that once women began to recognise common problems and experiences, they used that insight to challenge existing ways of understanding the world which did not fit with their experience of it. The feminists of this wave discovered their experiences as women who were similar and saw the great importance in 'sisterhood' to share their commonalities.

Feminism and Sisterhood

Sisterhood is explored by Mitchell and Oakley (1986) that most of these women had previously seen themselves as not only isolated from other women, but also as being in competition with them. They began to assert their identification with one another and claim through the idea of sisterhood, a collective strength embodied in the notion of 'sisterhood is powerful'. This is a phrase coined by Kathie Sarachid in 1968 but was popularised in Morgan (1970) book. Although this phrase is

common in the writings of the classified radical feminists', it explored more of the rage of the women towards the men. According to Simmond (1997, p.21), sisterhood as a feminist principle has been based on commonality between women:

While feminists of the second wave, such as Robin Morgan, used the Symbolism of sisterhood, of belonging to womanhood, as a way of articulating an urgent message for constructing global feminism based on personal and political alliances between women. The idea was powerful and seductive.

Simmond's view does not recognise the politics of the movement which raised many questions than it could answer. She identifies Roof's (1995) argument about sisterhood that it simultaneously presents the motive for feminist action and helps to publicise the female oppression in their societies. However, the unification of different women into a single sisterly protagonist positioned against a figurative father tends to complete the erasure of positional differences among women (and all issues relating to position). This further raises the question of women and marriage. If men and marriage were female oppressors, why get married and if married, divorce became an available option. Also, other women who still loved their husbands and children were cut in the web of how to love self above husband or children. This shows that women should not see marriage as a do or die affair, marriage is better enjoyed than endured.

Some other feminists see sisterhood as commitment. For example, Klein and Hawthorne (1999, p.57) observation that "sisterhood does not mean that every woman should like, love or commit to every other woman without critical engagement. What it does mean is that we respect, support and encourage women's efforts to achieve freedom globally, we work to further the interests of women as a diverse group and we work with women in our own fields when this is possible". These two writers believe that sisterhood is an act of solidarity, sisterly affection, sorority, unity and friendship that aimed to put an end to vulnerability and internalised oppression amongst women in their respective societies.

While feminists embrace sisterhood as a term of solidarity, Rozelle (1995) points out that the slave experience is the beginning of sisterhood and brotherhood amongst the blacks. She analyses her view about the blacks being bastardised, raped and fragmented from their families which led to the creation of other form of familial association. Rozelle sees this as a political act and that feminists appropriated the term sisterhood from black experience, from their participation in Civil Right Movement with the black experience.

Similar to Rozelle's assertion above, Oyewunmi (2001) questions the acceptability of sisterhood as a global concept. She questions why sisterhood is chosen as the basis of feminist allegiances which points that there is nothing inherent in the concept to describe interracial, cross-cultural or any social relationships. She notices that sisterhood emerged as the dominant model for feminist intercommunity relations. A term of political solidarity, "sisterhood" speaks women's activism. The meaning it carries for its initiators is of shared oppression, common victimisation, community of interests, solidarity and collective activism. Thus, she summarised that sisterhood is a metaphor, denoting a collectivity of experiences, and it operates at a more abstract and generalized level than the term "sister" and "brother" amongst black Americans, which are most often used on a personalised direct individual communication basis. This shows a reciprocal recognition and affirmation amongst women where they share a sense of mutual respect.

Unlike feminism which has created a lot of controversies and use of alternative terms, sisterhood has not generated any other term of political solidarity. Rather, some of the African American feminists have identified its inadequacies some which included arrogance, sentiments and dispositions amongst the white middle class women who engaged in it. Lorde (1984) writes about the "Sister Outsider" as an oxymoron phrase which suggests to the reader that the problem is not really with concept of sisterhood, but the way it has been used in the women's movement that does not allow flexibility. Another work that analyses the false sisterhood is by a black feminist, Hooks (1995, p.296) where she identifies that:

Sisterhood became yet another shield against reality, another support system. Their (white feminists') version of sisterhood was informed by racist and classist assumptions about white womanhood, that the white "lady" (that is to say the bourgeois woman) should be protected from all that might upset or discomfort her and shielded from negative realities that might lead to confrontation.

Hooks shows that white feminists did not incorporate self-transformation in their view of sisterhood in order to establish a more inclusive solidarity amongst other women. This reveals how the white middle class feminists had benefited from the concept of sisterhood at the expense of the other women. However, she concluded that sisterhood is possible amongst women of different races and cultural background but only with continuous fight against any form of division, especially racism. This entails that sisterhood involves a sense of sympathy, drawing other women nearer to one's self emotionally and identifying with their plights. According to Hooks, she

believes that the concept of sisterhood has an obvious problem of taking political solidarity with levity rather than a goal to be achieved. Hooks' perspective of sisterhood is identified by Spivak's (1988) coinage as "Strategic Essentialism" which is a major form of post-colonial theory. This is a strategy that nationalities, ethnic groups or minority groups can use to present themselves without compromising their strong differences. Thus, it helps to achieve certain goals that seem impossible in relation to dented identities of inferiorities and dominant mode of public and private representation rather than being seen as a metaphor or an abstract concept.

In line with Hooks' view, many of these feminists were no longer interested with simply expressing their experiences as an individual, but tried to present their experiences in a coordinated account as a group of women with common situations.

Feminism and Patriarchy

Patriarchy became another useful concept in exploring and explaining the oppression of women. The term patriarchy has been used since the late nineteenth and early twentieth century which is the rule, dominance and authorities of the fathers within the family and society. While this group of women found different causes and characteristics of patriarchy, many of them shared the idea that patriarchy still remains the strong cause of oppression against women. Ramazanoglu (1989, p.33) identifies that the theories of patriarchy are implicitly or explicitly theories which explain the creation and maintenance of man's social, ideological, sexual, political and economic dominance. The maintenance of these patriarchal elements highlights the inferiority and second class difference of the female gender whereby patriarchy is seen as an unjust oppressive social system. Such social system present women as morally, intellectually and physically inferior to men since it limits women's ability to reproduction and domesticity.

However, feminism has helped women of different races negotiate such patriarchal system. Osita (2012, p. 203) sees feminism as a 20th century, social realistic literary theory and criticism committed to the struggle against patriarchy and sexism. This reiterates the belief that the root of women's social oppression can be traced to a societal system that is mainly and mostly male dominated. Many of the women writers believe that the concept of patriarchy was needed to explain what seemed to be the universal oppression of women. Historically, many critics agree that neither feminism nor sisterhood alone could recognise the different priorities that women had within a patriarchal society. These concepts were not all inclusive as it claimed to be since women have different backgrounds. This became

clear as women discovered they did not share the same experiences and were subject to different forms of oppression, but they could still see a universal application of patriarchy as a form of oppression. This explains why the black women saw class and race respectively as their own form of oppression rather than the sexuality and gender that existed within the western and the African-American views. Genovese (1991) notices that the white middle class feminists proclaim sisterhood belong to all women by fighting for equality with middle class men. Meanwhile, the middle-class women ignorantly strengthen class lines by pushing lower class and minority women, singly or together with their men, further down the socio economic scales.

Hudson-Weems (1993) recognises another form of sisterly bond amongst women which she agrees should be reciprocal in its operation. She sees this bond as an opportunity where the individuals involve give and receive equally. Hudson-Weems' perspective is that these women are joined emotionally, as they embody empathetic understanding of each other's shared experiences. The concept of sisterhood became recognised amongst the black feminists. This is observed by Bobo and Seiter (1997) who are of the view that the emphasis of sisterhood is less universal and also seems to be an abstract notion inherited from the second wave feminism. In black feminism, the emphasis and relevance is more grounded on mutual support necessary for the existence and survival of black women in the white society that leaves them with no substitute for sisterhood. This creates a sense of closeness, interaction and connection amongst this group of women who yearn for change. Hooks (1995, p.138) affirms that the perception of identity politics was the second wave feminist first mistake. She sees that '[w]omen do not need to eradicate difference to feel solidarity. Hooks sees this as a form of restriction to the feminist movement politics which was another means of alienating women. Pilcher and Whelehan (2004) see that the utopian vision of sisterhood as a way of bringing women together under the same political banner was responsible for the burgeoning interest in feminism.

As these women fought for individual identity in relation to their different backgrounds, feminist identity also became a widespread conflict amongst them. Feminists at all levels recognise their sense of loss in various ways as they try to negotiate with the larger societies. This is identified further by Kristeva (1982) as the three-stage model of feminism. The first stage she identifies dealt with women demanding equality with men (the liberal feminist idea). The second stage focused on the reinterpretation of difference so that women's own activities would gain social value even though they were different from men's (radical feminist idea).

The third stage is referred to as the Utopian stage where she puts forward a situation of transcending gender divisions altogether. She agrees that male/female difference would not disappear, but it would become socially insignificant. This third stage becomes a significant part of the study as it criticises the difference approach that treat gender as a socio-cultural conditioning or as fixed and immutable.

Feminism and Gender

Kristeva's observation corresponds with Beauvoir (1952, p.295) identification that "one is not born but rather becomes, a woman". While these feminists acknowledge that gender differences are set in hierarchical opposition, their view of how masculine tradition is favoured above the feminine tradition is depicted in their quest to see gender as unfunctional. For Oakley and Mitchell (1997), the conceptualisation of gender is the key cornerstone of second wave feminism and its major strength. The second wave feminists expose the fact that masculinity is not being valued unless being performed by a biological male and so is femininity. Disciplines like psychology, medicine and linguistics study do approach gender in different ways. Gender is determined by the socio-cultural expectation that is attributed to individual females or males. Like any other theory, gender theory has been faced with lots of criticisms. While some researchers see it as a synonym for women, Nathanson and Young (2001) identify that gender studies as a discipline publicly limits the nature of the female gender as a social construct. This is because both genders are constructs created through social conditioning. Nathanson and Young see it as a way of discriminating against women in the society but ironically they have based their studies on moral arguments.

Contrary to their argument, there are works that have dealt with masculinity and masculinism under the gender studies but have been neglected by them. The study of how gender manifests in language is not a new field to the feminist sociolinguists since the 1960s. Considering the works of sociolinguistic theorists like Robin Lakoff, Dale Spender, Deborah Cameron, Jennifer Coates, Deborah Tannen, Ann Weatherall, Julia T. Wood amongst others, their works on gender and women's language has greatly influenced feminist theory and the understanding of women in relation to language. This shows the use of language as a major assignment of sociolinguists who see language as a means through which individual becomes a social being. While this paper sees the theory of language, gender politics and cultural politics as being interwoven, the three remain unresolved by feminist scholars and researchers who question the societal representation of femininity.

The issue of sexualisation and engendering has to be taken into account in order to understand the socio-cultural importance in the history of gender. This helps to answer the feminist question of how sociolinguistic theory interlinks with the social forms of gender oppression through the psychological experiences of women. From the feminist sociolinguistic perspective of language, the nature, origins and usages are examined with the women users in mind which helps to observe the relationship between the language user and the language itself, history and politics behind the language. The observations that language is influenced by culture and tradition are important issues that have led to many researches which have not ignored cultural theory. Thus, cultural theory sees to the heuristic concepts of culture; it concentrates on how a particular phenomenon relates to matters of ideology, nationality, social class, ethnicity and gender.

Culture, as examined by women writers such as Zulu Sofola, Efua T. Sutherland, Tess Onwueme, Irene Salami, Julie Okoh amongst many others establish the inequalities between the sexes and gives the males greater values than the female ones. This is explained further by Okoh (2003) that as society developed; gender discriminations were institutionalised and reinforced by traditions and religious dogma, until they become part of our cultural heritage. Such gender discrimination lends credence to the cultural values as coercive, oppressive, enslaving and dehumanising to femalehood, although it claims to command obligations and respects that create a good society at the expense of women. Exclusively, the interest at this point is the female gender, her language and her identity. Through the cultural understanding of gender, it is clear that female identity is based on the social subordination of women and the cultural devaluation of feminine qualities. These are often determined by linguistics, environment and pressures towards feminine compliance.

As a theoretical engagement, feminism has helped women to become the knowing subjects different from the knowing objects that they are always regarded as in the socio-cultural societies which shows some level of aesthetic of assertiveness in the way women have engaged with the theory. This invariably creates a sense of knowledge that encourages women to write their own stories from their own perspective in their own language no matter where they come from. The American critic, Showalter (1978, P. 14) observes in her prominent contribution to the transformation of critical approaches to women's writings that women's different lives and duties necessarily produce different content in their literary work, and that there are enough features in common to formulate a specific tradition. She goes further to argue that when people look at women

writers collectively, people can see imaginative continuation, the recurrence of certain patterns, themes, problems and images from generation to generation. Taking into account Showalter's observation, the women writers are able to identify stereotypes of women which are often used to re-analyse the restricted socio-cultural representations of women's oppression and how they either fall victim of or are able to resist such oppressions. These women's writings have encouraged their engagements with cultural, psychic, aesthetic and social elements of in/visibility in literature at different levels which corresponds to Todd's (1980, p.15) response to the recuperations of eighteenth century feminism that:

If 'feminism', in a 1970s sense, claims absolute equality of the sexes and complex identification of roles, then no woman in the eighteenth-century England advocated it; if it implies equal opportunity, then probably only Mary Wollstonecraft, who female politicians while extolling motherhood, might qualify. But if a feminist is one who is aware of female problems and is angry or mildly irritated at the female predicament, then almost every woman writer and many men could claim the title.

Todd's observation calls for the analysis of critical and non-critical view of women's writings whereby readers deduce the politically relevant and consciousness-raising pieces of information from the critical readings. As these women writers present themselves as narrators, observers and mediators in treating the female issues, they become actively involved in the recreation of the female gender and in the narrative of emancipation in which knowledge is celebrated as a means of liberation. Showalter is able to bring out the female literary tradition, the female creativity and the psycho-dynamics involved in female writings which project more on women writers investigating their situations within the patriarchal societies through their language. This reflects Jane Flax's claim in *Postmodernism and Gender Relations in Feminist Theory* (1990) that postmodernism and feminism share scepticism about knowledge, truth, language and the self. Flax argument furthers the questioning of some andocentric beliefs about women's inferiority position and their use of language which reveals that the problem of women was not only in sexual view but a problem of being accepted in the public domain.

Conclusion

It is noted that feminism is not a monolithic affair. Thus, feminism questions women's situation and their ill-treatment in the society that makes women unable to communicate with each other. Also, feminism has drastically reduced the

subjugated traditional portrayal of women as domestically bounded and the usual second class citizens, thereby making women the knowing subjects and not the silenced objects. With varieties of women's writings, feminism has encouraged their engagements with cultural, political, religious, financial, historical aesthetic and social elements of in/visibility in literature at different levels. Whorf (1976) identifies the function of language within a gendered society that language is not neutral. It is not merely a vehicle which carries ideas, but rather a shaper of those ideas. In other words, people are defined through the way they live their gendered situations in the society which shows that gender is deeply ingrained in the social system, in the understanding of self and others within the communication domain. However, many of the women writers create scenarios which portray active engagement with women in the patriarchal cultural frameworks; women who seek freedom and equality, and women who dare to enter into the public sphere with their use of fluid, flexible and versatile language.

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