

## WHY WOMANISM?

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### ABSTRACT

This is a query that has been solicited by countless feminists. Is feminism not adequate for every single woman all over the world? Why do women of color keep clamouring that feminism is not the answer for all their requirements, dilemma, and predicament and principally for their voices to be heard? Isn't black feminism the required quota for the African American women? Why did Alice Walker come out with this beautiful concept of 'Womanism'? These are some valid questions that have infuriated the minds of many feminists who believe and discriminatorily judge that the black woman to be already liberated and in no need of emancipation.

**KEYWORDS:** Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment, Womanism, Women and Feminism

### INTRODUCTION

The response is what this paper aims to give. Feminism has varied definitions. Started with the true idea of uplifting the women from their second class citizenship status around two hundred years ago, it has grown extensively and mottled and like an octopus tries to grasp at so many things at the same time and engulf the women with diverse ideas of liberation and freedom from their daily drudgery.

Bell hooks is frequently cited by feminists as having provided the best solution to the difficulty of defining something as diverse as "feminism", addressing the problem that if feminism can mean everything, it means nothing. She asserts an answer to the question "what is feminism?" that she says is "rooted in neither fear nor fantasy... Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression'. Pearl Cleage defines feminism as "the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities – intellectual, political, social, sexual, spiritual and economic... Patricia Collins in her well defined book *Black Feminist Thought* comments that 'being a biological female does not mean that one's ideas are automatically feminist. Self-conscious struggle is needed in order to reject patriarchal perceptions of women and to value women's ideas and actions.' She also asserts that it is commonly considered that becoming a feminist is a process of transformation and of struggle to develop new interpretations of familiar realities (27).

There are so many divisions in feminism that we cannot even begin from the basic idea that all women are equal and yet face multiple forms of oppression. We find different offshoots which privilege their experience over that of another and then claim that they can judge how other women live their lives. We have radical feminists, third wave feminists, eco-feminists, Marxist feminists who have their own ideologies. When we analyze the different social-justice movements across the western world, they all seem to have one thing in common, they are led by whiteness. These movements claim that they strive for equality, the racial dynamics are positioned in such a way as 'to reaffirm dissonance in worth and value'. It also stresses the fact that 'whiteness is not only naturally fit to lead but also ordained to do so'. (Renee) Whiteness does not necessarily want to eradicate the women of colour, but it certainly wants a submissive class that it can exploit at will. The media also actively promotes whiteness.

The organized movement of feminism is a significant venture that was begun by women in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries to undermine the oppression of women by men. Karen Offen (1988) states that 'feminism' as a term began to be used as a synonym to women's emancipation only by the 1880s. It was the woman's sufferer gate advocate Hubert Auclert who first described herself as a 'feminist' in her periodical *La Citoyenne* in 1882. Accurately pin pointing the meaning, one can definitely say that the main agenda of feminism from its birth was to change the existing power relations between women and men in society. The gathering feminist movement also very much disagreed, and argued that women's writing expressed a distinctive female consciousness, which was more discursive and conjunctive than its male counterpart. Such consciousness was radically different, and had been adversely treated. Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* documented the ways "Legislators, priests, philosophers, writers and scientists have striven to show that the subordinate position of women is willed in heaven and advantageous on earth." (Feminine perspectives)

Phallic reading characterized the first stage of feminist criticism, but Gynocriticism or the study of women's writing characterizes the second stage of feminist criticism. Writers like Annis Pratt, Elaine Showalter, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar unearthed the neglected women writers and gave a profile to the tradition of women's literature. They found a need to replace masculinist values with a new form of criticism and Josephine Donovan's *Feminist Literary Criticism* addresses this issue. Adrienne Rich's *The Dream of a Common Language* and Tillie Olsen's *Silences* expressed a need to explore a separate, distinctive women's language and to establish a body of literary criticism. (48) Showalter developed her ideas of feminist literary criticism in her works *Towards a Feminist Politics* and *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* in which she focuses on the woman reader and the woman writer. She talks about four models of gender difference – biological, linguistic, psychological and cultural. She maintained that these would be the concern of a gyno-centric model of feminist criticism. Showalter coined the term 'gynocritics' to describe literary criticism based in a feminine perspective. Elaine Showalter coined this term in her essay "Toward a Feminist Poetics." It refers to a criticism that constructs "a female framework for the analysis of women's literature, to develop new models based on the study of female experience, rather than to adapt male models and theories"(Gorden). Her model is in line with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. Gynocriticism is the study of feminist literature written by female writers inclusive of the interrogation of female authorship, images, the feminine experience and ideology, and the history and development of the female literary tradition. During the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries respectively, Virginia Woolf and Simone de Beauvoir began to review and evaluate the female image and sexism in the works of male writers. During the nineteenth sixties the feminist movement saw a reaction and opposition to the male oriented discourse of previous years. Most thoroughly developed during the late seventies and early eighties, Gynocriticism was a result of the interrogative critiques utilized in post-structuralism and psychoanalysis.

Five years later the debate had moved on to gender theory, from exclusively feminine concerns to the wider issues of gender in social and cultural contexts. As Althusser had tried patriarchy and capitalism should be examined more closely, and sophisticated models built to integrate the larger web of economics, education, division of labour, biological constraints and cultural assumptions. Michèle Barrett demanded facts, research. How does gender stereotyping arise in various social contexts? How are the canons of literary excellence actually established? What is the practical effect on literature? Shouldn't we remember that attitudes are struck within a fictional framework, and can't be simply pulled out and convicted by a kangaroo court of feminist morals? Literature will often reflect the cultural assumptions and attitudes of its period, and that of course includes attitudes towards women: their status, their roles, their expectations. But a literature doctored of male-orientated views would be failing in its first requirement, to present a realistic or convincing picture of the world. Moralizing, which includes political correctness, has its dangers. Feminists have argued for positive

discrimination as the only way to correct centuries of bias. Nonetheless, the consensus emerging among black Americans is that positive discrimination is counter-productive. Disadvantaged minorities desperately need the odds levelled, but not patronizingly tilted in their favour.

In the 80's and the 90's feminist criticism evolved into a more multi voiced critique. Cora Kaplan's Pandora Box advocates the idea of assimilating the two different models found in Charlotte Bronte's *Villette* which is psychoanalytic and Judith Newton's socio-feminist model to form a third reading where women's literary sexuality as a displaced representation of experience can stand for instabilities both of class and gender. *The Madwoman in the Attic* by Gilbert and Gubar also dwelt on interwoven discourses. Like Kate Millet's *Sexual Politics*, *The Madwoman in the Attic* used the andocentric paradigm. Gynocriticism is the historical study of women writers as a distinct literary tradition. (Friedman 18)

Radical feminists want to create woman-only communities to embrace androgyny. Famous postmodern feminists who have been instrumental in the establishment of postmodern feminism as a philosophy are Helene Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Shulamith Stone and Julia Kristeva. They have based their concepts on the structure of language and also for the need of language to be restructured to include the writings of women which should not be considered as scribbling, jotting down, interrupted by life's demands. The major critique of postmodernism is that there are varying viewpoints within this theoretical framework. Helene Cixous believed that men's writing is filled with binary oppositions but women's writing is scribbling, jotting down, interrupted by life's demand. Her ideas is that the development of women writers will improve when the rules governing the language and ultimately the thinking process and the structure of the thinking process.

Lucy Irigaray whose primary focus is to liberate women from men's philosophies, including the ones of Derrida and Lucan, is a psychoanalyst. Irigaray feels that the western world will never abandon Freud and feels that women can redeem themselves from something better than 'waste' by creating a gender free language; engage in lesbian and autoerotic practice and mime the mimes men have imposed on women. "If women only exist as images in men's eyes then women should take those images and reflect them back to men in magnified proportions" (Tong, 228) Feminist discourse shares many similarities with post-colonial theory and for this reason the two fields have long been thought of as associative, even complimentary. Firstly, both discourses are primarily political and concern themselves with the struggle against domination and prejudice. Moreover, both discard the established hierarchical, patriarchal system, which is dominated by the hegemonic white male, and passionately deny the supposed supremacy of masculine power and authority. Imperialism, like patriarchy, is after all a phallogocentric, supremacist ideology that subdues and dominates its subjects. The oppressed woman is in this sense parallel to the colonized subject. Fundamentally, exponents of post-colonialism are reacting against colonialism in the political and economic sense while feminist theorists are rejecting colonialism of a sexual nature.

Postcolonial feminism objects to the use of the term 'woman' as a universal group, for they are then only defined by their gender and not by social classes and ethnic identities. Postcolonial feminism, often referred to as Third World feminism, is a form of feminist philosophy which centers around the idea that racism, colonialism, and the long lasting economic, political, and cultural effects of colonialism in the postcolonial setting, are inextricably bound up with the unique gendered realities of non-white, and non-Western women. Postcolonial feminists criticize Western feminists because they have a history of universalizing women's issues, and their discourses are often misunderstood to represent women globally.

In their famous book, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post Colonial Literatures*, the Australian triad Bill Ashcroft et al. point to ostensible conjunctures between post colonialism and feminism. They say that both discourses "seek to recuperate the marginalized and to decenter the hegemonic". Chandra Talpade Mohanty and Spivak

consider the majority of white feminism as colonialist because as, Mohanty argues it assumes Europe/ Euro-America as a 'primary referent in theory and praxis'. Gayatri affirms that white feminism "mutes" the third world woman through an imperialist subject-constitution and 'a ferocious standardizing benevolence' (Subaltern, 294 - 95) The tension between western and non-western feminisms is complex and deeply rooted in 'an abrasive mutual contestation' (Sulari, 760).

Bell hooks and Adrienne Rich maintain that women's writing entails a revision and looking back in search of new perspectives. Alice Walker's classical search for our mothers' gardens has become an aspect of Black women's manifesto. The importance of ethnocentric values is being emphasized not to heighten the binaries but to decentre feminism, deconstruct existing partiality, and reconstruct an innovative ideology that bridges the gulf that exists across the imperial wide. 'Writing becomes a tool of self-liberation, self-preservation and self-healing' (Kolawole, 18). Modern African women and African American women who are actively speaking for other women do not necessarily take a cue from the West. They were motivated by traditional African oral literature and historic powerful women like Aidoo, Nwapa, Njau, Sofola, Zora Neale Hurston etc. Many agree that the West cannot speak for Africa or the African Americans (Kolawole, 17- 21).

It is this consciousness that has impelled many African and African American women to search for alternatives. The quest for a different terminology that would address the African American specificity and yearning more adequately as opposed to an imposed or dogmatic position is a wholesome one. Ogundipe – Leslie's expression 'recreating ourselves' fits in well in this situation. 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. Even a radical like Ogundipe- Leslie recognizes the possibility of taking feminism as an initiative nomenclature that may be seen as something imposed on African women. New terms permit the Africans and African Americans to talk about the requirements of their women today in the tradition of the spaces and strategies provided in their indigenous cultures for the social being of women. New terms accommodate diversities through a dialogic standpoint.

The introduction of "Womanism" in the feminist lexicon in the early 1980s inscribes a celebrated instant in feminist engagement in the United States. The late 1970s and 1980s witnessed an inner revolution in feminism led by women of colour who participated in fighting against sexual politics of the earlier decade only to be confronted by the feminist politics of exclusion a decade later. The women of colour were excluded and alienated by feminists theorizing and thinking. Activism by women is often labeled by the terms feminism and womanism. In an earnest attempt to be inclusive when one writes about activism most often it is written as feminists/womanists. This proves that women of colour have to a certain degree separated themselves and have taken the label of womanists because of the history of racism within the feminist movement.

Barbara Smith in her article "Toward a Black Feminist Criticism" forcefully speaks about how the African Americans were denied education and also the chances of leading a decent human life. She also unveils how Walker discloses how the political, economic and social restrictions of slavery and racism have historically stunted the creative lives of black women. Barbara Smith feels that a 'viable, autonomous black feminist movement' in America would definitely 'open up the space needed for the exploration of black women's lives and also the 'creation of consciously black woman-identified art'. (4)

In her essay entitled, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" Chandra Mohanty studies the political implications of western feminist scholarship. She argues that feminist authorship is "inscribed within relations of power" that place Western theory and the "Third World" women it is imposed upon, at polar ends of the

spectrum. The west is considered superior and as the sole dispenser of scientific knowledge and scholarship and is placed at the height of intellectual analysis while the developing nations are considered “politically immature” and under developed. She also asserts that the western feminist scholarship has created the context of binaries – west versus the third world “other” and specifically, Western feminism versus the Third World female.

Mohanty has identified several inadequacies in the western feminism. Feminist theory is itself described as a western phenomenon, and the issues that are relevant to them are assumed to be universally applicable. The white middle class feminists of the West tend to project their own gender dynamics onto the nations of the Third world and women of colour portraying male to female relationships as dichotomous or adversarial despite local gender relations and cultural specificities. Mohanty like Alice Walker and Toni Morrison reiterates the importance of discussing the lives of women within specific contexts. She believes that feminists need to examine the particularities of the structures that exist rather than applying their own biased conclusions to them. Clenora Hudson – Weems, author of *Africana Womanism*, discusses the pitfalls of mimicry and addresses the “need to avoid tagging African women’s agenda onto white feminist values” (Koawole, 25)

Higginbotham suggests that such marginalization is evidently expressed in two different ways: women of colour are introduced as mere tangents to a generic white womanhood, or they are introduced as “exceptional” models for admiration. In both ways, theories, paradigms, and dominant discourses always lean towards the white women, whose social realities are positioned as if they represented the “totality of women’s world” (Reid, 134). Cultures are not discrete phenomena, and hybridity is always an ongoing process (Huddart, 7). Hence it can be understood why there is the rise of an exclusive concept, which has been named womanism. According to Walker, Womanism does not emphasize or privilege gender or sexism; rather it elevates the sites and forms of oppression. Since being named, womanism has spawned both passionate affiliation and debate. Scholars in Theology, literature, history, and in fields as diverse as film and theatre studies, psychology, education, anthropology, communication, nursing etc have explored the implications of womanism in their disciplines. The womanist frame has been applied more frequently than it has been written about. More people have applied womanism than have described it. This once again affirms the distinctiveness and incommensurability of womanism vis-à-vis other perspectives with which it might be confused and conflated. On the positive side, this state of affairs has preserved the open-ended, polyvalent, polyvocal, dialogue noncentralized, and the improvisational character of womanism. Layli Philip has a totally unique perspective of Womanism.

One can see that the seeds of womanism were sown by the early black feminists like Sojourner Truth and the reaping done by Alice Walker. Weakness, Sojourner Truth seems to say, is no option when there is no one who will catch you. Pragmatism, Alice Walker reassures us, will see you through. Sojourner Truth and Alice Walker speak with an unperturbed and honest voice, the resolve, and the attitude of equanimity behind each of them. They seem to reflect ‘the timeless reality of the lives of black women in the United States’. Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman” concisely brings out some of the differences in the experiences of black and white women. Denied formal education, nineteenth-century Black feminist activist Sojourner Truth is not typically seen as an intellectual according to Collins. Yet her speech in 1851 at an Akron, Ohio, women’s right convention provides incisive analysis of the definitions of the term woman forwarded in the mid-1800s:

That man over there says women need to be helped into carriages, and lifted over ditches, and to have the best place everywhere. Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain’t I a woman? Look at me! Look at my arm! I have ploughed and planted, and gathered into barns, and no man could head me! And ain’t I a woman? I could work as much and eat as much as a man- when I could get it- and bear the lash as well! And

ain't I a woman? I have borne thirteen children, and seen them most sold off to slavery, and when I cried out with my mother's grief, none but Jesus heard me! And ain't I a woman (Truth, 116)

Sojourner's speech shows how the image of the black woman and the white woman was culturally constructed. Truth challenged the double standards. Her actions demonstrate the process of deconstruction by showing how the concept is culturally constructed and exposed the fact that it was not a natural reflection of reality. By deconstructing the concept woman she has proved herself to be an intellectual, though she had had absolutely no formal education and did not even know how to read and write. (14) In making her speech Truth foretold the emergence, one hundred and some fifty years later of womanism, a concept first espoused by Alice Walker.

Layli Philips in her influential book *The Womanist Reader* comments that womanism candidly acknowledges a spiritual transcendental realm with which human life, living kind, and the material world are all intertwined. For womanists, this realm is actual and palpable, and the relationship between it and humans is neither abstract nor insignificant to politics'. Womanism is quite adamant about the reality and importance of the spiritual world. Of all the characteristics that distinguish womanism from other critical, theoretical, or ideological perspectives, this one is perhaps the most unique and potentially controversial. (67-73).

Story telling is a dynamic form of remembering and feminist thoughts evolves and challenges and renews itself in the process of writing. Patricia Hill Collins in her significant work, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* writes that black feminist thought demonstrates Black woman's emerging power as agents of knowledge. By portraying African-American women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, and class oppression, Afrocentric feminist thought speaks to the importance that knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people...New knowledge is important for both dimensions or change...Knowledge is a vitally important part of the social relations of domination and resistance. By objectifying African-American women and recasting our experiences to serve the interests of elite white men, much Eurocentric masculinist worldview fosters Black women's subordination.

## CONCLUSIONS

However, placing Black women's experiences at the center of analysis offers fresh insights on the prevailing concepts, paradigms, and epistemologies of this worldview and on its feminist and Afro centric critiques. Women squabble, women support, women love, heal each other. Women grow together. They become womanish, as Walker has mentioned in her definition of a womanist. The black women writers have moved to excavate the past and restore to themselves the words of many of their foremothers who were buried in the rumble of distorted history. Using their words, stories they have now taught not only themselves but also the younger generation to revision themselves (Collins, 221-577).

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