

## Dwelling or Duelling in Possibilities: How (Ir)relevant are African Feminisms?

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### ABSTRACT

In its four decades of rebirth, the world has debated (enough) the relevance of feminism, but there is, surprisingly, refreshingly emergent dimensions at the turn of the twenty-first century: feminisms from feminism flowing from Africa. The theories or models of Womanism, Stiwanism, Motherism, and Nego-feminism, with their underlying assumptions and values, were all born at various end times of the twentieth century with a common objective of seeking gender justice. This paper examines the crucial question of how relevant these models are to the global practice of woman as human. What propels their separateness, and why didn't they combine to make a more solid stance on the plight of the African woman? In fact, why can't they simply identify with the general feminism? Put differently, are they dwelling in the same terrain or are they separable and easily recognisable discourses duelling in possibilities for the woman in Africa in particular and the woman of the globe in general? More specifically, how (ir)relevant are African feminisms? In trying to answer these questions, the paper presents a critical review of the afore-mentioned theories of African feminisms with the goal of providing readers an understanding of what is new in each model, and what is similar or different between the various strands of African feminisms. The paper concludes with the author's analysis of the model that holds the best promise or possibilities for African feminism to achieve its seemingly elusive goal of gender equality.

**Keywords:** feminism; womanism; stiwanism; motherism; nego-feminism

### INTRODUCTION

In 2006, Africa's historic journal, *African Literature Today*, No. 25 gave to the world how the genre of African literature is "an unparalleled laboratory", discovering new issues at the turn of the century. The volume theme, "New Directions in African Literature" attractively discusses emergent writers and writings on the legacies of the twentieth century, the challenges that writers and critics face, new aspects in the twenty-first century in the Sierra Leonean, South African novel, new children's literature, new mothering daughters, new female writings, and reintegrating Africa into a unipolar project of the globe. Interestingly, the articles, particularly those that apparently identify with feminism hardly found, in the

assessment of this paper, the “new dimension” as major concerns of writers, critics and teachers at the turn of the twenty-first century that will importantly shoot the African woman to the enviable status of positive freedom. The gaps remain to be filled.

This paper is an attempt to understand and describe a more responsible role for the sexes by throwing “last shots” at African feminisms. At once, the paper will not be focussing on liminality spacing in-between the designations of appropriateness in Womanism, Stiwanism, Motherism, and Nego-feminism all shooting from Africa – on whether they are *feminist theories* or just *models*. Their identities have become what Homi K. Bhabha (1994, p. 4) sees as “a process of symbolic interaction, the connective tissue that constructs the difference” between them and global practice bearing semblance in objectives. The paper will not be looking at that direction because attempts on theoretical canon formation have been adequately attended to (see, for example, Adeoti, 2001 & Liman, 2001). The efforts of Adeoti and Liman seek to discredit canon formation where, new theories are subjected to the tall order of the established ones. T.S. Eliot (1973, 2015), for example, would insist that a new work of art ought to be “judged by the standards of the past”. Adeoti and Liman both disagree as it discourages ingenuity and innovation.

The dispute that Womanism, Stiwanism, Motherism, and Nego-feminism are *theories* or simply *models* will continue to exist as canonising has always insisted on recognising commonly shared ethics of art. But conversely, it has been convincingly argued that canon should have open boundaries to tolerate new trends (Abrahams, 1993, p. 20). To put matters in proper perspective, imagined communities of ethnic minorities have been underplayed, particularly, by Western canon. Could this be what Achebe was alluding to, when he retorted in an interview with Ogbaa (1981, p. 69) that he has stopped disturbing himself about how Western readership reduces his craft to sociological documents or anthropology? Canonising has always sought to discriminate against emerging crafts thereby underscoring unending contest between tradition and innovation. Basically, then, the schema marginalises a huge majority at the footage of small propertied class (Adeoti, 2001, p. 25; Liman, 2001, p. 153). Thus, whether feminisms from feminism in Africa, what Gloria Steinem in a different discussion somewhere calls “hyphenated feminism” exemplified in socialist-feminism, liberal-feminism, radical-feminism, etc. (which she frowns at) has actually morphed into theories has always been an issue for debate.

Womanism, Stiwanism, Motherism, and Nego-feminism have emerged in successive sequence – all at the turn of the century. Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and/or Alice Walker (1980s), Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie, (1994), Catherine Obianuju Acholonu (1995), and Obioma Nnaemeka (1999) in that order and in one decade are their creators. That they were all born in one decade is least surprising following the irrefutable study of Barzun (1961). Barzun places four English novelists who wrote in both nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Joseph Conrad, Thomas Hardy, Henry James and D. H. Lawrence all stretched their literary muscles beyond nineteenth century. They wrote up to, and including, the new age that began with World War I. Similarly, the 1990s for Womanism, Stiwanism, Motherism, and Nego-feminism is at the close of twentieth century and therefore a new age of the twenty-first century. The debate of periodising the English authors at the turn of a new age forced out a less than amused tone from Conrad, “There is even one abandoned creature, who calls me a neo-Platonist. What on earth is that?” (Conrad, 1908, cited in Edward, 1962, p. 214). This paper, therefore, will not dabble into the crisis of periodisation, but will hold on to the possibility of just a decade producing interesting study types for feminism.

A true change, we believe, is not predicated on few or many years but the substance of its concentration. Consider these periods: The Classical Age, The Middle Ages, Renaissance Period, Elizabethan Period, New Classicism, Romanticism, Victorianism, etc.; they all survived within five, ten and not more than thirty years. But one thing stood out in

each of these epochs: unity of purpose for their existence. The one thing that unifies men of a period should be the objective of their work. For example, the concentration of their themes, ideas, values, styles, plot structure, indeed, of content and even form, if it is possible, become distinguishing mark points for identification. “Any group of writers must share a set of familiar ideas rooted in certain social norms” (Cook, 1973, p. 3). Here, then, by one decade life-span of birth of Womanism, Stiwanism, Motherism, and Nego-feminism, we mean names given to distinguished writers, critics, and teachers that worked peculiarly on them.

The question is, why have they emerged? Why are they not content with the feminism before them? And is one not enough for the others?

## WOMANISM

Two people have laid claim to the birth of the modern use of the term Womanism. The Nigerian Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi and the African-American Alice Walker both have independent claims to it in the 1980s. What is not in contention, however, is its meaning; a viewpoint of the lived experiences of “women of color” which necessarily is not the White woman’s standpoint on feminism. It is the philosophy of daring black daughters on the well-being of the entire Africa-African and African-American communities, (fe)male, adults and children, canvassing support for the importance of the African woman’s trajectory by challenging the madness of all oppressive forces impeding Black woman's struggle for survival, which will include unacceptable stance for poor quality of life of the African woman and family freedom. Basically, it is black feminism against racism, sexism, classicism, sexual preference, physical disability, and caste. “A woman is to feminist as lavender is to purple,” muses Walker in her *The Color Purple* (1982).

The noticeable contention has been that some womanists have observed the negative and perhaps, unintended consequences of Western feminism on “women of colour”. White feminists have apparently paid no attention to, and silenced the black communities. This has now constrained the communities to come up with an “alternative but acceptable theory” in Africa (Nwajiaku, 2010). Western feminism failed to imagine that black communities have been injuriously left out of their gender justice course; a reason which has empowered them to bond together politically across ethnic and racial boundaries to seek their own. The African female thinker, more than her Western counterpart, is doubly suppressed by hostile forces – first, by her male counterparts and second, by the European neo-colonialists by which feminism is subsumed. This manifestation of the consciousness of the two-tier levels of oppression is necessary for her cultural survival as an intellectual. But by ‘cultural’ survival does not surrender the arguments of Womanism to multicultural feminism. For more information on multicultural feminism, (see Lépinard, 2009; Tong, 1998, pp. 212-25; Lemons, 1998, pp. 43-66; Hooks, 1990; Moraga & Gloria, 1983).

It should be added that the striking difference between white and black feminism, Kolawole (1997, p. 27) believes, is that African women “... are not seeking to be like men, look like men, or necessarily act like men”, which is essentially Western feminist. Womanism and/or African Womanism, Kolawole rebrands, is certainly nothing near lesbianism, nor is it a radical approach, the approach of the South African radical, Patricia McFadden (to use her choice self-description of being a radical African feminist). It is a feminism that suggests a wide remit; fearlessly attacking inequality. Her radical feminism smacks of rebelliousness, fearlessness, political awareness of sexism and an unpardonable (from male view point) drive for equality between the sexes. It, therefore, instils fear in men though it thrills women. The radical McFadden glided into this world in Swaziland but had her professional life in Zimbabwe. She works with the Southern Africa Political Economy Series (SAPES) Trust and its Gender Project (see, Ruth Meena (Ed.) *Gender in Southern Africa: Conceptual and*

*Theoretical Issues* (Harare: SAPES Trust) in 1992, which is the result of a gender planning workshop organised by the SAPES Gender Project in July 1991). She is associated with the South African Research Institute for Policy Studies (SARIPS), and edited its *South African Political Economy Monthly*. Her criticism of African cultural practices includes:

Those legal systems that are partial and often blatantly patriarchal: for example, the persistence of notions of male conjugal rights; refusals to recognize marital rape as a crime; allowance of polygamy and rampant sexual mobility; notions of paternity which define children as the property of the man rather than emphasizing the responsibilities and obligations of parenting in democratic family relationships; inheritance practices that allow men to inherit women as a form of property/as slaves of male controlled families

(McFadden, 2001, p.4)

At the Feminist Institute of the African Women's Leadership, her lecture (interestingly for this paper's claim) challenged African women to drum up new issues at the dawn of the 21st century. She asserts,

We bring the African feminist tradition of thinking and problem solving to the global women's movement and participate in the formulation of new theories and methodologies... We must write about ourselves and speak for ourselves. We have nothing to lose by envisioning and crafting a new future, and we have every reason to want something different for Africa in the 21st century.

(McFadden, 1997)

South Africa then will be home for Womanism as it has been responsible for several feminist publications including *Agenda: Empowering Women for Gender Equity*, based in Durban, South Africa. This journal included two earlier special issues on 'African Feminisms' (No. 50, 2001, and No. 54, 2002). There is also the *Southern African Feminist Review* published by the Southern African Institute for Policy Studies, Harare, Zimbabwe; and *Feminist Africa* based at the African Gender Institute, University of Cape Town, South Africa founded in 2002.

Acholonu (1995, p. 92) had observed that Buchi Emecheta together with Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie and Ama Ata Aidoo "have misunderstood feminism to be synonymous with violent confrontation, militancy and aggression". But Acholonu may not be correct here. McFadden expressly tells the world that her brand of feminism is confrontational, nothing less. This paper has to offend Acholonu here in order to address some issues correctly. But let us not hasten to judge her harshly for in her shoes, the paper may talk in similar language, especially as the paper deliberately intends to guide its diction such that its rendition should easily become exceptionally polite, where possible. Scriptural discourse may be appropriated here, "And argue not with the People of the Scripture unless it be in (a way) that is better, save with such of them as do wrong..." (*The Holy Qur'an* 29, verse 46).

Going back to the considered opinion of Ogunyemi in 1988, she defines Womanism as:

black centred; ...unlike radical feminism, it wants meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stand.

(1988, p. 65)

In the same vein, "Black Womanism", says Adesanmi (2004, p. 72), "is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideals of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black woman freedom ... Its ideal is for black unity where every black person has a modicum of

power ...” (p. 72). Womanism dwells on the duels of non-incorporation of African women’s experience locally, nationally, and globally, stressing that it should “incorporate racial, cultural, national, economic, and political considerations”. In a slightly different contribution, Walker’s stress is on the peculiarities of the African-American woman in contrast to the Africa-African woman’s plight of Ogunyemi. Alice Walker’s feminism and/or Womanism generally does not challenge men’s ego but rather lures them into accepting living in harmony by abandoning their self-pride as women’s superior. Critics have variously appraised Womanism which we shall consider.

Hardly the concern of Akorede (2010), her analysis shows how Womanism merely dwells in possibilities than duels on a new issue or approach. Womanism, she says, is fighting a course that it is equally guilty of. This is astutely so because Womanism, like Western feminism, is indirectly a racial affront by being Afro-American and African centred only (p. 59). It has no sympathy for White woman; very restrictive to African agenda. Simply, if Western feminism is a commodity of the middle class White woman, Womanism is so peculiarly so with African woman. Akorede may not be far from the truth. The author of Womanism herself, Ogunyemi (1995), incisively observes that Womanism is an ideology, philosophy, or theory used in Nigerian literatures which “celebrated *black* roots, the ideals of *black* life” (Ogunyemi, 1995, p. 192; our emphasis). There may not be any significant difference then between the middle class white woman orientation in as much as the restrictive black woman agenda of Womanism is implanted; they are both racially tailored.

The aforementioned is particularly why it may not be difficult for critics to read Womanism into some African novels, for example, Kaine Agary’s novel, *Yellow Yellow* (2006). Briefly retold, *Yellow Yellow* dramatises the life of a young lead-female character, Zilayefa, who is of a Nigerian and Greek parentage. Many Greeks, Lebanese and Syrians travelled to Nigeria on business capacity and as sailors. They often would take their pleasures to Nigerian women and sometimes inter-marry. Often too, they leave without the notice of their partners. This seventeen-year-old Zilayefa is a child-product of this relationship. She leaves her crude-oil ravaged village and moves to the city in order to, as she says of herself in the poetics of Nigerian pidgin:

understand better or with less anger why there were more and more of my kind  
– ‘African-profits’, ‘born-troways’, ‘ashawo-pickins’, ‘father-unknowns’...  
Maybe then I would not hide from the facts of my birth that my yellow skin and  
curly hair put on display. (p. 171)

In consequence of her skin pigmentation, all of the villagers usually call her as Yellow-Yellow, a slur on her complexion that stigmatizes sometimes because of it. This complexion often heinously has been harmfully intimidating her as it defines her racial identity within the society further stretching on stereotypes, female sexuality, sexual pleasure, abortion, single-motherhood, etc. Contending questions about her paternity, she concludes:

I came to understand that people had preconceived notions about others of  
mixed race – they thought we were conceited, promiscuous, undisciplined, and  
confused. (p.74)

Importantly, there is in the unfolding story of the political angle of the Niger Delta region in Nigeria during the Abacha regime. It is still, even in the twenty-first century defining the Nigerian political space. Zilayefa laments about her politician-lover-man who could not spare enough time for her because of his political engagement,

There would be more days like that. Days when I would be so close to Admiral,  
in his house, but unable to see him, or if I did see him, it was for five to ten  
minutes because he was discussing politics in his living room. ...There were

discussions about who would be suitable candidates for political power if and when the opportunity came... (p. 178)

These life challenges made Zilayefa finally joined an emergent women community; the womanist group of Sisi, Lolo, and Emem who have economic independence. It is the rise of an African marginalised group which has seen single parenting and absent fathers. It encourages women to be on their own, and not to rely on men or society. Today, African women in conferences, seminars, and meetings pride themselves as 'womanists'.

It is logical to expect that many African female intellectuals would think seriously about developing this concept of Womanism or the issues raised much more rigorously in order to make it serve as the cornerstone of their scholarship. This probably has led to the emergence of other forms of African feminism such as Stiwanism which succeeded Womanism.

### STIWANISM

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, who has occupied herself with gender injustice and social transformation within the African context for over three decades now (Guy-Sheftall, 2003, p. 31), discovered Stiwanism in 1994. Stiwanism; STIWA for short, is expressed in "Social Transformation Including Women in Africa". It hypes on the exclusion of the African woman from transforming the male in World feminism. This transformation agenda is its dividing line with Womanism. It strives to contest for its inclusion in the world's social transformation by women. It further does introduce the concept of partnership with the male, which is not a Western recognition nor is it the concentration of Womanism. It discusses the African woman's aspirations in life for strategic equal partnering. The African woman's needs are rooted in her cultures. Ogundipe-Leslie has chosen active participation in Africa's transformation by women. As we are told in an interview with her:

I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation. It's not about warring with the 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.

(see, Adebayo, 1996, p. 1)

Pertinently, Ogundipe-Leslie perceives the female struggle from the perspective of African feminism hinged on a commitment from both sexes, not woman affair only as stressed in Womanism and Western feminism. It can also be sifted from this pleasurable offer that Ogundipe-Leslie seems to have had a rethink on her drift into radical feminism. Her radical handwriting could be read in her earlier 1987 essay, "The Female Writer and Her Commitment", *African Literature Today*. While repudiating stereotypical strategies on woman, the African female thinkers were encouraged to vigorously change these images with the might of the pen. They were further enjoined to delimit the struggle from and on Africa to the liberation of the Third World nations. Her radicalism is further traceable.

In 1994, it beats Ogundipe-Leslie's imagination every minute why "many of the African female writers like to declare that they are not feminists, as if it were a crime to be a feminist" (p. 11). Hitting it hard, she finds it difficult to understand why African henchwomen of gender naming them as Bessie Head, Buchi Emecheta, and even Mariama Bâ distance themselves from the identification (p. 11). Does the 'F' Word sting? She fails to understand, perhaps, that it was and still is the dreadful radical stance apparently readable in some works that people are running away from, not the logical cause of womanhood. For example, the

label 'feminist' is often used, but the notions associated with it tend to differ tremendously. There are those who believe the stereotype that all feminists are lesbians since many lesbians are feminists, apparently (see Trigiani, 1999), or the little less nudity journals like *Feminist Africa*, Issue 16 (2012) with Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah's article, "Standpoint" pp.142-5. Not infrequently this leads to difficulties in placing oneself or a (literary) text in context. Flora Nwapa is a good example of this. In 1984, she was cross at the fact that just because she wrote about gender injustice, she was persistently blamed for being a feminist. But the truth was she wanted nothing to do with feminism because of its anti-men stance. At most, she says, she could identify with Alice Walker's Womanism (see Perry, 1984). Ten years later she took part in a conference in Nuke, at which feminism was topical. After essential listening to the Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo, she proffered,

Years back, when I go on my tours to America and Europe, I'm usually asked, 'Are you a feminist?' I deny that I am a feminist.... But they say, all your works, everything is about feminism. And I say, 'No, I am not a feminist.' Buchi Emecheta is another one that said: I am a feminist with a small 'f' (whatever Buchi means). Having heard Obioma on Monday, having heard Ama [Ata Aidoo] today, I think that I will go out and say that I am a feminist with a big 'F' because Obioma said on Monday that feminism is about possibilities; there are possibilities, there are choices. Let us not be afraid to say that we are feminists ... . Globally, we need one another

(see Nnaemeka, 1995, pp. 3-82)

Similarly, most Americans, to paraphrase the bold, witty, and incisive effort of Trigiani (1999), who have thrown their weight behind the equal rights of women still flinch at the term, 'feminist' and are either indifferent or hostile towards feminism because of the sympathetic attention it receives on secular feminist issues of abortion and lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered rights. Consequently, uncontrolled attacks on feminism as radical can be understood as manifestations of what Harold Garfinkel called the "natural attitude" toward gender. This "natural attitude" includes a series of "un-questionable" truisms about gender, including the beliefs that there are two and only two genders; with it is the fact that genitals are the essential signs of gender. Everyone is naturally either male or female. Everyone therefore is naturally either masculine or feminine and not subject to dispute as no one has a choice here - any deviation from the status-quo is easily classifiable as either pathology or a joke. Garfinkel clarifies that the beliefs constituting the "natural attitude" are "incorrigible" as they are held in truism whose validity cannot be challenged (1967, pp. 122-28). Taking exceptions to visions of the aggressive woman, or better still rascality (since naturally "[o]thers think the public doesn't like feminism because feminists are angry", says Trigiani), has engendered some African women to think along *the African way* of handling feminist situations. There would always be other possibilities, especially as Obioma Nnaemeka said that feminism is about "possibilities" and about "choices". Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* can be offered as a possibility for Stiwanism.

Ama Ata Aidoo is one of Africa's leading feminist writers. For anyone interested in postfeminist politics in a multi-genre novel in Africa, Aidoo's genius shines throughout on each page. Her brief 132 page novel, *Our Sister Killjoy*, raises many issues. But we take side with only feminist aspects since fiction is defined as "any form of narrative which deals, in part or in whole, with events that are not factual, but rather, imaginary and invented by its author(s)". In the novel, Aidoo contemplates the present global, postfeminist occasion, and she does so in order to rethink the question of transformation agenda contributed by a woman that the haunting politics of patriarchal Africa provokes.

The story of *Our Sister Killjoy* is told through a young female student's eyes, Sissie, in "exchange" for European education. She is chosen to "represent" Ghana and travels to Europe, specifically Germany. Out there with her degree and her all-seeing eyes, Sissie tries to make sense of her essence there. It is a profound version of the theme of self discovery, where she explores a passionate desire to reform a rotten world that is ridden with conflicts between men and women. Supposedly, Sissie should follow the sun's path and settle in Europe. But she returns to Ghana after her studies with complaints on various injustices of the world on the female sex particularly for our Stiwanism, the African female. The novel is a trying exercise in whining or complaining about being a woman, and especially so being an African woman. She may have cause to whine. Women have been excluded in transformation agenda in Africa as in the globe. Notwithstanding this "politics of exclusion" in transformation agenda, Gay Wilentz, one of Aidoo's important critics, points out that "[h]er outspokenness toward male dominance in African countries has earned her a rather antagonistic response from some male critics", which explains Aidoo's exclusion to a certain degree (Karavanta, 2001, p. 38). So, could Stiwanism be accepted as dwelling on the same things in Africa and the globe, or dueling in Obioma's possibilities? By definition, Stiwanism would appear to have given itself away to sectional racialised issues as well, like its former, Womanism, and Western feminism. STIWA's transformation through the efforts of the African woman has directly submitted its arguments in favour of a continental address, sadly. Its hopes are limited to the continent; it has no wide appeal, we think. And therefore, the ever-present question remains the same: what is the observable difference between the strands of African feminism? And if Stiwanism does not have, what of Motherism?

### MOTHERISM

The motherist discourse tries to give the White history of feminism, and the White domination within it a fair read but lost several teeth, due to excessive grinding in the process. Protest against the history and domination within feminism has taken into account the material circumstances and cultural histories of Africa as important prelude to the formations of African feminisms. The motherist discourse, thus, ensues in the theorisation of alternative concept to feminism. Catherine Obianuju Acholonu is the creator of Motherism in 1995. But whether this African variant of feminism, like its formers, has actually morphed into a theory remains a great debate as theories are not easily formed, especially since anything outside of Western practice has not found acceptance in Western canonised periscope and particularly so for the hole in the postcolonial zero of nothing in Africa. Canonising includes the existence of commonly shared ethics of cultural practice in literature, for example, which enhances practice of art. Canon has (and indeed, should have) open boundaries as certainly, "the boundaries of a canon remain indefinite..." (Abrahams, 1993, p. 20). But in spite of this, there is exclusion of competent works of "Blacks, Hispanics and other ethnic minorities of women ... and non-European civilizations" (p. 21). Canon consistently enjoys discrimination for the chosen which enjoys unfettered authority and thereby underscores unending contest between tradition and innovation. Simply, the agenda advantages the small propertied elite while at the same time marginalising a huge majority (Adeoti & Liman, 2001, p. 25 & p.153).

Catherine Acholonu discusses women's freedom through Motherism, emphasising the impossibility of severance of issues of motherhood from the African woman. She chooses the mother-child love to stress that while it is thinkable for the White woman to have little or no space for motherhood (they may have shaped their opinion now) whether in aspects of feminism or not, the African woman in contradistinction cannot live without the significance of motherist concerns. This African feminism considers nature, nurture, and respect in the mother-child space as the centre of any motherist discourse. In consequence, consideration

for the child holds the African woman back every inch in her decision on the uncomfortable patriarchal home. It is the reality of the survival of every woman in Africa. What Acholonu means is demonstrated in Abubakar Gimba's *Sacred Apples* (1994), where he unveils the inability of the African woman to distance herself from her child. A woman seems to live for her child in Africa, Gimba observes.

*Sacred Apples* will always be essential to anyone trying to understand the intricacies of twenty-first century feminism in Africa. The novel unveils the inability of the African woman to accept severance from her child. Barely six months into her employment as industrial officer, Zahra's constitution disagreed with the theory and practice of working-class mother workforce. She discovered a huge disquiet for mothering by proxy, where she only has about one hour for her children in the morning for the children to leave for school, and only another one and a half in the evening before they retire to bed. To abdicate her responsibility to surrogate mothers most of who are not any better than the children they supposedly look after was quite unreasonable to her (pp.75-82). Zahra confides in her friend:

I just can't leave them behind... I feel I have abandoned them. Abdicated my responsibility to another woman, and turned them into some little orphans... I don't get to be with them enough... I feel guilty... (and she pensively characteristically adds like an African woman), ...I'd love to welcome them when they return from school. I'm never around... Only my brother's wife is... A very nice woman alright, but... I don't think it's the same as being around myself. (p.77)

Even with this kind of weighty consideration in mind, it is not likely for the Western feminist to dump her work in favour of her children. She would most likely consider it as an inevitable crisis in the passing life of a woman seeking necessary emancipation. It is weird to let go such opportunities.

The argument of Acholonu on Motherism also compares to Shulamith Firestone's love question (see her *The Dialectic of Sex*, 1970) as an intimidating impediment in dealing with men. If we have to probe by asking, and it has already been asked: why the love question, it is unlikely to disagree with Shulamith that love has consistently denied women achievement of their dreams for revenge-game on the male class. How do you deal with the man you love, even that he is of patriarchal order? How do you deal with the father of your children? These questions and more have a way of causing a rift in the house of the female class, observes Shulamith. It is in the same vein that Acholonu's Motherism appears to be a deciding factor which establishes difference and deference with Western feminist ideology anchored on mother versus offspring love.

Acholonu's 144-page book, *Motherism - An Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* (1995) shows implications in the cultural differences on philosophical, historical, sociological and psychological means and the changes brought by the contact of Western culture with the African culture. The traditional role of the African woman has essentially been that of a matriarch and a social nurturer. In her words, Motherism would refer to an Afrocentric feminist theory:

... anchored on the matrix of *motherhood* ... Whatever Africa's role may be in the global perspective, it could never be divorced from ... the Mother Continent of humanity, nor is it coincidental that motherhood has remained the central focus of African art, African literature... (Acholonu, 1995, p. 3)

Gordon (2005) strengthens Acholonu's Motherism as an African theoretical variant of feminism, most probably towing the path of the myth of "Big African Mother-Earth" as emphasised by Acholonu's "Mother Continent". To Gordon, Motherism has given to the

world a theoretical base to work on. “[I]n distant countries and blown by different cultural breezes”, Gordon reads Motherism into the Japanese Ayako Mizuo’s “(Post)Feminism, Transnationalism, The Maternal Body” (2001) which establishes corresponding relationship between the body and the mother, which, as a repressed maternal body needs to be negotiated; Gordon reads Motherism into the Caribbean George Lamming’s *In the Castle of My Skin* (1954) which describes houses that mothers have assumed fathers’ role – fathers who are rather absent or merely peripheral to the household, and mothers exert a “paternal” authority on rebellious boys through threats and flogging. Also, she adds, there is the Sudanese Kola Boof’s modified Motherism, which through her artistry contaminates the spiritual philosophies of ancient Nilotic African woman from the Nile River, and female heroines who live in rootlessness and alienation from a mother-country and the loss of cultural identity. The theme of homelessness among Zimbabwean mothers in Chenierai Hove’s *Bones* (1988) is also, Gordon says, well pronounced in Marita as a poor wife, labourer and mother whose only son opts to fight for freedom, and the mother ended it by standing for freedom and self-fulfilment. Marita survives despite the harsh pyramidal social scale under the tyranny of male oppression: her husband, then the “boss-boy”, and the cook; all of whom are in turn subject to the autocracy and prejudices of the White farmer – exactly depicting African scenario of protest of White history and White domination within feminism.

A reading of the second edition of Nancy J. Chodorow’s *The Reproduction of Mothering* (1999a) provides additional essential concern on how sexual division of labour produces a specific gendered psychology, which in turn reproduces the sexual and familial division of labour where women are mothers. The psychology of being a working-class mother is the attention of the book. With this, we quickly remember two studies: Sabitha Marican (2012) and Wan Yahya (2003). At the International Gender Conference 2012, Sabitha Marican (2012) provides striking Malaysian perspective on the challenges and implications of dual carrier women. The study shows women facing work-family conflict, serious occupational health hazards resulting in employee dissatisfaction, lowered productivity, absenteeism and workers turnover. These imply that women workers are having too much work to do but too little time to do it. Malaysian Ministry of Health records reveal that women are facing 1.5 times more mental stress compared to men due to work overload and rising expectations.

Sabitha Marican’s (2012) comparative research (in strengthening the claim to universal practice) indicates that in Canada like Malaysia, women are also associated with increased conflict between work and home, as most Canadians have had to sacrifice personal life in cutting back on social life, not having children, working harder and getting less sleep. The Malaysian findings show that 47.4% are trapped due to role conflict between work and home; 34% do not have enough sleep as they have to juggle to finish extra work responsibilities at home. As high as 82.4% indicated that they handle alone house responsibilities while managing their career, while 90% have no maid. Other findings reveal that almost 55% confessed that they have little or no time with their husbands. In fact, they sacrificed their ‘husband time’. For example, 15% could not recall the last time they had quality time with their husbands. In the research interview, a respondent said, “I have so much overtime at work that .....am not able to do even part-time with my husband.” Almost 70% confessed that life was stressful and unfair to their children for not spending enough time with them. 53.2% believes they do not have enough time at home as they have too many roles to match and most importantly, feel helpless at times. Mothering duties are gradually being eroded and lost to work places. It is this mothering role that is special to Nigeria’s Acholonu which prompts her to do a theory/approach on feminism. Sabitha Bte Marican’s research cannot be less correct, then.

Earlier than Sabitha Marican (2012) and Wan Yahya (2003) valorises the trauma beneath monologic and therefore, silent working-class mothers. In this kind of literary gymnastics, the polygynous working-class mother is thrown into array of “emotions and thoughts” (p. 1) which apparently becomes impossible in a dialogic imagination because of the trauma a character goes through: no words can convey what goes on in such minds. It is, as Wan Yahya’s study reports, what Cixous (1981, p. 49) sees as “silence is the mark of hysteria” (Wan Yahya, 2003, p. 2). The female protagonist Santha’s silence and passivity in K.S. Maniam’s play, *The Sandpit* (1994) is, therefore, unavoidably active by deliberate implication. In this dramatisation, lifeless pages are not to be seen as unconnected as they are not there by chance but by choice. Often, the technique uses unimportant “splinters of memory”, “fragments of speech”, “titles of quoted passages left unnamed or forgotten”, “communication between characters becomes incomplete”, “minute signals scattered everywhere in the book”, “character’s stammer”, “the slip of the tongue”, etc. Surprisingly, one discovers that all of these seeming nonentities always amazingly lump together into one sense: male-domination dynamics versus female-submissiveness. This, essentially, is both the ‘Brechtian technique’ and what readers of Virginia Woolf call the technique of ‘androgeneity’ (see, *Brecht on Theatre*, 1964; Leaska, 1977 on Woolf).

The complications of mothering have forced Obioma Nnaemeka to ask, “Can *one* claim reasonable knowledge of modern African women writers without taking a measured walk in *their* mothers’ gardens?” Nnaemeka asks. “Can African women writers”, she adds, “suffer historical amnesia and still survive as writers, Africans, and WOMEN?” (Nnaemeka, 1994, p. 137). Taken as given, since women have been successfully turned into written objects by the criminal mercies of imperialist subjects in deliberate happy connivance with patriarchal subjects, it is about time the written objects should rise in reinscribing their relevance as speaking/writing subjects (p. 137).

But, we should pause to ask, if Nnaemeka, who has a different theory/model from Motherism, discusses Motherism favourably, it pinches us to ask, why she should then propagate a different theory/model from Motherism? Is it not that one form of feminist theory or criticism looks for the sins and errors of the past and chatters a new course? Nego-feminism has emerged with a different approach.

### NEGO-FEMINISM

At once, Nego-feminism is defined by the theorist herself, Obioma Nnaemeka, who proposes the term and definition in her paper, “Nego-Feminism: Theorizing, Practicing, and Pruning Africa’s Way” (1999) as “the feminism of negotiation; no ego feminism” (Nnaemeka, 1999, p. 360). The staple point of this spirited effort is its affinity with issues of soft-peddalling in the game of antagonism with (wo)menfolk so as to recognise a more rewarding equal partnering. Nego-feminism surrounds issues of peace, conflict management and resolution, negotiation, complementarity, give-and-take, and collaboration. It is truly tempting to think Nego-feminism is the exception which proves the rule as it argues simply that it is only ‘weak people that seek revenge; strong people forgive, while intelligent people ignore’. Nego-feminism is a feminist approach for feminist social movements, feminist communities, in its power for both man and woman. And this contradicts Western feminism, Womanism, Stiwanism, and Motherism. Nego-feminism takes a step further.

The highly significant attraction of its name, Negotiation-feminism, not only suggests the broad range of its tolerance: in one bold sweep it has eliminated so much of the unfruitful discussions of offensive literatures or the embattled conflicts in novels that give the impression that all men are (potential) rapists and wife-beaters, or at most, sisterhood or

solidarity among women is shown as a possible doubtful source of solace or a vague anchor of hope.

Nego-feminism describes a new paradigm that can, finally, take us beyond ‘winners’ and ‘losers’ in an endless “gender war”. A relief! It proposes in other words that if women and their adaptable selves are really going to take over the world, there is the need to make certain that some men are brought along. This is essentially so as feminism is after all about cooperation. As feminists develop alternatives to ease gender injustices, nego-feminists can more reliably renew our energy and remind us that “in the end, the choice of what kind of world we live in is up to every one of us” (Eisler, 1995, p. 214). The cushion effect of Nego-feminism is, perhaps, what Carol Gilligan in her *In a Different Voice* (1982) hypothesised that the nature of men and women live in different cultures and develop different modes of moral reasoning: while men have an ethic of “justice”, with its demand for autonomy and laws, women have an ethic of “care”, with its emphasis on empathy and supportive relationships.

The usual discussion of Nego-feminism under the broad heading of African feminisms is actually less representative of “global coming” since it would be restrictive, but everything does have origin; Africa is its place of origin but its outreach powers are beyond a continental discussion since it matches the intellectual feminist tone of the world.

Professor Obioma Nnaemeka is its creator, who is Chancellor’s Professor of French and Women’s Studies, Indiana University. Following a postmodernist, postfeminist obligation, Obioma Nnaemeka seems to have practically understood the call for a change in the goals of the sexed body. Reading her articles shows Obioma’s strength and consistency in keeping the main questions of her intellectual inquiry clearly in mind for more than a decade since 1999. It shows a meeting point for psychological and cultural perspective between the sexes. Obioma concentrates on what Chodorow in a different observation would call “that place where the psychological meets the cultural or the self meets the world” (Chodorow, 1999b, p. 6). Obioma’s call to the world is a critical review of the true strengths and weaknesses of the sexed body. Does Nego-feminism call for new criticism? And is it, indeed, a new theory; or do we have here another instance of individual talent at work (libertarian feminism) within a stable tradition? Much of the interest it has generated is comparable to the interest taken on any theory of feminism in history. Of course, no artist — male or female — is free from influences, but creativity lies in making up new images and finding new forms; in the case of Nnaemeka, this process is inexhaustible in its output. And this is why this Nego-feminism may be more complex than any of its precursors, especially in the relationship between its vernacular tradition and the publishable literary vehicles.

If there has been the need for a theory/approach that is better able in looking afresh at new works and styles, capable of looking at itself, Nego-feminism will need to be tested by practitioners of the art. And this is why Osammor’s 217 page novel compels attention by its muscular strength and disciplined structure of new feminist streak, the streak of Nego-feminism. The dialogue of the novel is witty and plangent, the narrative pace quick, inner and outer worlds interwoven through the sheer juxtaposition of feminist hostilities. Her novel is *The Triumph of the Water Lily*. It is a book about the profound nature of an African female thriving in the midst of marital adversity. *Water Lily* is a story of four characters paired: Nkem and Odili; Effua and Norman. The lives of the pairs culminate in a celebration of womanhood in a moving exploration of life and death, in which Effua, the narrator, tells a passionate story of trial and tribulation of the triumph of love and life, even in the massively frustrating circumstances. Nkem, Effua’s friend, after plenty of thought vacates her home, not on divorce but on self-will for a second wife to occupy her husband’s home in order to curiously maintain the love she has for her husband. She moves out to shield her marriage from what she foresaw: the malice of in-laws as out-laws, the spite of “friends” as “foes”, and

series of outright spitefulness of the people around them all simply for her inability to bear children:

“Now that I have created a vacancy in Odili’s home, by moving out, people like his stepmother will now leave us in peace” (p.17)

Hard and hopeless as her decision to vacate her home appeared first, the opportunity to undertake a visit to Britain by both of them happily reunites them. Consequently, she christens her psychological crises as “Endured-Patience” because her marriage is now blessed with a child at a long last. She doesn’t even believe heaven will be any different from her moment of happiness; she is fulfilled and the naming ceremony is grandiose.

*Water Lily* holds out a more confident hope of feminist regeneration than other novels because it has shifted ground from excessive antagonism to a gentle masculinity contingent on the forging of new identities. The male characters of these novels are, ‘by nature’ or because of their socialisation, not sexual predators and therefore, usually not deeply immoral or wife beaters as in radical feminist texts. Male characters who depart from this pattern are rarely found - and those who do are powerless in these novels. This powerlessness is symbolised either by their premature death or by their inability to realise their positive ambitions which would have left the female characters devastated as they are being physically battered, sexually assaulted, and emotionally abused in their inescapable state of vulnerability, thereby reducing them to sexual assault survivors.

A further fundamental characteristic of these texts is their distance from tragedy and violence. The female characters do not suffer physical and psychological violence at the hands of men. At least, a partial improvement in the situation of women is negotiated. Thus, for example, while death and murder carry the end of most of radical texts, nego-feminist novels such as *Water Lily* record mutuality of the sexes, exercising a partial criticism of patriarchal gender relations by describing the circumstances as reformable, transformable. Accordingly, *Water Lily* assumes men’s willingness to (partially) rethink. So, while Nkem is worked to the bones for her infertility, still, she is thoroughly convinced to disallow herself from taking erroneous, extremist position in remedying the damage done to her; the author is with a particular view to teaching the world to learn from Nkem’s experiences. The world, then, is invited to respect “respect for mutuality between the sexes”. Few women with deep sense of feminism today will accept to vacate their homes for fellow women. For the first time, perhaps, Osammor, through Nkem, has helped the world to see how possible it is to be accommodative through:

how possible it is for a woman to love a man totally; just for himself and not for the fact that he was the father of her offsprings or the provider of her personal comforts. (p. 86)

By implication, it is possible to tolerate ourselves in a/an (inter)national outing! And James Baldwin’s *The Fire Next Time* can be appropriated here to mean Nego-feminism which needs to be upstaged, since it is not peculiar to Africa only. In her deliberate bold claim, Osammor gracefully relieves the spokesperson’s narrative authority, in favour of the author for the new female voice:

These things happen all the time, not only in Africa but also in other supposedly civilised societies. Marriages get arranged and annulled by families for political and socio-economic reasons and not only for love. Concubines are also arranged to produce heirs if the woman taken in wedlock is unable to beget any.

(*Water Lily*, p.11)

This bold claim is the new position, new voice, “the fire this time” in the 21st century literature. Peculiarly, the arranged marriage is not coming from the family but the first wife herself! She has decided to become the woman outside. Nkem’s resolve to move out of her legitimate house is the very underlying factor for anti-masculinity and anti-femininity. In this new feminism, while male chauvinism vanishes, it is not replaced by a role reversal, or replaced by feminist ego. It is the coming together of men and women for harmonious survival where there is no victor nor vanquished.

## CONCLUSION

Delphy (1996) has pointed to the unacceptable claims of “French feminism” as feminism in France, in exactly the same way as, “Why should it be feminism in America?” Delphy makes a strong case that “French feminism” is a backlash. All, she contends, are with one-point agenda: freeing woman from historical disadvantage relative to men and towards gender justice. It is in the same vein that the possibilities offered by African feminisms are incapacitated in as much as they are issues for the African continent only. They may not be irrelevant but they are deficient in heading towards a restrictive opportunity for woman thereby merely dwelling on the same issues, instead of duelling on a better logic that will shoot the woman to an enviable international status devoid of any egoism. To return the discussion to one big umbrella of feminism that has the power to collapse (almost) all the needs of the state of womanhood into a logical global practice which is beyond “narrow notions of ‘local’ or ‘national’ cultures ...” (to use Lie, Kong & Zainudin’s (2012, p. 2) phrasing, it is apparent that only Nego-feminism may have that opportunity.

The relevance of Nego-feminism’s proposition is simply that women have a tendency to recur as fundamental real. And as men are not likely to ‘naturally’ deny women their due rights, it needs to be researched how women can regain their esteem with relative ease. In order to take the feminine world to the next level, therefore, we must practice forgiveness (Govier, 1994) from both sexes so that harmony will fill our homes. *Water Lily* was particularly effective in getting women as active forgivers. Not many women with serious sense of feminism today will accept to vacate their homes or step aside for *fellow women*. In the long run, which is not without being a forgiver, the relationship between Nkem and Odili is happily blessed with a child (p. 166). The novelist, through Nkem, has helped the world to regenerate being accommodative in reclaiming their men.

In this permissibility, Nego-feminism has become the emblematic shorthand of possibilities that has previously been discussed on womanhood in Africa and elsewhere. Interestingly, Nnaemeka, the creator of the Nego-feminism, refuses to negatively critique what might have gone wrong in previous feminist approaches – feminism, Socialist-feminism, liberal-feminism, radical-feminism, the Freudian psycho-analytic feminism, Womanism, Stivanism, and Motherism, while at the same time providing alternatives to them because of apparent “marked limits” in their achievements. In fact, she would in some occasions even praise the models principally because no matter how insignificant they may appear, they had played out well in chattering the woman’s course. To close, then, we will be content with a friend’s share, “Always choose to heal, not to hurt, to forgive not to despise, to persevere not to quit, to smile not to frown, and to love not to hate! At the end of life, what really matters is not what we bought, but what we built, not what we got, but what we shared, not our competence but our character, and not our success but our significance”.

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