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Parallel Trajectories in Western and African Feminist Discourses

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Abstract
There are several works on feminism, most often taken from the Western background. This paper distinguishes itself by investigating the parallelism between Western and African feminisms. It involves a detailed analysis of two distinct yet interconnected feminist frameworks that reflect each other's unique cultural, historical, and ideological contexts. Western feminism, which is shaped by Euro-American influences, emphasizes gender equality with a strong focus on individual rights, personal autonomy, and legal reforms. Over time, it has evolved through various waves, addressing issues such as suffrage, legal rights, reproductive rights, and more recently, intersectionality. In contrast, African feminism has its roots in colonial and postcolonial experiences, intertwining gender issues with broader social, economic, and political challenges that are specific to African societies. African feminists prioritize communal well-being, social justice, and the decolonization of women's roles and representations, often advocating for collective empowerment rather than solely individual advancement. The comparative and thematic methods of inquiry will be employed during this research. The paper discovers that while both feminist frameworks share a common goal of achieving gender equality, they diverge in their approaches and focal points. This divergence highlights the concept of intersectionality - an area where both Western and African feminisms intersect.

Keywords: Western feminism, African Feminism, patriarchy, intersectionality, parallelism

Introduction

The conversation surrounding feminism has become increasingly delicate, however richer, incorporating a wider range of viewpoints, ideologies, and cultural backgrounds. At its core, feminism aims to achieve gender equality by confronting the systems and beliefs that sustain gender-based discrimination and oppression. Yet, it is important to recognize that the feminist movement is not a singular entity. Different frameworks have emerged in response to unique cultural, historical, and socio-political circumstances, leading to the concept of "feminisms" rather than a single, cohesive feminism (Kanu 2015). Among the various expressions of feminism, Western and African feminisms stand out as two significant examples. While both movements

strive for similar goals of gender equity, they differ in their methods, strategies, and foundational philosophies.

> Hooks (1984:1) paints a vivid picture of the onset of the feminist struggle:
> Feminism in the United States has never emerged from the women who are most victimized by sexist oppression; women who are daily beaten down, mentally, physically, and spiritually-women who are powerless to change their condition in life. They are a silent majority. A mark of their victimization is that they accept their lot in life without visible question, without organized protest, without collective anger or rage.

Alongside the negative experiences in marriage was also the issue of Western women wanting more out of life. This was the major concern of the American white women who introduced feminism. Such was not the plight of all women in general (Kanu 2014). There is also often an implicit assumption that the experiences and perspectives of women are primarily those of white women. Thus, Hooks (1984:1) writes:

> "The problem that has no name", often quoted to describe the condition of women in this society, actually referred to the plight of a select group of college-educated, middle and upper-class, married white women-housewives bored with leisure, with the home, with children, with buying products, who wanted more out of life. Friedan concludes her first chapter by stating: "We can no longer ignore that voice within women that says: 'I want something more than my husband and my children and my house. That "more" she defined as careers.

Although the particular issues and challenges faced by white housewives in the leisure class were legitimate and deserving of attention and reform, they were not the most urgent political issues facing the majority of women. Many women were worried about racial and ethnic prejudices, economic survival, etc. (Hooks 1984:2) . In contrast to Western feminism, African feminism emerged in response to the specific experiences of African women within the frameworks of colonialism and postcolonialism. Crenshaw (1989:139) collects and systematizes black feminist critiques of feminist theory, which focused on women as an undifferentiated social category, something which in reality represented the interests and needs of white, middle-class women.

This paper aims to explore the parallels between Western and African feminisms, examining both the areas of convergence and divergence between the two feminist traditions. By comparing these movements, the research aspires to offer a clearer understanding of feminist theory, one that acknowledges the significance of context and resists the urge to generalize women's experiences on a global scale. This study will throw light on how Western and African feminisms tackle shared issues, such as gender-based violence, reproductive rights, and social justice, while also emphasizing the unique priorities and methodologies that each movement contributes to the feminist agenda.

Methodology

The comparative method is employed in this work to serve as a framework for studying the parallelism of Western and African feminisms. It will provide the framework for identifying

specific Western and African feminist movements, ideologies, or practices to compare, and examine the comparisons and contrasts. The systematic comparison will be adopted to compare specific aspects of Western and African feminisms, such as their theoretical frameworks, activist strategies, or policy impacts. The value of this methodology is that it provides a nuanced understanding of Western and African feminisms within their specific cultural, historical, and social contexts. It will reveal the similarities and differences between Western and African feminisms, highlighting patterns and trends that might not be apparent through single-case studies, and enabling the development and testing of theories about feminism, gender, and social change, thereby contributing to the advancement of feminist scholarship. The thematic method of inquiry will also be employed for the presentation of the major ideas in this paper.

Statement of Problem

The discourse on feminism has been largely dominated by Western perspectives, often overlooking the unique experiences, challenges, and epistemologies of African women. While Western feminism has made significant strides in advancing women's rights, its application in African contexts has been problematic, often perpetuating cultural imperialism and neglecting the complex intersections of gender, culture, and power in African societies (Kanu 2012a).

This knowledge gap raises critical questions: What are the parallelisms and divergences between Western and African feminisms? How do African feminist perspectives challenge or complement Western feminist theories? What are the implications of these parallelisms and divergences for feminist practice, policy, and social change in African contexts? This article seeks to investigate the parallelism of Western and African feminisms, exploring the convergences and divergences between these two feminist traditions. By examining the historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts that shape African feminist thought and practice, this research aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of feminist theories and practices in African contexts.

Purpose of the Study

The purposes of engaging in this study on the parallelism of Western and African feminisms include the following:

1. To move beyond the dominant Western feminist discourse and highlight the diversity of feminist thought and practice globally, thereby amplifying African feminist perspectives and experiences, which have often been marginalized or excluded from mainstream feminist discussions.
2. To explore the similarities and differences between Western and African feminisms, and thus set the stage for the promotion of mutual understanding and respect, and facilitate collaboration and solidarity among feminist activists, scholars, and organizations across cultural and geographical boundaries.
3. To examine how feminist theories and concepts are interpreted and applied in different cultural and socio-political contexts, and draw lessons from the comparative study to inform feminist activism, policy-making, and social change initiatives.
4. To promote a more inclusive and diverse understanding of feminist thought and practice, and contribute to the development of intersectional and transnational feminist frameworks that account for the complex intersections of gender, culture, and power.

Theoretical Framework

To address the marginalization of African American women in anti-discrimination laws as well as feminist and anti-racist theory and policy, Crenshaw (1989) created the term "intersectionality." According to her, the idea that race and gender are mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis, that is, the application of analytical viewpoints that fail to take into account the interplay between the systems that produce privilege and oppression, leads to the invincibility of social positions characterized by multiple forms of oppression. Since we need frameworks that enable us to recognize the social issues faced by every member of a particular group, using an intersectional perspective is a crucial standard in the struggle for social justice and human rights. Thus, Hankivsky (2014:6) states that:

> Intersectionality promotes an understanding of human beings as shaped by the interaction of different social locations (e.g., 'race'/ethnicity, Indigeneity, gender, class, sexuality, geography, age, disability/ability, migration status, religion). These interactions occur within a context of connected systems and structures of power (e.g., laws, policies, state governments, and other political and economic unions, religious institutions, and media). Through such processes, interdependent forms of privilege and oppression shaped by colonialism, imperialism, racism, homophobia, ableism, and patriarchy are created.

In their 1977 Collective Statement, the African-American feminist group, feeling marginalized by white feminists' insensitivity to their particular kind of oppression, called attention to the necessity to confront women's diversity (Combahee River Collective 1977: 23). "As Black women, we see Black feminism as the logical political movement to combat the manifold and simultaneous oppressions that all women of color face." This group defined intersectionality as a political position dedicated to the liberation of Black women, defining it as the goal of their struggle. This perspective sees the many types of oppression as interrelated, with their impacts reinforcing and intensifying one another (Collins 2000:18; Davidson and Yancy 2009:18; Kanu 2012b). This necessitates an all-encompassing strategy that acknowledges how these various oppressive systems bothering on race, class, gender, sex, ethnicity, religion, etc., interact and impact their lives (Kanu 2012c) and views Black feminism as the best political movement for tackling the various and simultaneous oppressions that women of color endure (Kanu 2012d; Hooks 1982:6).

Proponents of African feminism argue that Western feminism ignores how racism, colonialism, and economic exploitation have intersected to oppress African women throughout history. In the spirit of intersectionality, Hooks (1982:6) links racism and sexism in the oppression of black female slaves. In this context, sexism is viewed as a fundamental component of the social and political structure that white colonists brought from their European homelands, with multiple repercussions for black women who were enslaved (Hazel 2020:1; Kanu 2024a). In her commentary on Hooks, Hazel (2020:18) holds that Hooks' notion of the interlocking webs of oppression, which is connected to intersectionality, strongly aligns with African feminism, which entwines with broader battles for racial justice, economic independence, and political sovereignty rather than focusing only on female equality. As a result, African feminism takes a more collective stance, focusing on the welfare of the community and giving importance to ideals like social

cohesiveness, cultural observance, and the decolonization of African identities and customs (Kanu 2024b).

Western Feminist Movement

According to Lerner (1987:360) "Class society started with the dominance of men over women and evolved into the dominance of some men over all men and all women". This demonstrates that class formation was a part of human civilization from the dawn of time and has since used patriarchy to control the social relationships between men and women (Mill 1982:219).

The term "patriarchy" refers to the archaic social structure in which a male head of the household exercised authority over even distant cousins of the same ancestry. It is "a social menace and disease that plagues the life of men in both body and spirit," according to Hooks (1984:13). For Walby (1989:213), it is a social structure in which men have many powers and use them to control women, children, and property. According to Eisenstein (1979:33), it is a hierarchical system in which women are tasked with fulfilling the roles of consumer, domestic worker, and mother within the family unit. Cain et al. (1979:405) refer to patriarchy as a form of material-based social connection that enables men to exert power over women. Ullah (2018:62) speaks of it as a societal structure in which men control and take advantage of women in political, cultural, and economic spheres.

Feminism, a term coined in the 20th century, which gained popularity in the 1960s, was born out of a patriarchal society. Originally, it was a medical term used to refer to either the masculinization of women or the feminization of men. Thus, Lorber (2010:23) avers that "Feminism is a social movement whose basic goal is equality between women and men". Due to the significant disparity between the legal positions of male and female citizens, Western feminism emerged as an organized movement in the nineteenth century in Europe, America, and Japan (Herwood, 1992:23; Lorber, 2010:23). The aforementioned lends credence to the idea that Western feminism is a response to a long-standing practice of gender inequality, which mostly takes the form of the marginalization, subordination, and subjection of the female sex. However, in contemporary usage, it is associated with the widespread women's movement and an effort to enhance women's lives generally (Kanu 2018a).

This notwithstanding, Freedman (2022:22) holds that right from the origin of the term feminism, the word has carried negative connotations. It is such that only very few politically engaged women have styled themselves as feminists. Woolf (2001:44) launched one of the earliest attacks on the concept. She rejected the word outrightly, claiming that it has outlived its purpose: "…destroy an old word, a vicious and corrupt word that has done much harm in its day". Walters (2005:30) traces feminism back to religious homes like the convent: "It allowed some women to develop a talent for organization, and some were able to read, think, and discover their distinctive voices".

According to Walters (2005:26), the religious structure made space for these women to showcase their abilities, and gave rise to notable authors and poets such as Julian of Norwich in the fifteenth century and Hildegard of Bingen in the eleventh. Notable was the first writer in England to examine and express ideas about women while recognizing their common issues- Mary

Astell. She vehemently disagreed with the idea that women were merely men's property, with no right to dispose of their bodies, and was radical in her view of how convention limited women's lives and kept their minds underdeveloped and untrained (Walter 2005:30).

Singh (2018:13) divides Western feminism into four waves. Describing the first wave, she points to the period between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Europe and America, which: "focused primarily on gaining the right of women's suffrage, the right to be educated, better working conditions, and double sexual standards". Singh (2018:13) adds that: "Originally it focused on the promotion of equal contract and property rights for women and the opposition to chattel marriage and ownership of married women (and their children) by their husbands. However, by the end of the nineteenth century, activism focused primarily on gaining political power, particularly the right of women's suffrage".

Even though the word "first-wave" was coined retrospectively after the term second-wave feminism began to be used, the second-wave feminism was a concept used to describe a newer feminist movement that focused as much on fighting social and cultural inequalities. According to Singh (2018:13).

> Coming off the heels of World War II, the second wave of feminism focused on the workplace, sexuality, family, and reproductive rights. It was perceived that women had met their equality goals except for the failure of the ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment, which has still yet to be passed.

Early in the 1990s, the third wave of feminism emerged. Young women's perceptions of the second wave's perceived shortcomings gave rise to the movement. It was also a reaction to the criticism of the second wave's projects and activities. Third-wave feminism aims to avoid or contest what it considers to be the "essentialist" notions of femininity of the second wave, which they claim overemphasize the experiences of white upper-middle-class women (Singh 2018:13).

The increase of interest in feminism that started about 2012 and is linked to social media use is known as fourth-wave feminism (Cochrane, 2013). Therefore, Singh (2018:13) writes that: "Fourth-wave feminism is defined by technology and characterized particularly by the use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Tumblr, and blogs …to challenge misogyny and further gender equality." It describes the violence and extremism that women face, such as harassment, abuse, murder, etc., both domestically and internationally as a result of imperialism in the shape of global capitalism (Kaplan 2003:59). It is observable from the foregoing that whatever the wave that is under discussion, and its distinguishing characteristics, the interest of the women folk is at the heart of it.

African Feminist Movement

African feminism can be traced back to the 1980s, when the feminist movement was centered on the interests of white women (Chanter 2000:10). It contained an implied presumption that white women's experiences and viewpoints predominate. The concerns that primarily afflicted white women were thus the focus of mainstream feminist discourse, which frequently ignored or minimized the particular difficulties that women of color, particularly Black women, experienced. Even worse, when the experiences of black women were taken into account, they were frequently

presented in a way that gave precedence to the experiences of men in the black ethnic group, essentially disregarding the unique challenges and viewpoints of black women. Hooks (1982:6), therefore, writes:

> No other group in America has so had their identity socialized out of existence as have black women. We are rarely recognized as a group separate and distinct from black men, or as a present part of the larger group of "women" in this culture. When black people are talked about, sexism militates against the acknowledgment of the interests of black women; when women are talked about, racism militates against a recognition of black female interests. When black people are talked about, the focus tends to be on black men, and when women are talked about, the focus tends to be on *white* women.

This meant that Black women were caught up amid these misrepresentations. As a result, they had to defend their status as Black people in the feminist movement, where whiteness is frequently the default, and as women in racial discourse, where maleness is frequently the default (Kanu and Adidi 2022). Furthermore, they noted that men's experiences as oppressed people were frequently disregarded. Therefore, as feminism gained traction in Africa, it adopted a new name that focused on issues specifically affecting Black women while also considering men's concerns (Kanu 2018b). Ideas like Humanism, Womanism, Stiwanism, Motherism, and Radicalism, which are African variations of the movement, were born out of this context.

In contrast to pre-colonial Africa, post-colonial African societies, independence, urbanization, globalization, Western education, and modernity provided women with new identities and roles. In this era, women believed they were free from the snares of demeaning and discriminatory traditions and conventions. Post-colonialism provided women a voice to choose their own identities and restored their self-confidence. Chimamanda Adichie, Ogundipe-Leslie, Chioma Okpara, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí, and numerous other modern literary feminist authors may have been influenced by this voice (Kanu and Ndubisi 2023). Unlike Western feminism, Mikell (1997:1) notes that "the origins of African feminism are different from that of Western feminism as African feminism arose mostly due to resistance to the perceived dominance of feminism from the West and are rooted within African culture". Men and women are seen as complementary in African culture, and each sex has equally significant roles to play in the community. Thus, intersectionality is the foundation of African feminism.

Nigerian literary critic and theorist Ogunyemi (1995) suggested the term womanism as a substitute for feminism in African gender discourse. According to her, womanism is a more accurate phrase that captures the essence of African women and, in the end, sums up their experiences. To offer Black women a different voice, the term "womanist" was coined. Finding alternative terms that could accurately describe Black women's experiences was vital if feminism, as practiced in the West, was unable to adequately explain them. With a focus on cultural representations of the African woman, it is a notion that focuses on how African women view their female identities. Its main objective is to change society for the benefit of both men and women.

Writing on Ogunyemi, Kolawole (1997:11) avers that, "Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideal of black life, while giving a balanced presentation of black womandom. It concerns itself as much with the Black sexual power tussle as the world power structure that subjugates blacks". The rejection of the concept of feminism by Ogunyemi was on

the basis that its mission is unacceptable to black/African women. According to Ogunbiyi (1988:64):

> …feminism smacks of rebelliousness, fearlessness, political awareness of sexism and an unpardonable (from the male viewpoint) drive for equality and equity between the two sexes… Womanism is black-centered. It is accommodationist. It believes in the freedom and independence of women like feminism. Unlike radical feminism, it wants a meaningful union between black women and black men and black children and will see to it that men begin to change from their sexist stance.

Omolara (1994:22) developed the philosophy of "Stiwanism", which is about the social transformation of all people: "I wanted to stress the fact that what we want in Africa is social transformation." It is about attempting to create a harmonious society, not about going to war with males, reversing roles, or doing to men what women believe men have been doing for ages. Stiwanism was an effort to fill in the gaps in their knowledge of feminism. It maintains that African women must use diplomacy to successfully rid African society of all types of oppression, particularly sexist oppression, and that the radical or militant stance of Western feminism has no place in the African environment.

> The new term describes my agenda for women in Africa without having to answer charges of imitativeness or having to constantly define our agenda on the African continent in relation to other feminisms, in particular white Euro-American feminisms which are, unfortunately, under siege by everyone. This new term allows me to discuss the needs of African women today in the tradition of the spaces and strategies provided in our indigenous cultures for the social being of women (Omolara 1994:22).

"Nego-feminism and no-ego feminism" is a theory of negotiation feminism that was established by Nnaemeka (2004:357). It is defined as "the feminism of negotiation,... structured by cultural imperatives and modulated by ever-shifting local and global exigencies." She is adamant that negotiations, not power struggles, should be used to resolve conflicts between the sexes.

The concept of "Motherism" was developed by Acholonu (1995:6) as Africa's substitute for Western feminism. Motherism's attributes, which include motherhood, nature, nurturing, collaboration, cooperation, tolerance, love, understanding, patience, etc., properly characterize a woman's nature and all that she stands for in African culture. At every level of human endeavor, it encompasses the dynamics of structuring, reorganizing, constructing, and reconstructing in collaboration with Mother Nature. In this instance, motherhood could refer to either a woman or a man. In this sense, men and women are fighting together against their shared foe. The completeness of human existence in a balanced ecosystem is guaranteed by the complementarity between males and females.

Opara (1999:1; 2004:23; 2013:57; 2017:119) created the feminist model of African feminism, which is very different from radical feminism. After Opara, Akachi (2015) presented a philosophy of snail-sense feminism. She advocates for a snail movement in Nigerian patriarchal society when discussing how all Nigerian women should treat males of the opposite sex. Snails are crawling animals that release saliva while they move. Because of its saliva, it can go through

uneven terrain without getting hurt. It can even crawl through areas with a lot of thorns without getting hurt.

Parallelism of Western and African Feminisms

As much as it has been established that African culture is different from Western culture, there are points of convergence, which are also true about the study of Western and African feminisms. Thus, Davies and Graves (1988:10) note that: "the obvious connection between African and Western feminisms is that both identify- specifying issues and recognize women's position internationally as one of second-class status and 'otherness' and seek to correct it". Generally, at the level of convergence, women's movements all over the world concern themselves with the same grand themes around gender equality and social justice, like women's legal and political rights, Gender Based Violence (GBV), reproductive rights, employment, and discrimination.

At the level of difference, Hooks (1982:6) thinks that a "central tenet of modern feminist thought has been the assertion that all women are oppressed." This is different from the understanding of feminism in Africa, and most African feminists are likely not ready to be associated with the Western concept of feminism. Mikell (1997:1) avers that "the perspective of feminism in Africa grew from a very different dynamic than in the West. In the first place, it has been shaped by the resistance of African women against Western rule". As the African states put themselves together, there emerged a gender-prejudiced social pact, gradually growing at the power of female leaders.

Another important difference between Western and African feminisms is found in the conceptualization of women as the subject of struggles and the issue of equality between men and women. Bayu (2019:54) notes that:

> Western feminists make equality between men and women the center of their struggles, while World feminism considers gender discrimination neither the sole nor perhaps the primary focus of the oppression of Third World women. It is one of the issues they have to face, one problem among others, certainly not the only one. According to them, other types of oppression like racism and economic exploitation also have to be defeated.

Bayu (2019) also observes that Western feminists disagree with the view that men are equally oppressed under patriarchy, while African feminists agree that men are similarly oppressed and that gender equality means the oppression of neither gender. African feminisms, with their emphasis on community, culture, and social justice, offer a nuanced and contextualized understanding of gender and power relations. In contrast, Western feminisms, with their focus on individual rights and equality, provide a more universalized and liberal framework for gender analysis. From the foregoing, it can be said that while Western and African feminisms share common goals and critiques of oppressive patriarchal systems, they also have distinct differences shaped by their unique historical, cultural, and socio-political contexts.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of Western and African feminisms reveals a complex tapestry of similarities, differences, and intersections. While both traditions share a commitment to gender equality and social justice, they diverge in their historical, cultural, and philosophical contexts. Rather than positing African feminisms as a reaction to or rejection of Western feminisms, this article has sought to highlight the agency, creativity, and diversity of African feminist thought and practice. By centering African voices and perspectives, we can work towards a more inclusive, decolonial, and transnational feminist project.

Ultimately, the comparison of Western and African feminisms reminds us that feminism is a multifaceted, dynamic, and contested concept. As we move forward, we must continue to engage in dialogue, listen to diverse perspectives, and foster solidarity across borders and boundaries. There is a need to further develop and apply decolonial feminist frameworks to analyze power relations and knowledge production, examine the intersections of gender with other categories, such as race, class, sexuality, and disability, in African and Western feminist contexts, and investigate the strategies, challenges, and successes of transnational feminist collaborations and movements. By pursuing these avenues of research, we can deepen our understanding of the complexities and diversity of feminist thought and practice, ultimately contributing to a more just, equitable, and inclusive world.

African feminism brings a critical perspective to the global feminist movement, emphasizing the importance of intersectionality, community-based approaches, and cultural sensitivity. Ultimately, the intersection of Western and African feminisms enriches our understanding of the complex and multifaceted nature of gender inequality. By engaging with and learning from each other's perspectives, feminist scholars and activists can work towards a more inclusive, nuanced, and effective movement for gender justice. As we move forward, it is essential to recognize and value the diversity of feminist thought and practice, and to create spaces for dialogue, collaboration, and mutual learning. By doing so, we can build a stronger, more united, and more just feminist movement that truly represents the needs and aspirations of women and marginalized communities around the world.

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