

FEMINISM AND MODERNITY IN ANGLOPHONE AFRICAN WOMEN'S WRITING

A 21ST-CENTURY GLOBAL CONTEXT

Dobrota Pucherová



"In Pucherová's bold foray into twenty-first-century Feminist writing from Sub-Saharan Africa, the F-word stands tall and proud, yet in relational, transhistorical and transnational symbiosis with Euro-American feminisms. This may anger Afrocentrists, but the fact is that this fierce cohort of African Amazons is honing new, global tools and entexting a post-patriarchal Africa for women, womyn/womxn, transwomen and the rest of us."

Chantal Zabus, Professor, Université Sorbonne Paris Nord

"This is an extremely relevant and bold move to look at the women's writing in terms of what is going on the continent, comparing it to similar moments of the rise of women's writing in other parts of the world including Eastern Europe and thinking of it through terms of strategic and thematic interventions. The political point that the book makes about liberation and democracy questions assumptions that have long needed interrogation. That is to say a clear reading of the last 60 years of Anglophone women's writing from a transnational and transhistorical feminist perspective is long overdue."

Abena Busia, Professor of Women's and Gender Studies, Rutgers University, USA

"Dr. Pucherová argues that African feminist writers have progressed from the conventional postcolonial tradition/modernity divide, to a sharpened focus on their bodies as entirely theirs. I am delighted that she anchors African feminist praxis in the contemporary African women writers' bold affirmation of their bodies. This book widens the analysis of the body in pain to include attention to pleasure and desire in the fashioning of African women's agency. This is a well-researched and well-argued monograph that promises to enhance our understanding of contemporary African feminist praxis."

Chielozona Eze, Professor of African and African Diaspora Literary and Cultural Studies, Northeastern Illinois University

"This is an important contribution to research on African feminism by conceptualising it from a transnational and transcultural perspective. It puts the discourse at a global level, a shift from many insular discussions of African feminism. The choice of texts opens up multiple avenues for engaging with these topics from many different African contexts. The material is very timely and the scholarship is outstanding. A must-read for any student researching African feminism."

Naomi Nkealah, University of Witwatersrand, South Africa



Feminism and Modernity in Anglophone African Women's Writing

This book re-reads the last 60 years of Anglophone African women's writing from a transnational and trans-historical feminist perspective, rather than postcolonial, from which these texts have been traditionally interpreted. Such a comparative frame throws into relief patterns across time and space that make it possible to situate this writing as an integral part of women's literary history.

Revisiting this literature in a comparative context with Western women writers since the 18th century, the author highlights how invocations of "tradition" have been used by patriarchy everywhere to subjugate women, the similarities between women's struggles worldwide, and the feminist imagination it produced. The author argues that in the 21st century, African feminism has undergone a major epistemic shift: from a culturally exclusive to a relational feminism that conceptualizes African femininity through the risky opening of oneself to otherness, transculturation, and translation. Like Western feminists in the 1960s, contemporary African women writers are turning their attention to the female body as the prime site of women's oppression and freedom, reframing feminism as a demand for universal human rights and actively shaping global discourses on gender, modernity, and democracy.

The book will be of interest to students and researchers of African literature, but also feminist literary scholars and comparatists more generally.

Dobrota Pucherová is Senior Researcher at the Institute of World Literature (Slovak Academy of Sciences) in Bratislava, and a lecturer in the Department of African Studies and the Department of European and Comparative Literature at the University of Vienna.

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Dobrota Pucherová



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Introduction

Reclaiming the "F-Word"

In Africa, most women's rights practitioners prefer to call themselves "gender activists". For various reasons, we avoid the F-word: Feminism. However, I personally steer clear of the term, "gender activist". This is because it lacks the "political punch" that is central to feminism. In the African context, the term "gender activist" has had the regrettable tendency to lead to apathetic reluctance, comfortable complacency, dangerous diplomacy and even impotence. [...] It must be understood that a backlash against "women's issues" is a backlash against democracy and progressive change [...] In Africa, when the backlash is placed against the backdrop of political monopoly, economic deprivation, poverty, violence, displacement, adjusting economies and globalization, the crisis multiplies tenfold. It will take a new revamped kind of feminism to resist and defeat this kind of backlash. A feminism with a capital "F".

Sylvia Tamale (2006)

Feminism as transculturation

This book is about the epistemic shift in the understanding of feminism, modernity, and what it means to be an African woman that has taken place in Anglophone African women's writing between the 20th and the 21st centuries. By rereading this literature in a comparative context with European and American women writers, I aim to show how invocations of "tradition" have been used by patriarchy everywhere to subjugate women, the similarities between women's struggles worldwide, and the feminist imagination it produced. By "feminist imagination" I mean, borrowing from the South African feminist philosopher Pumla Dineo Gqola, "a range of expressions of creative agency that deconstruct patriarchal power" (2017, 160). Such a comparative framework is, according to the Indian feminist theorist Chandra Talpade Mohanty, the only adequate model for studying women's histories, because it emphasizes "relations of mutuality, co-responsibility, and common interests, anchoring the idea of feminist solidarity" (2003, 242). Similarly, Caren Kaplan and Inderpal Grewal (1994 and 2002), Pumla Dineo Gqola (2001), Desiree Lewis (2001), Ella Shohat (2001), Bibi Bakare-Yusuf (2003b), Elleke Boehmer (2005), Sylvia Tamale (2011c), Rodriguez et al. (2015), and others have argued

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that feminism is a relational, global process that can lead to cross-pollination and dialogue about women's shared experiences while not cancelling out their differences:

A relational approach allows women, at least in principle, *both* to proclaim the specificity of their particular historical experience, *yet also* to affirm common interests and political transformations across cultural and national borders, as they act from a commitment to social justice for those constructed 'woman.'

(Boehmer 2005, 13)

I am arguing that 21st-century African women's writing manifests such relational, transcultural feminism, which suggests mutuality, coimplication, and the interweaving of histories and struggles. As the Nigerian scholar Bibi Bakare-Yusuf explains, African and Western ideas on gender and sexuality have not developed in isolation, because they have always been part of a history of intellectual exchange between the continents:

For millennia, Africa has been part of Europe, as Europe has been part of Africa, and out of this relation, a whole series of borrowed traditions from both sides has been and continues to be brewed and fermented. To deny this intercultural exchange and reject all theoretical imports from Europe is to violate the order of knowledge and simultaneously disregard the (continued) contributions of various Africans to European cultural and intellectual history, and vice-versa.

(2003a, 140)

For this reason, I maintain that speaking of "indigenous" or "home-grown African feminism" on the one hand, and "Western feminism" on the other, as distinct and mutually exclusive, is inaccurate. These terms are not seen here as homogenous, authentic entities, but rather as working frames that enable the historicizing of "the interconnectedness of the histories, experiences and struggles of U.S. women of color, white women, and women from the Third World/South" (Mohanty 2003, 242), but also the parallels across time and space that resulted from no direct cultural contact, but only similar socio-historical dynamics. My own "in-between" position as an "Eastern European" scholar from a formerly colonized nation helps me complicate the "African vs. Western feminism" dichotomy that dominated 20th-century postcolonial discussions as inaccurate and unhelpful in analyzing African women's emancipatory struggles, and allows a reading of African women's writing as part of transnational feminism. In this book, I predominantly use the term "transnational feminism" that feminists like Mohanty, Kaplan, and Grewal claim has political power because it "signals attention to uneven and dissimilar circuits of culture and capital," recognizing "the links among patriarchies, colonialisms, racisms, and feminisms" (Kaplan and Grewal 2002, 73).

The term "global feminism," on the other hand, has been seen as disregarding profound differences among women, while "international feminism" has echoes of a Marxist internationalism for some feminists. However, I find that this terminological war does not quite reflect the reality of feminist activism, where many women from the Global South identify with the terms "global" and "international"—as, for example, in the Sisterhood is Global Institute, the Association for Women's Rights in Development, or the United Nations world conferences on women, human rights, or poverty. In fact, as Peggy Antrobus (2004) usefully points out, the worldwide women's movement is largely a movement of Third World feminists and women of colour in North America. Therefore, I do not essentialize these terms and use them interchangeably.

Anglophone African women's writing published in the new millennium has already received a great amount of scholarly attention, although not so much in monograph length. My book is in conversation with Marie Kruger's Women's Literature in Kenya and Uganda: The Trouble with Modernity (2011), Touria Khannous' African Pasts, Presents, and Futures: Generational Shifts in African Women's Literature, Film, and Internet Discourse (2013), and in particular with Chielozona Eze's Ethics and Human Rights in Anglophone African Women's Literature (2016), whose concerns with feminism, the body, and human rights echo my own. While Eze focuses on the important topics of pain, human rights abuses, and empathy, I widen the analysis to include also pleasure and desire in relation to African women's agency, freedom, and power. My main contribution to the debate lies in the comparative and diachronic perspective that makes it possible to situate Anglophone African women's writing as an integral part of women's literary history. This allows me to identify the major epistemic, discursive, and figurative shifts in African feminism that, I argue, represent a transcendence of 20th-century postcolonial discourses. As the epigraph by the Ugandan feminist Sylvia Tamale signals, this transformation has been fundamental—from "feminism with a small 'f" (Emecheta 1988) to "feminism with a capital F."

In this comparative reading, for example, the contemporary phenomenon of the "New South African Woman" can be related to the New Woman movement of late 19th-century Euro-American feminism; similarly, 21st-century Somali women's memoirs can be read alongside English Enlightenment narratives of female emancipation, just as recent African transgender writing can be productively compared to the trope of androgyny that was an important feminist concept of English-language literary modernism. Such "typological analogies," to borrow a term from the Slovak literary comparatist Dionýz Ďurišin (1967), show that women's engagements with the discourse of modernity have often mirrored each other across cultures and centuries, because their exclusion from modernity by patriarchy put them in similar positions. Such a transcontinental and transhistorical feminist perspective, rather than postcolonial, from which these texts have been traditionally interpreted, allows for a unique examination of the relationship between gender and modernity while

presenting an opportunity to situate African women's literature as an inherent part of women's literary history.

Postcolonial historiography has rejected the idea that European historical development constitutes the norm against which the others are measured (see Chakrabarty 2000; Gaonkar 2001). What interest me is not how, crudely put, African feminists have been "lagging behind" and have now "caught up" with their Western "forerunners," a question based on a teleological view of history that would be both historically inaccurate and meaningless. Rather, I am interested in the historical circumstances that have caused that certain ideas are to be found in literary texts by women centuries apart. Finding out how the same ideas developed on different continents at different times makes it possible to understand patriarchy as an embodied, rather than abstract, experience, and feminism as women's universal response to patriarchy's violation of their bodies.

The emergence of African feminisms

Feminism, understood as women taking care of their lives and challenging patriarchy, has existed in Africa in many forms throughout history. As the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo observed, "Those women who rioted against the colonial regime at Aba, in Eastern Nigeria, in the 1920s did not seek permission from Virginia Woolf' (Maja-Pearce 1990, 18). Late 20th-century African feminisms had their roots in women's participation in anticolonial movements, such as the rebellion of over 10,000 Igbo and Calabar women in 1929 that became known as the Women's War (Amadiume 1997, 151). When African women started writing in the 1960s, their texts challenged patriarchal gender roles even though they did not see themselves as "feminists." They resisted this term, which they understood as the struggle of bourgeois white women for the right to reject marriage and motherhood, an attitude they found deeply incomprehensible and immoral. For them, the oppression of racism and (neo-) colonial capitalism seemed much more urgent than sexism. As the African American theorist Clenora Hudson-Weems put it, "If one considers the collective plight of Africana people globally, it becomes clear that we cannot afford the luxury, if you will, of being consumed by gender issues" (1998, 158). This meant that global feminist solidarity was impossible, because white Western women were unavoidably seen as part of the neocolonial power structures. As the Nigerian literary critic Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi wrote,

As a woman with her own peculiar burden, knowing that she is deprived of her rights by sexist attitudes in the black domestic domain and by Euro-American patriarchy in the public sphere; as a member of a race that feels powerless and under siege, with little esteem in the world—the black female novelist cannot wholeheartedly join forces with white feminists to fihe a battle against patriarchy that, given her understanding and

experience, is absurd. So she is a womanist because of her racial and sexual predicament.

(1985, 79)

Ogunyemi's womanism was one of the African feminist theories that started to emerge in the 1980s as a corrective to Western feminism's white, middleclass, Western bias and its perceived combative attitude. These African women argued that Western feminists paid scant attention to the cultural specificities of Third World societies, structural domination of those societies by the West, and did not allow for a diversity of perspectives in formulating international human rights agendas even as they sincerely believed their good intentions (Tamale and Oloka-Onyango 1995). As a result, the position of postcolonial African feminism was (and in some cases still is) that a global sisterhood was an illusion that pretended to find common ground while appealing to a set of "universal" (that is, Western humanist) values (see e.g. Amadiume 1987; Oyewumi 2003a). The Nigerian scholar Mary Modupe Kolawole wrote that "The starting point for Africans is the search for and enunciation of Africanness as a pre-requisite for any coalition with other women globally" (1997a, 14). Feminism, seen as a "dirty word," was replaced by womanism, motherism, stiwanism, nego-feminism, or feminism with a small "f." As the American scholar Gwendolyn Mikell summed it up, "The debates in many Western countries about essentialism, the female body, and radical feminism are not characteristic of the new African feminism [...] concerned with many 'bread, butter, culture, and power' issues' (1997, 4).

Even though African women's criticism of second-wave Western feminism was in many ways valid, many thinkers from both camps found this theoretical schism unproductive and attempted a dialogue. The French comparatist Françoise Lionnet asked: "But does this necessarily mean that the only acceptable approach to a demystified multicultural feminist practice is the one based in cultural relativism?" (1995, 2). She proposed that "there is a distinction to be made between *cultural* and *moral* relativism" and insisted that it was possible to create a dialogue "about the nature and function of feminism as a global process and the social construction of femininity within different cultural contexts" (ibid.). The German scholar Susan Arndt also called for the necessity of an "internal feminist dialogue" among "the feminisms of the world" (2000, 53) and emphasized the necessity of a "proactive reflection upon the whiteness of feminist movements and theories, both historically and in the present" (Arndt 2005, 162), as has been done by Laura Donaldson (1992), Anne McClintock (1995), Elleke Boehmer (2005), Margaret McLaren (2019), and others. The Cameroonian Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi (1997a) pointed out that such a dialogue between women from the Global North and South was only possible if they met on an equal footing, with equal opportunities to speak and be heard.

African feminism in the 21st century as a global phenomenon

Such opportunities presented themselves in the 21st century, when African women's voices have become more audible and powerful than ever. Their

feminist texts speak to audiences across the world, becoming enormously influential and appropriated outside of African contexts, and some have become international bestsellers. For example, in 2005, the Somali feminist Ayaan Hirsi Ali was named by *Time* magazine as one of the 100 most influential people of the world. Her work has had a powerful impact on government policies regarding social justice for immigrant women and girls in the Netherlands and the United States. African feminists regularly appear on lists of the 100 most influential Africans: the New African magazine's 2020 list included the Ugandan feminist Stella Nyanzi (who uses what she calls "traditional radical rudeness" to campaign for the rights of Ugandan women and LGBTQ people) and several established and emerging women writers: the Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangarembga, the Nigerian Abi Daré', the Ugandan Jennifer Nansubuga Makumbi, the Zambian Namwali Serpell, the South African Zukiswa Wanner, and the Nigerian Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Adichie's book-length essay We Should All Be Feminists (2014) has been translated into 32 languages and is distributed to every 16-year-old high school student in Sweden as a blueprint for "gender equality and feminism as one of the cornerstones of the Swedish society" (Emenyonu 2017, 2). However, there are many other African feminist activists of the millennial generation who are receiving global attention by taking advantage of the online space as bloggers, public speakers, and journalists, such as June Eric-Udorie, Panashe Chigumadzi, Zineb El Rhazoui, and Nana Darkoa Sekyiamah, to name just a few. The British-Somali poet Warsan Shire's poetry featured prominently in Beyoncé's 2016 feature-length film Lemonade, which popularizes Black feminism through the language of globalized popular culture. The Nigerian writer Akwaeke Emezi's novel Freshwater (2018a) was named the Best Book of the Year by The New Yorker magazine and nominated for the Women's Prize for Fiction, a British prize. The nomination of this novel meant that the Women's Prize Trust had to create new guidelines for transgender and non-binary authors. These are just a few examples of how African women are changing ideas about gender, gender justice, and feminism across the world. In other words, African feminism has become a global phenomenon.

This new, empowered generation of African feminists rejects the contest between competing theoretical camps as paralyzing feminist resistance. This is why Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie said in 2017 that she finds identities such as "intersectional feminist" or "womanist" unhelpful, because they divide, rather than unite, women (Brockes 2017). Of course, intersectionality remains a key concept for contemporary African feminists, for whom it is already included in the term "feminism." As formulated by the 2006 *Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists*, "patriarchy is inter-related with and informs relationships of class, race, ethnic, religious, and global-imperialism" (4). While the history of colonialism still has a powerful impact on African women's gender politics, as analyzed for example by Gqola (2010), Tamale (2020), or Chigumadzi (2019), contemporary African feminists find that the earlier constructions of white women as the staunch enemies of African

women, and the emphasis on the oppression that African women and men share, relegated the issue of gender-based oppression to the background. Gender mainstreaming has foregrounded gender as the cross-cutting issue in the African underdevelopment discourse, making it the prism through which neocolonial, religious, capitalist, racial and sexual oppressions are viewed. This has made it possible to see feminism as a global movement with the united goal of ending sexism. Among the first to formulate this were Sylvia Tamale and J. Oloka-Onyango:

Whereas we all recognize the differences between and among women (such as those based on race, class, ethnicity, age, and sexuality, to name a few), it would be a terrible mistake for both national and international feminism to become overly engrossed in the "difference" debate. [...] It thus makes pragmatic political sense to retain the category of women despite the multiplicities that exist within this category. [...] This conviction is based on our belief that universality exists in many women's concerns, regardless of physical location.

(1995, 697-698)

This paradigmatic change in African feminism has been enabled by three major phenomena of the late 20th and early 21st centuries; intensified globalization, increased migration, and digitalisation, which has given rise to internet activism through blogging, social media, and internet publishing. As the South African feminist Desiree Lewis wrote in a 2001 issue of Agenda, "essentialist evocations of geographical, national or racial criteria as decisive grounds for defining African feminism are especially untenable in our current context of intensified globalisation" (2001, 4). By this she meant "The diasporic migrations of numerous feminists, especially the movement of African scholars to the United States, [which] complicates any clear identification of the regional sites of intellectual production," but also the "globalised networks that shape scholarship, its rapid circulation via international conferences, the internet and commercial publishing" that lead to "high degrees of crossfertilisation across national and continental boundaries" (ibid.) and have resulted in the fact that "African feminism" has become much more fluid than before. As I argue, significant themes in contemporary African feminist writing are nomadism, border-crossings, unhomeliness, deterritorialization, displacement, and explorations of otherness resulting from disillusionment about the direction of postcolonial Africa. For these women, the "African vs. Western feminism" is no longer the analytical frame of feminist inquiry. This allows them to claim predecessors across continents, acknowledging a history of feminist resistance as a common heritage. They write in a dialogue with Western feminists and protofeminists ranging from Mary Wollstonecraft, Jane Austen and George Sand to Simone de Beauvoir, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, Naomi Wolf, and Kimberlé Crenshaw, seeing no ideological problem in such allegiances.

In the same breath, it needs to be emphasized that contemporary African feminism invokes a long and rich tradition of African women's resistance to patriarchy that is their source of inspiration for creating home-grown concepts and theories that capture their specific socio-political and -cultural realities and contribute to global feminism's understanding of gender power. African feminism has destabilized hegemonic discourses within and outside Africa, with the result that gender has become accepted as a key term in international development and human rights discourses. Feminist thinkers from Africa have played key roles in international and Pan-African networks such as Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), Association of African Women for Research and Development (AAWORD), African Women's Development and Communication Network (FEMNET), Women in Law & Development Africa (WiLDAF), and The African Women's Development Fund (AWDF) that have driven this change (Moghadam 2005; Ahikire 2014; Tamale 2020). More recently, South African feminists, drawing from their own protest tradition, fuelled the momentum of the #RhodesMustFall and #FeesMustFall movements that have inspired decolonial movements around the world. As I discuss in this book, many contemporary African women writers, philosophers, politicians, activists, and literary scholars look to their own roots when writing their feminist theories, comparing Western feminism with precolonial African understandings of gender and sexuality that revise, rewrite, and complicate (but not entirely reject) Western notions of femininity, female liberation, modernity, and postmodern subjectivity. As Pumla Ggola wrote,

theories from Blackwomencentric spaces are no longer just concerned with writing back—to white feminists, to colonialism, to patriarchy, to apartheid, etc.—but are about refashioning the world in exciting ways where the difference within is not a threat but a source of energy.

(2001, 11)

Beyond terminological wars

At the beginning of the new millennium, Susan Arndt wrote that "If feminism could do justice to the self-understanding of Africans committed to gender issues, all terminological differentiation could become unnecessary" (2000, 54). It seems that we are now witnessing such a transculturation of feminism that has been possible, on the one, hand, by the calls for a greater inclusiveness from the side of those Western women who did not feel included by second-wave feminism's white, middle-class, heteronormative bias; and, on the other, by the epistemic shift in African women's understanding of the self, modernity, and freedom that is signalled by their embracing of the term "feminism" without qualifications—as, for example, in the title of the journal Feminist Africa launched in 2000 by the African Gender Institute in Cape Town, or by the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists, signed by over two hundred women in 2006 in Accra, whose preamble boldly states:

We define and name ourselves publicly as Feminists because we celebrate our feminist identities and politics. We recognise that the work of fighting for women's rights is deeply political, and the process of naming is political too. Choosing to name ourselves Feminist places us in clear ideological position. By naming ourselves as Feminists we politicise the struggle for women's rights. [...] Our feminist identity is not qualified with "ifs," "buts" or "however." We are Feminists. Full stop.

(3)

This is an unambiguous space-clearing gesture, indicating separation from the previous generation of African women who explicitly rejected the term feminism, and expressing no less than an entirely new stage in African women's liberation movement – a second wave in African feminism. As Tamale indicates in the epigraph above, the term "feminism" has a political edge that alternative terms such as "gender activist" do not. Similarly, the Ugandan Josephine Ahikire (2014) refers to the political impotence of "gender activism" of the 1980s and 1990s that offered African women a strategy to work around, but not against, patriarchy. While 20th-century African feminists distanced themselves from the "radical" Western feminism and emphasized negotiation and compromise, contemporary African feminism is unashamedly radical and politicized. Gender inequality is seen as undermining democracy on a global level: "We must perceive gender equity as one of the major pillars of our democracy today. Gender equity would ripen global democracy to its truest sense" (Tamale 2006, 40).

An epistemic shift in African feminism

As this suggests, the shift in African feminism is not only terminological, or only concerning genealogies, but profoundly philosophical. I will use the words of the South African feminist philosopher Pumla Gqola (2017), for whom this new feminism is

a global movement of people who know patriarchy is unjust [...]. Feminists reject patriarchy's insistence that human beings come in two, oppositional sexes: one soft, emotional and inferior, the other hard, rational and superior. [...] Feminism insists that women should be able to decide what to do with their bodies freely and without punishment or threats of violence. Feminists believe a woman should be able to choose what to do with her body, that reproduction is a choice not destiny, that women are entitled to sexual pleasure [...] and that nothing women do is "asking" for violence.

(58)

Gqola's definition foregrounds three aspects that are key to understanding the transformation African feminism has undergone in the last 20 years. First, it is no longer a culturally self-enclosed feminism, but part of the global movement against sexism; second, it rejects traditional gender roles that were important

for 20th-century Afro-centric feminists; and third, it focuses on the female body, previously neglected by African feminists, as the crucial site of women's oppression as well as their freedom. All of these aspects are emphasized also by the *Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists*:

As African feminists, we are also part of a global feminist movement against patriarchal oppression in all its manifestations. Our experiences are linked to that of women in other parts of the world with whom we have shared solidarity and support over the years. (5) and mentions in the same sentence "rights of access, ownership and control over resources and our own bodies."

(4)

Such articulations are unprecedented in African feminism. For contemporary African women writers and theorists, sexuality is the primary arena of women's negotiation of their rights, framed as human rights. The Nigerian scholar Chielozona Eze has called it the "ethical turn in African literature" (2016, 1). As he insightfully formulated it,

the new generation of African women's writing [...] recasts feminism as a moral issue of our times. [It] draws attention to some of the central issues of feminism: rights and dignities of the body of woman. In so doing, it establishes women's rights as fundamental human rights that have to be addressed in Africa.

(Eze 2014a, 89)

Eze's deeply affecting reading of African literature insists, controversially, that morality cannot be understood as culturally relative, because moral issues have a life and death consequence. Following upon his work, I am arguing that the transformation in African feminism in the new millennium, when it has turned its attention fully to the body and sexuality as the key territory requiring liberation from misogynistic oppression, can be compared to the profound epistemic shift that took place in Western feminism in the 1960s, when it proposed that the private is political and has retrospectively been called the "second wave." Sexuality, once considered a Western feminist concern by African women, is brought centre-stage and recognized as the location of women's freedom and victimization. According to Naomi Nkealah and Obioma Nnaemeka (2021), "the prevalence of gendered violence [in Africa and African diasporal indicates a gross neglect of human rights values" and they suggest that "misconceptions about human rights" are "directly implicated in the practice of gendered violence" (1). The new focus on sexuality is not an underplaying of other types of oppression African women undergo, but a recognition that all of these types of oppression are heavily gendered. As Elaine Salo and Pumla Gqola put it in their editorial to a 2006 issue of Feminist Africa,

Anyone who is passionate about women, gender and development in African contexts needs to interrogate discourses about African sexuality. [...] sexuality remains central to contemporary conflict about citizenship in postcolonial and post-apartheid contexts [...] Contributors to this issue of *Feminist Africa* have challenged the dominance of heteronormativity as assumed in the limited set of sexualities considered permissible within African societies.

(Salo and Ggola 1–3)

Such articulations reflect a 180-degree turn from the late 20th-century discourses on African femininity and offer new opportunities for African women to redefine their societies from within, making the idea of sexual freedom a template for thinking about individual human rights. By reframing women's demands for bodily freedom as universal human rights, contemporary Anglophone African women writers and feminists transcend the culturalist discussion on feminism and contribute to its decolonization. As the Charter of Feminist Principles for African Feminists states, gender equality must be built on "The indivisibility, inalienability and universality of women's human rights" (7). These rights are recognized as universal because, as Eze (2016) argues, the violation of these rights produces physical pain that hurts all women in the same way. Therefore, I am arguing that feminism is not an abstract theory that is meaningless outside of its own cultural context. The language of feminism is intelligible cross-culturally because it is inscribed directly on women's bodies. By depicting bodily pain as caused by patriarchal oppression, and pleasure as enabled by the ideas of individual freedom and human rights, the narratives analyzed in this book perform the meanings of these concepts (including emancipation, modernity, the self, and bodily autonomy) that have been seen as Western. The meaning of feminism, literally embodied, is thus freed from abstraction.

Towards a global feminist solidarity

This understanding of feminism enables female solidarity across continents, classes, and races in the 21st century, as rising religious fundamentalism, political conservativism, and ideologies of masculinism across the world threaten to undermine the feminist victories of previous decades (Ahikire 2014). In her latest book, Tamale emphasizes with great urgency: "The benefit of 20/20 hindsight has allowed feminists to understand that heteropatriarchal-capitalist power is all pervasive and that social inequalities have only increased after half a century of formal independence" (2020, 370). For the new generation of African women writers facing a growing backlash against feminism, it is their oppression as women that unites them and can lead to transcultural feminist solidarity. As the protagonist of the South African novel *Period Pain* (2016) by Kopano Matlwa realizes, rape happens to women across race, class, and social status: "It doesn't matter that I'm highly educated, a doctor, that I started a

petition that made the newspapers. I have a vagina. That's all that matters" (131). In her novel *Black Widow Society* (2013), the South African novelist Angela Makholwa makes a similar point by showing that domestic violence victimizes black, white, lower- and middle-class women. This is not to assume a universal "woman-ness" and deny the specificities of women's situations, since these can be crucial in how women experience and are able to resist gender oppression. Rather, it is to suggest that sexism has become perceived as a cross-cutting oppression, reflecting cross-cultural patriarchal discourses. As the Indian feminists Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita recognize,

Yes, there are a lot of factors dividing women from each other—class, caste, religion, race, education (or the lack of it), one's field of work (in the house or out of it), and many other complex historical forces. Yet if we look at the nature and basis of women's oppression, we discover that our sex determines our common predicament in a very fundamental way.

(cit. in Miles 1998, 173)

Sexism is very difficult to resist, because it has become normalized to the degree of becoming invisible: it is deeply embedded in the gendered categories of cultural identity, morality, spirituality, ideas of beauty, and so on—in other words, it is part of traditions that are valued as positive. As this book analyzes, it can be expressed in various ways: as the bride price or the diamond ring; as the social obligation of motherhood or sexual harassment in the workplace; as implicit censorship of women writers; as female genital mutilation and forced marriage; or as rape and murder of women who "misbehave"—that is, who refuse to accept patriarchal discourses about femininity. Therefore, African women's writing shows, resistance against sexism unavoidably requires the undoing of these discourses.

The plural narratives of feminism

As I write this narrative, I am constantly aware of the need to simplify complex histories. It, however, need not be forgotten that "Western feminism" has been not only white, liberal, and middle-class, but also Black, radical, socialist, queer, ecological, intersectional, and so on. It is also perhaps relevant here, as Sylvia Tamale points out, that "Western thought is not always synonymous with colonial thinking. Historically, many scholars and thinkers located in the West (Whites and non-Whites) have been extremely critical of colonial power and practices" (2020, 13). Likewise, "Far from being constructed in simple opposition to Western feminism, feminism on the African continent constitutes a myriad of heterogeneous experiences and points of departure" (Ahikire 2014, 8). A transcontinental and transhistorical analysis such as this makes it possible to recognize the common concerns of "postcolonial" and "Western" women, instead of only their differences, and the mutual interactions and inspirations that have blurred (neo)colonial boundaries. I believe

that exploring these similarities can help transcend distracting cultural relativist debates and put feminism at work in the interest of all women.

For instance, while from the African point of view the former Eastern Europe counts as "the West," Eastern and Central European women have had a very different feminist history. In the 1960s and 1970s, when the second feminist wave was rising in the United States and Western Europe, respectively, Eastern Europe was in the grip of communist totalitarianism; therefore, the human rights of both men and women were on hold. Of course, according to the official ideology, the socialist woman was already liberated. free to work outside the home and pursue her career, and did not need feminism to rescue her. In the wake of the fall of communism in the early 1990s, Eastern European women looked to Western feminism for inspiration and sustenance when formulating their demands and positions in the newly democratic societies. In post-communist Czechoslovakia, for example, the support from Western feminists was crucial in helping women define their goals and strategies after 40 years of physical and ideological isolation from the democratic world, especially as majority society again viewed feminism as a suspicious left-wing philosophy (Cviková 2014, 67).

Postcolonial African women encountered very similar reactions when they expressed the need for a feminist discourse: that "the word liberation doesn't arise here at all because we were never in any form of bondage," or "Feminism is for developed countries like America and Great Britain. Our women here are alright...no problem" (Chukurere 1998, 134). As Nfah-Abbenyi observes, "Senghor went as far as to state that 'the African woman does not need to be liberated. She has been free for many thousands of years" (1997b,5). A number of texts by Anglophone African women writers of the first and second generation—for example, by Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, or Flora Nwapa show that they were profoundly aware of the need to challenge patriarchy in Africa. In a number of cases, Western feminism helped them name patriarchal forms of oppression and articulate ideas of self-determination, individual freedom, and gender equality that were not indigenous to their cultures, through picking up terms such as "marital rape" or "sexual harassment," or discovering alternative roles available to women. It is not for nothing that Francis, the patriarchal Igbo husband in Emecheta's Second-Class Citizen (1974), worries about the effect of London on his wife: "Somebody has warned him that the greatest mistake an African could make was to bring an educated girl to London and let her mix with middle-class English women. They soon know their rights" (64). Western feminism is here not to be rejected a priori, but is seen as enabling (albeit to a limited extent) for the African woman.

Structure

Contemporary Anglophone African women's literature is a huge and growing body of writing that cannot possibly be covered by any single monograph. The choice of texts in this book reflects my effort to include writers from East,

West, as well as Southern Africa (living either in Africa or in the diaspora) whose work best exemplifies the new focus on the body, sexuality, human rights, and the transcultural positioning of African feminism in the 21st century. Due to space limitations, many important texts necessarily had to be left out.

Chapter 1 places Anglophone African women's literature into the context of Anglophone women's literary history and feminist criticism, tracing patterns and continuities across time and space that highlight the gendered nature of tradition and modernity. It describes the epistemic shift that took place in this literature in the 21st century, reframing women's demands as universal human rights and recognizing the female sexual body as being at the centre of women's political struggle, since it is the primary site for the production of hegemonic gender order all over the world.

Chapter 2 compares the work of two expatriate Nigerians, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie and Sefi Atta, to argue that the idea of Afropolitanism, as a consciousness of being part of the world, has a unique potential for advancing African feminism, because it enables a transcultural positionality that opens up a productive space of critical inquiry into African gender politics and makes it possible to imagine an alternative gender order. Their texts' focus on the themes of nomadism, border crossings, unhomeliness, and explorations of otherness is read in the wider context of postcolonial and post-communist women's writing against patriarchal nationalism, colonialism, and totalitarianism.

Chapter 3 draws on Judith Butler's theorization of censorship present in the social regulation of discourse to analyze Ugandan women's writing since their belated entry into literary publishing in the late 1990s, facilitated by the non-governmental organization FEMRITE. Placing their experiences into a wider Anglophone literary history, it examines the ways in which patriarchal society creates norms of constructing a social and political female subject. The diasporic generation of Ugandan women writers is seen to free itself from this discursive censorship and create narratives that are entirely woman-centred.

Chapter 4 reads the representation of female genital mutilation (FGM) in three East African texts alongside 18th-century English proto-feminist texts to show the practice as part of systemic sexism that casts women as irrational. Enlightenment ideas of selfhood that the texts invoke are an opportunity for African women to reconstruct themselves as free, rational, and sovereign subjects with exclusive and inalienable rights to their bodies, equal to men in their humanity. In drawing on the work of Sylvia Tamale and Chielozona Eze, it engages with the problem of how African women can claim universal human rights without rejecting their culture.

Chapter 5 analyzes three South African novels in the context of the post-apartheid debates in South Africa on toxic masculinities, nationalism, and the New South African Woman. It argues that the novels by Angela Makholwa and Kopano Matlwa rewrite South African post-apartheid discourses about the nation from a black female perspective to reject the culture of violent masculinity as well as traditional discourses about women by appealing to universal

human rights. The trope of the New South African Woman is read as an analogy to first-wave feminism's New Woman ideology and as a transnational feminist phenomenon.

Chapter 6 analyzes sexual desire between women in contemporary African writing as an expression of the disappointment with the African postcolonial nation and its heteropatriarchal systems of oppression. By proposing the African woman's right to self-determination outside of heteronormative identities, and drawing a direct relationship between women's sexual pleasure, freedom, power, and agency, it chronicles a radical epistemic shift in the formation of African female subjectivity. In its insistence that women's bodies are meaningful in themselves, it imagines a social change toward respect for otherness and the recognition of individual human rights.

Chapter 7 analyzes contemporary African transgender texts as an explicit articulation of 21st-century African feminism: that the meaning of the body is not fixed, but fluid and is generated by a person's lived experience; and that it is imperative to redefine African femininity so that African women no longer feel a deep dissonance between their sex, sexuality, and their assigned gender. Read through the lens of queer theory and French poststructuralist feminism, it shows how these African texts destabilize the boundaries between African and Western feminist frameworks to constitute their protagonists' gender identities through a real or imaginary encounter with otherness, transculturation, and translation.

While the narrative arch of this book proceeds from the less towards the more radical feminist texts by Anglophone African women/womyn/womxn writers, this is not an attempt to write yet another grand narrative of a cumulative history of emancipation with a triumphant ending. As my readings show, this writing can also be occasionally ideologically contradictory or ambiguous. Sometimes, it has a tendency to replicate some of the blind spots of white middle-class Western feminism, such as class bias, confusing materialism and consumerism with liberation. At other times, it tends to endorse stereotypically masculine behaviour in women as empowering, or, on the contrary, reveals a fixation with romance and its stereotypical gender roles. This book does not seek to celebrate 21st-century African women's writing as the ultimate stage in the "evolution" of African feminism, but to examine how it contributes to the ongoing transnational discussion on gender power, modernity, human rights, and democracy.

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