

AFRICAN FEMINIST PHILOSOPHY: THE CREATION OF A MORAL CONFUSION?

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Abstract

The uninitiated or novice might easily believe that Feminist Philosophy is something easy to define. Once we have defined Feminist Philosophy we can easily suggest that African Feminist Philosophy is Feminist Philosophy that belongs to Africa or Africans or something to that effect—such as philosophising about feminist ideas in and for African women. My thesis is that the concept of African Feminist Philosophy is nothing like a Western type conception of feminism. The suggestion that African Feminism is like Western Feminism amounts to moral confusion.

I will use the Setswana traditional idea of woman to demonstrate this argument. Even though women are oppressed in the world, their idea of oppression does not and may not necessarily be the same. The Western type of women liberation might not necessarily be what African women want. It is therefore a moral imperative to define and chart a clear and peculiar path for African Feminism and feminism in general will have to accept this as part of the universal liberation movement for women.

Keywords: African feminism, feminist philosophy, moral confusion, women liberation

Introduction

Feminism is difficult to define, let alone African feminism. Certain attempts at defining feminism lead to what I call ‘moral confusion’. I also argue that what is critically important is the humanity of a woman rather than her gender. This is not a denial of the suffering that women encounter. African traditional thought can contribute to the understanding of moral behaviour in general and the behaviour towards women in particular. African traditions have to be listened to for that to happen, and their story is not the Western story of womanhood.

Moral Confusion

Before we deal with the other issues I think it is wise to define “Moral Confusion.” When what is used as a criterion of right and wrong is different from what other participants elsewhere use; or if the pursuit of a certain thing as value is taken as such by one group of people and another group thinks otherwise about the value, and yet another thinks it is valuable but not to the extent that the others value it then we have what I call moral confusion. In short moral confusion is the situation whereby there is lack of clarity regarding some moral imperative, some value, the importance of pursuing something and the way it ought to be pursued if at all it should.

Moral confusion can arise not because there is no objective instrument to measure morality but simply because the people who ought to make moral judgements are mistaken about applying moral principles. This happens when people are not clear about what they want to value or if they make mistakes about what ought to be valued. If for example an agent treats me unjustly on account of my nationality because they are ethnocentric it does not mean justice itself is indefinable. It means that the agent is mistaken in thinking that nationality is morally significant in making decisions about treating people justly. If they try to hold their position as a moral position then they would be under the grip of moral confusion. They are confused about what it means to say that something is morally right or it is a moral duty.

Feminism

“Feminism is a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression” (Hooks, 2000: viii, 1).¹ This may mean different things to different people. One student of mine did not attend lectures, missed some of the tutorials and failed to submit her term assignment on the due date. She later wrote to tell me that she was working full time while at the same time she was attending university. She said that she could not do her assignment because she was busy at her job; that she was a single mother and the university did not appreciate her situation and therefore it was sexist. She wanted me to mark her overdue assignment and trash the university regulations because they were anti-women. I need not belabour the negative consequences of such thinking for society.

Bell Hooks argues that “a woman can insist she would never choose to have an abortion while affirming her support for the right of women to choose and still be advocate of feminist politics. She cannot be anti-abortion and an advocate of feminism” (Hooks, 2000: 6). This actually means that anybody who is anti-abortion cannot be a feminist. It means that the

¹ She had expressed the same idea earlier on (Hooks, 1984:18).

definition of feminism includes the acceptance of abortion as a right. The moral justification of abortion seems to be taken for granted. Women have to want abortion for themselves or for others for them to qualify for being feminists. They must be able to use abortion as a means of birth control so that they can have free love—they can have sex with whoever they want whenever they want even if repeated abortions may be harmful to them (Hooks, 2000:27). I would expect that any man who opposes abortion cannot be a feminist let alone a friend of feminism.

The above insights are enlightening in that they help us to ask whether Africans will define feminism in the same way. Is or should the African woman be concerned about the right to lesbianism, binary vision of personhood, individualism, materialism and infatuation with the body, modernism and a total rejection of what they are and a replacement of that with what the western feminist prescribes for her? Bell Hooks makes a good point in criticising western feminism for assuming that it is what they call and make it to be but nothing else. She points out that the Arab and African practices of forced female circumcision are called barbaric whereas the sexism of the west is accepted by the powerful western feminists who in effect are bedding the enemy when they assume colonialist, social class and racist postures such as the belief that beauty is thinness according to the tastes of white male supremacists (Hooks, 2000: 44ff). Bell Hooks commits the same crime when she prescribes feminism as including necessarily, the idea that abortion is a right.

Rosemarie Tong (1989: 1ff) talks of varieties of feminism and desists from defining it. She however gets tempted to define it even after making a disclaimer that it is difficult to define. She believes that feminism can be understood in the following way “[...] many, although by no means all, feminist theorists are able to identify their approach as *essentially* liberal, Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, socialist, existentialist, or postmodern” (emphasis added) (Tong, 1989:1). She goes on to explain that all the different feminist traditions in their various weaknesses combine to give what is fascinating to her by:

the way in which these partial and provisional answers intersect, joining together both to lament the ways in which women have been oppressed, repressed, and suppressed and to celebrate the ways in which so many women have “beaten the system,” taken charge of their own destinies, and encouraged each other to live, love, laugh, and be happy *as women* (Tong, 1989:1-2).

This is telling given in an introduction to a subject that is new like feminist philosophy or feminism, and a “comprehensive” introduction for that matter. The above quotation utilizes the word ‘essentially’ and lists seven traditions of feminism (liberal,

Marxist, radical, psychoanalytic, socialist, existentialist and postmodern). The use of that term is telling because it means that what makes feminism feminism is describable in terms of these seven. Anything else can be added but these are the traditions without which one would not have feminism.

The other important thing is that she does not mention Africa in her book in relation to feminism; neither does she mention other traditions from Asia for example. This is telling because in her mind these do not make part of the essence of feminism. It cannot be the case that a modern day scholar of her calibre would not be aware of these feminist traditions.

Finally, the above quotation captures what I believe is her definition of feminism as a lamentation about oppressions, repressions and suppressions; a celebration of women's triumph against all odds; and an exhortation for women to take charge and be loving, happy and sisterly as a gender. This definition does not account for the picture of a happy woman whose happiness was nipped in the bud by colonialism; whose identity is with the clan rather than gender; whose struggle is for everybody rather than women. The picture leaves out the woman who spearheads the liberation of her children who are both male and female; the husbands, brothers, cousins, uncles, fathers, grandfathers, neighbours, compatriots and fellow human beings who are male.

It is clear that the above definitions of feminism seem to make sense until one asks what the words used really mean. It is therefore clear that feminism is difficult to define. If this is true then African feminism is even more complex especially if it is going to be defined in terms of the power brokers of the society be it the western world or the very boisterous and loud western educated African scholars who call themselves feminists and see modernism as the in thing worthy of adoption by all Africans. If other African scholars reject the values of western feminism and define the rights of women within the context of human moral rights not necessarily ascribable to and pinned for by women as a group but to humanity, would it make sense to talk about African feminism or it would be more sensible to talk about respect for human rights that include the respect of every person irrespective of their gender?

One would suspect that an attempt to define feminism is futile and in the context of Africa it makes better sense to talk about the elevation of how Africa has a contribution to make in the area of gender studies by showing the powerful position of women in the African traditional societies, which have been corrupted by colonialism and western ethnocentrism. In that sense African Feminism would be defined as *the struggle of Africans to reaffirm their most valuable conceptions of motherhood as the centre of human development and liberation from the bifurcation of humanity into gender, racial, ethnic, religious, economic, traditional,*

regional, national and philosophical categories. From this we can define feminism in general as *an attempt to recognise the place of women in society as stakeholders who should not be viewed in any other terms besides their humanity.*

My definition is of course prescriptive like Hooks'. But I want to suggest that it seeks to deny what feminism seems to emphasise. Whilst the feminist tradition seems to call for the emphasis of sexual orientation (Horn, 2006, Onyewumi, 2001, 2002), gender and the body as defining categories (Arnfred, 2002; Nzegwu, 2002; Horn, 2006; Onyewumi, 2001, 2002), I am proposing that humanity ought to be the defining category.

Western definitions of African Feminism and the African woman

My unwillingness to accept a simple definition of feminism is directly at odds with some of the most celebrated feminists of the west who in turn have conscripted African feminists to see things their way. I am going to give a sample of the views below. We can start with the famous Bell Hooks who argues that “Feminist politics is losing momentum because feminist movement has lost clear definitions. We have those definitions. Let’s reclaim them. Let’s start over” (Hooks, 2000: 6). She of course argues against class based feminism and the north/south differences and advocates for a radical feminism that goes beyond these binaries (Hooks, 2000: 46). It is however important to notice that this radical feminism is defined by the likes of her. She sees herself as follows:

Many of us were the unplanned children of talented, creative women whose lives had been changed by unplanned and unwanted pregnancies; we witnessed their bitterness, their rage, their disappointment with their lot in life. And we were clear that there could be no genuine sexual liberation for women and men without better, safer contraceptives—without the right to a safe, legal abortion” (Hooks, 2000: 26).

She wants African women and men in this case to subscribe to that definition of who she is. The whole of humanity has to share her view. The problem is that many African women do not subscribe to abortion. It is also clear that her appeal to their experience does not necessarily imply the right to abortion. It is not a very smart argument to say that because my mother did not plan to have me she should have had the right to abort me. If I really mean it I must understand that I would not be alive if she had the right to abort me and she actually exercised that right. The likes of Hooks must understand that many women who had unplanned pregnancies did not react the same way that she is suggesting. It therefore amounts to moral confusion on her part to assume that she is right in advocating for abortion as a method of contraception.

The idea of abortion actually is consistent with what Simone de Beauvoir is supposed to have said “it is not in giving birth but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded not to the sex that brings forth but to that kills” (Arnfred, 2002: 4). So women in addition to other reasons, kill the unborn in order to be like men so that they can have access to the superiority that men enjoy in this tradition.

The reason why western feminists including the likes of Hooks who may seem to be radical in their thought and forthright in their criticism of western ethnocentrism in feminism are reaching out to Africa is to change the way Africans think. Africans are seen as traditional societies that need to be modernized. This idea permeates the whole of western thinking from anthropology to economics, feminism and sociology (Arnfred, 2002). The African woman is the other that needs to be domesticated or formatted to fit into the modern format. The primary issue in the western world is the focus of the male, who is the epitome of development. The western woman has struggled to approach the ideal who is a man both in terms of freedom and gender equality. Feminism now wishes to bring the African woman who is “subordinated par excellence” on board. “The general idea is that women’s subordination belongs to tradition and to the past, whereas women’s emancipation—or gender equality, as the current terminology has it—belongs to modernity and to the future” (Arnfred, 2002).

The Africans have to believe that the female body is a handicap which has to be brought closer to perfection—to be like that of man. In the same way, according to Arnfred (2002) western women see themselves as being better than African women who have now been conscripted into the universal patriarchal oppression of women—the oppressed western women become the oppressed women of Africa.

The Africans have to believe that they are considered by men and the whole of society as others, the immanent body that has to be contrasted with the transcendent mind of the man. The body determines what a being is according to this tradition and the Africans have to adopt it—female/male, black/white, beauty are categories based on bodies. This is what Oyeronke Oyewumi calls western scholarship patriarchalizing Africa and teaching biological determinism (Arnfred, 2002).

The nuclear family that is taken as the norm in the west and is pushed into the thinking of the African. “The nuclear family is a gendered family par excellence. As a single-family house hold, it is centred on a subordinated wife, a patriarchal husband, and children” (Oyewumi, 2002). In this family the woman is just an oppressed wife and nothing more.

The issues of homosexuality and lesbianism are important in this respect. Westerners and their allies debunk African views of morality and good family values. They hail lesbianism for example as a right that ought to be recognized by the Africans; a lifestyle that challenges hegemony and patriarchal discourses. Sexual rights according to this view are “based on the application of existing internationally recognised rights within the domain of the sexual body” (Horn, 2006:8). Jessica Horn protests that in Africa femininity is seen as a domesticated heterosexual woman married for the sexual gratification of her husband. Proverbs and laws are then used to entrench the idea that the woman mother is the ideal at the exclusion of lesbianism (Horn, 2006:9). What is wrong with this is that the heterosexual family institution is nothing but “the means through which men reproduce themselves socially, culturally and sexually” (Horn, 2006:10). She also calls for the right to a legal abortion.

She goes on to claim that:

The sexual rights discourse also exposes points of tension between the demands of *African feminists, who find their political roots within local histories of African women’s resistance*, and conservative commentators, who see the feminist agenda in Africa as an index of misguided Westernisation, and make “restorationist appeals to implicitly masculine constructions of African culture”(emphasis mine) (Horn, 2006:11).

Here we can see her conscripting the “African feminists” so that her opponents appear “conservative” and she also makes use of the patriarchalization concept where she charges her opponents with constructing a masculine African culture. The idea, she wants us to believe, is not foreign after all as evidenced by local feminists. She cannot ignore the evidence for “the growing visibility of ‘homophobia from the left’, including on the part of actors in the women’s movement, suggests there is still need for education [...]” (Horn, 2006:15). This is informative because she is determined that their project succeed no matter what the Africans themselves think. The need for education that she is referring to shows the attitude that she has—the African is ignorant of what is good for him and her and has to be educated.²

² It is clear that some of the feminist ideas are rejected by non-western women. For example, Lal (2004: xviii) reports that in 1995 during the UN conference on women “one night the ambassador was woken by an agitated Chinese official asking him to rush to the tent city as the Indian delegates were rioting. On getting there he found that the trouble began when some American delegates went into the tents of their Third World sisters and tried to initiate them into the joys of gay sex. With the Indians in the lead, the Third World women chased the American women out of their tents, beating them with their sleepers.”

Sister Namibia is an organisation dedicated to the promotion of lesbianism among other sexual identities in Namibia. The westerners and their allies have “nurtured a new generation of young lesbian women who are prepared to speak publicly for their rights” (Frank & Khaxas, 2006:85). By 2007 they should be producing electronic and print media to ensure “the visibility of lesbian women in Africa” (Frank & Khaxas, 2006:86). South Africa has legalized gay marriages and some people are already looking at neighbouring countries hoping that they will follow suit (Setsiba 2006a, b).³

Another area that is of concern related to the vision of African feminism is prostitution. Some people, in the face of protestation by Africans still want to promote women engaging in prostitution. In South Africa for example, there is an organisation (SWEAT—Sex Worker Education and Advocacy Taskforce) that works for the legalization of prostitution. The director of the organisation has argued “our primary goal is to achieve a legal adult sex work industry in South Africa, in which the human rights of sex workers are realised and where sex work is acknowledged as work” (Arnott, 2006:88).⁴ In Botswana there are voices calling for the legalization of abortion. For example Dr Peggy Ntseane is quoted as having pushed this argument claiming that “voluntary sex work would lead to enhancement of economic empowerment for women” (BOPA, 2006). One columnist calling himself Loose Cannon claims that prostitution is a sign of women being smart and he was advising them to forget about love and concentrate on getting themselves rich men (Loose Cannon 2007).

Part of the reason why women become desperate to the point of turning to prostitution is the fact that capitalism has shortchanged everybody and traditional attitudes and behaviours of community life have been trashed. For example, the Botswana Media Worker’s Association (BOMWA) issued a statement pointing out the part played by the media in promoting practices that violate women. BOMWA noted “the perpetration of the violation of the rights of women by the media through unbecoming advertising, which tend to ridicule and portray women as sex objects and amusement tools” (Mashungwa, 2006). This is supported by the fact that Population Services International (PSI) recently ran an advertisement to promote their Lovers Plus assorted coloured and flavoured condoms in

³ This paper is not advocating for the persecution of lesbians and homosexuals. It is not arguing for the position that homosexuality is morally wrong. The position is rather that in the west the issue is taken for granted. People no longer think it is debatable whether or not people should be allowed to practice their sexual preferences. My argument is that this fact does not and should not be taken to mean that it must be the case in the south where the practices are resisted.

⁴ The organization also contributed a chapter in which they explain their goal. Democracy is seen as guaranteeing rights for prostitution (Petzer & Issacs, 1998: 192-196). The volume in which the chapter appears is entitled “Global Sex Workers” (Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998). It generally argues in the different chapters for the support of prostitution and its recognition as work.

Botswana. The advert showed a fourteen year old girl saying that she is fourteen and she goes out with elderly men and she uses the Lovers Plus condoms. This generated a lot of debate according to the report (Motlogelwa, 2007).

Oppression of women through language Sameness—Luce Irigaray and others

According to Rosemarie Tong Luce Irigaray criticised Sigmund Freud for seeing women as mere reflections of men or being same as men except for their lack of a proper penis. According to this view:

female sexuality, because it does not mirror the male's, is an absence, or lack, of the male's. Where woman does not reflect man, *she does not exist* and, suggested Irigaray, will never exist until the Oedipus complex is exploded and the “feminine feminine” released from its repression (Tong, 1989: 227).

The query is that women are described in terms of men. The Western society did and does not conceive of women independently of men. Women become some kind of deformed men or men who are lacking in some way.

Luce Irigaray proposed that a good look at language is important in dealing with this problem. When you look at the sciences for example, they want to avoid subjectivism and the active voice and for her this is an attempt to hide the identity of the speakers. This is to achieve the so-called neutrality, but that is misleading because there is nothing neutral. She agitated for the active voice—people should stand up to be counted so to speak.

The other solution advocated for by Luce Irigaray is for women to engage in self-stimulation and lesbianism. This is necessary to challenge the patriarchy that she saw dominating life to the detriment of women. They have to show their richness in thought which is much wider than men's. When women engage in these activities they challenge the myth of an invisible penis that is peddled by patriarchy (Tong, 1989: 228).

Luce Irigaray must have a point. If we take the English language for example, on the surface there appears to be something in support of the sameness between men and women and that women are defined in terms of men. A masculine gendered person or thing is called a **male**. A feminine gendered one is called a **female**. Whilst the latter stands alone, the former is the latter preceded by something such as (fe-). The language has **man** and **woman**; not only that, persons are usually referred to as **human** beings and some people do not hesitate to say “man” with reference to persons of both genders but never say “woman” to mean the same. The question is whether this is coincidental or not. People like Irigaray do not think so.

Of course boy and girl seem to be different and one wonders whether that *is* the coincidence. Other terms are: actor actress, hero heroin, emperor empress, heir and heiress.

If the above is true then the liberation of women should include the reformulation of language even though some of the feminists do not want anything to do with men. It is important however to note that whilst the call for a morally imperative examination of language as a tool of oppression by men is legitimate it amounts to moral confusion to suppose that all cultures and linguistic groupings must take arms against their languages on account of their role in the oppression of women by men. The reason is that not all languages describe women that way. Or, women can be described independently of men in other languages.

The case of Setswana⁵

The language

One Botswana theologian can teach us something when he argues:

In Setswana, like in many African languages, we do not have such gender insensitive pronoun problems. We would say, “O Lorato,” while the English would have no gender-neutral pronoun to use there, hence the male pronoun “**He** is love.” Maybe we could contribute to the expansion and development of theological language by using “O” wherever there is a need to use a pronoun for God (Mmualefhe, 2007: 13-14).

The point here is that even God is gendered in the west whereas the Setswana tradition does not make such assumptions.

In Setswana *motho* (person), *mosimane* (boy), *mosetsana* (girl), *mosadi* (woman) and *monna* (man) all belonging to noun class 1 of the language. All class 1 nouns in the language are for persons (Mogapi, 1984:46). Their root is /*Mo-*/ in the singular. Their plurals belong to noun class 2 whose root is /*Ba-*/. Noun formation for classes 1 and 2 is through the combination of the root and a stem. Thus the names are formed by combining:

Root /*Mo-*/ + stem

-tho

-simane

-setsana

-sadi

-nna (Mogapi, 1984:62).

⁵ This author has argued elsewhere that the Setswana language does not discriminate against women. It is the exploiters and oppressors of women who use the language to oppress women to the extent that they promote parts of the language that seem to be against women and gloss over those that are for women (Gaie, 2001).

The point I am making here is that when we see the noun *mosadi* (woman) it does not reflect anything about *monna* (man). The only common thing about them is that they belong to the same noun class.

The words *mosimane* (boy), *mosetsana* (girl), *mosadi* (woman) and *monna* (man) have meanings. From *-sadi* is derived *sala* which means “remain”. *Mosadi* literally means one who remains. To remain can mean at least two things. Firstly it can mean a person who remains when others leave or move forward. In this sense it would mean one who remains backward when others advance. It could also mean one who remains at home when others go or have gone somewhere—probably when the men go hunting? Secondly *sala* can mean maintaining the status quo. This would mean one who remains when everything changes. To *nna* is to sit or always be. *Monna* is one who sits or one who always is. So continuous being seems to be common to the meanings of the two words for man and woman. There is no good reason why we should suppose the word naming females is negative and the male positive.

Interesting also is the term *ngwana* (offspring). My *ngwana* (offspring) which can be both male and female;⁶ is ‘one who swears by me.’⁷ She is also her mother’s *ngwana* (offspring) by whom she swears. This means the offspring swears by both parents; not just the mother and not just the father. Further, my *ngwana* is also *ngwana* to my brother whom she calls *rangwane* (small father) and to my brother whom she calls *rramogolo* (big father). She is my father’s *ngwanangwanake* (one who swears by one who swears by me). My daughter calls my father *rremogolo* (my great father). A *ngwana* calls her mother’s younger sister *mmangwane* (small mother), she calls the elder sister to her mother *mmamogolo* (big mother) and *mmemogolo/nkuku/nkoko* (great mother) is what she calls her grandmother. This shows that the child cannot be claimed by either of the parents at the exclusion of the other. Despite appearances to the contrary, the mother claims an equal share for her child just as the father does.

It is also critical to note that a maternal uncle, the brother to one’s mother is very important in the life of an individual. This is clear when it comes to marriage. The uncle is the head of delegation that negotiates for marriage. He is also important in deciding where his

⁶ This is consistent with other African traditions, for example, in Shona an offspring is a *mwana*, *umuntwana* (Isindebele) simply means ‘a small person’. The words are gender neutral. It is also noteworthy that the nearest translation in English is ‘offspring’ rather than child. Oyeronke Oyewumi (2001) makes the same point when she says that “many African languages do not have gender-specific kinship categories like sister and brother.” See also Signe Anfred (2002). This is true in Setswana *nmake* (younger ‘sibling’) and *nkgonne/nkonne/mogolole* (older ‘sibling’) are gender-neutral. The word sibling is in quotes because *nmake* is a relationship that goes beyond sibling in the western tradition—my bother is not just my mother’s son it is my aunt and uncle’s son as well as explained above.

⁷ Kgomotso Mogapi (1984:74) says that the word *ngwana* is derived from *moana* “*ke go re motho yo o anang ka yo mongwe.*” This means a person who swears by another person.

nephew or niece is buried in the case of death. Here the uncle represents the person's mother's. Traditionally no marriage would take place if the uncle was opposed.⁸ The role of woman is also important in that whereas from the mother's side the uncle is critical, from the person's father's side the aunt, the sister to the father, is a critical member of the inner circle of the family without whom no decision about marriage can take place. She comes before the brothers to the person's father who as stated above, is part of the father. Somebody's daughter or son does not belong to their father more than to their aunt.

Language and sex

Batswana do not like calling sexual parts by their names. It is especially unbecoming for anyone to mention by name sexual organs of the opposite gender. A woman can talk about vaginas etc even though it is not good and a man about testes and penis etc but it is worse for a man to talk or pronounce vagina or for a woman to pronounce penis. In fact as far as Batswana are concerned there is language that can be used to refer to these organs without mentioning them. Otherwise it is rude to mention the organs.⁹

Having said the above there are references to the vagina in the Setswana language. But as usual it is not directly mentioned. A pronoun is instead used. *E tshetlha e tsala kgosi* (the poor one gives birth to a king. “E” is the pronoun standing for “it”. We have to note that “*tshetlha*” is a colour name for orange, yellow, gold and the related colours. More importantly, it refers to poverty as well—to say that somebody is “*tshetlha*” is to mean that they are poor. It also represents one whose skin is patched and dry due to lack of proper bathing and ointment. It is also critical to realise that the colour “*tshetlha*” refers to a male thing. In Setswana colours reflect gender. So a vagina, because it is female must be referred to as “*tshetlhana*”. But it is referred to as male when “*tshetlha*” is used. To reflect this organ as male is symbolic in that the “maleness” of the vagina in this context shows something negative. In the thinking of Batswana maleness reflects negativity whilst femaleness reflects positivity. For example, when there has been rain and people have bumper harvests Batswana say the year has been female (*ke ngwaga o mo namagadi*). Now to say that a vagina is male by identifying it with that colour is to mean that even the type that is supposed to be negative (poor in this case) can give birth to a king. It means even a poor woman can be loved by a king and end up being the queen mother. Note that the mother of a king is a powerful figure in this tradition.

Sexual relationships

⁸ Julie Livingston (2005: 116) explains that when a young man went to the mines before the 1960s the first salary they earned was given to the father who would pass it on to the uncle.

⁹ Mmaulefhe (2007:17) points out that it is more taboo to pronounce female genitalia—he describes it as “ear-defying.”

It is customary nowadays for people especially western styled feminists to assume that traditional sexual roles in Setswana society put a woman under a man. The assumption is that men dominate women when it comes to sexual intercourse. They decide what should be done, when they should have sex and how. The media has taken the assumptions and suppositions as gospel truth which needs to be reported without much assessment and comment.¹⁰ Some scholars hold this view as well (Phaladze & Tlou, 2001:199).

This view does not seem to be consistent with the available evidence. Batswana do not openly discuss sexual matters. It is also clear that initiation of young women and men included sex education. But what the people were told has not been openly discussed to the extent that scholars can take informed positions or whether or not women were taught to be submissive sexually to men. The fact is that whatever was discussed at the initiation schools was top secret. The graduates were never to divulge that to a person who has not been initiated. So most of the information is gleaned from the so-called advice given to brides and grooms at weddings. In my view this is very inadequate in that the wedding talks are a bastardization of the real education that took place at the initiation schools. So they cannot be a guide to traditional Setswana attitude to sex and the place of a woman in a sexual relationship.

The available evidence rather points to a different direction. It shows that the people in a sexual relationship are not necessarily what is perceived by the moderns. For example, normally men married women who were younger than them a practice still common to this day. But the wife would still be referred to as *molekane* (meaning mate as in age-mate) to the husband. If one is a mate it should not be expected that one must be subservient to the other. It is very likely though that modernisation has been mingled with western patriarchal beliefs and Setswana traditional beliefs recruited to support the status quo. For example, Setswana traditional beliefs did not tolerate abuse of children and women, wives included but nowadays people find it easy to claim that the traditional culture has a lot to do with these practices. The available evidence for example points to the fact that impregnating a young

¹⁰ For example, Mr Richard Matlhare is credited with the view. He is said to have claimed that “Some of the factors which contribute to low condom use include women’s reliance on men for protection during sex, their lack of negotiating power [...]”

Men still have a greater say on when, with whom and how sex takes place because of some culturally and institutional entrenched attitudes, he suggested” (Botswana Daily News, 1 December 2006).

The Midweek Sun also carried a similar belief (Mophonkolo, 2006).

woman resulted in a severe penalty for the man—their urethra would be cut with a razor in public according to Willoughby (Livingston, 2005: 77-78).¹¹

Leadership positions

In English the words king or queen reflect the gender of the leader. The Setswana equivalent *kgosi*¹² does not reflect gender in the same way. This is consistent with other African traditions. Signe Anfred explains that:

In Yoruba *oba*, which means ‘ruler,’ denotes a social position to be occupied by a man or by a woman. But in Western translation, *oba* has come to mean ‘king.’ (Oyewumi 1997:30). Whenever Westerners see a throne, they expect a man to be sitting on it” (Anfred, 2002).

It is a fact that many of the famous African kings are male. This is not necessarily because of discrimination against women. It is more a question of practicality. Batswana believe that a woman who gets married joins another family. If she is king then it would mean taking the throne to that family, which they did not want to happen. The other practical issue is that kings were leaders of the army, roles that were played by men in many cases. It is however clear that powerful women have been known to rule their tribes and also they could question the king (Livingston, 2005:76, 79). This is the case in other traditions as well.

The powerful position of women in Setswana traditional society is well articulated by Julie Livingston:

Women ensured that political machinations did not disrupt the necessary mediating activities of men, through their unique social position and ritual activities. Through their fertile and nurturing qualities, women also extended the system to the ground, turning rain into food, *madi* (blood) and *mashi* (milk) into people, and the doctor’s power into the experience of care and well-being” (Livingston, 2005:74).

Motherhood

Signe Anfred (2002) explained that from her sources in the African traditions motherhood is highly valued unlike in the west where it is looked down upon. It is also clear that matriarchy and patriarchy existed side by side in these traditions. So to emphasise one without the other is to misrepresent reality—there is male ancestry alongside female power/matriarchy. The concept of motherhood goes beyond bearing children and embraces mutual concern for women including the care of men and the whole of society (Oyewumi,

¹¹ This of course did not just constitute a punishment only but also a ritual to cleanse the land.

¹² The British translated the word as chief and many people have since followed suit (see Livingston 2000:5); the reason of course being that an African king cannot be given the title that is equal to that of the British monarch.

2001). Motherhood is a communitarian affair, never an individual one (Oyewumi, 2001). That is why even the physical pregnancy is not seen as an illness but a good sign of health (Nzegwu, 2002).

In the Setswana tradition, my sister is also called my mother. Likewise, as her brother I am also her father. In the absence of my father I will do for her what her father has to do and she does for me what my mother has to do. This means we both have to take care of each other. For example, when a man dies his cattle are shared among the family. The wife gets some. The children also each get some and the biggest share goes to the eldest son. This is not done to oppress the female siblings but it is supposed to ensure the family is taken care of in the absence of the father. The eldest son now takes the responsibility of ensuring that any member of the family who needs material assistance gets it just like the father would provide. So the extra cattle they got were for that purpose. The mother's cattle were also held in trust by the eldest son just as the father would hold them in trust for the wife. He was to ensure that his mother would not suffer when he was there.

Batswana would not give the eldest sister the highest number of cattle so that she could hold them in trust for the family in the same way that her male sibling did. The reason is again practical—usually the elder sister would have married and left the family. If she still remained, there was always a chance that she would leave her family through marriage. It would not make sense for a family to transfer their riches to another family by giving them to their daughter. She only took what she would use for her new family and left everything else to her people at her parents' home. She could always come back to her father's place if the marriage did not work.

A Setswana traditional home is a sacred place where the woman realizes her power unlike in the west which is the place of her bondage. Like the uterus, the home is where nurturing takes place (Livingston, 2005: 69). It is also where there is division of labour where dogs patrolled to ward off intruders at night and cats “kept away rodents and snakes.”

The king in traditional Setswana society is a “woman”. The kingly title *mmabatho* means ‘mother of the people’ (Mmualefhe, 2007:17). This shows the centrality of motherhood. Just like the mother of the nation the king has to cater for the needs of his people. They have to rely on him for sustenance. People pay taxes to the king (they contributed part of their harvest) and the king provided for the people in times of need. That is what a mother does. She collects food from the field and the different members of the family bring different types of food to the home and she prepares and distributes it to the members.

The point is that African traditional societies did not discriminate against women as people want us to believe. It is therefore moral confusion to suggest that Africans must take up arms against men because their society is patriarchal and oppressive to women. This however should not be taken to be a denial of the currently oppressive societies in African nations which have swallowed western traditions at the detriment of their own people.¹³

The young lady of UWI Mona—an example of moral confusion

She was wearing a pair of green jeans, which could easily reveal the top part of her bottom when she bended. Her top was revealing a good part of her belly and pubic hair. The sleeveless t-shirt enabled her to show her armpits.

Her t-shirt was written “Turn me on put your flesh inside me.”¹⁴ When she realized I was looking at her asked, “Do you want to read?” She proudly pushed her chest forward and stood in front of me for a moment. When I finished reading she provocatively invited me to ask further questions. I asked what the words mean. “It means what is written, nothing more nothing less.” I pleaded ignorance and she told me “we are all adults here. You know what these words mean and I mean what is written here.” The message did not just have a sexual connotation she was prepared to make an even more explicit sexual statement and she was bold, unfazed and clear about it.

I would like us to examine this incident for our assessment of the ideas of feminism. I thought it has a lot to do with moral confusion. The conduct of our young lady shows her to be “liberated” as she does not show any inhibitions regarding matters of sex. This can be seen as positive because she can present a view of women who are upfront about such matters, who would not be oppressed by men, the kind of woman who knows what she wants. This is good for her in the era of HIV and AIDS because she would for example, insist on safe sex and would not have any of her rights easily violated by a man.

Rosemarie Tong (1989: 203) talking about Simone de Beauvoir says that biology makes a woman different from a man. It also makes her weaker “her primary role in reproduction relative to man’s secondary role, her physical weakness relative to man’s physical strength, and her inactive role in heterosexual intercourse relative to man’s active role [...]”. This is relevant to our young lady’s behaviour because being assertive and

¹³ Julie Livingston (2005) details how the mining industry in South Africa, drought conditions in Botswana and Christian churches especially the missionary led ones, all combined to gnaw away at the Setswana traditional culture thereby promoting individualism and undermining the power of the elders, traditional doctors (religion) and the kings. The resultant state of affairs is capitalistic ambitions and exploitation rather than concern for the well being of others as it used to be the case in the Setswana traditional setting.

¹⁴ The t-shirt culture might be a response to the likes of Bell Hooks’ call to feminism who was concerned that the people seem to be losing the momentum to advocate for feminism. She urges “Let’s have T-shirts and bumper stickers and postcards and hip-hop music, television and radio commercials, ads everywhere and billboards, and all manner of printed material that tells the world about feminism” (Hooks, 2000: 6).

outspoken about sex would show the strength that she has or at least an attempt to “usurp” the man’s power to dictate matters of sexuality—she is able to talk about it rather than quietly wait for an interested man to raise the issue.

This is the kind of person we want to see out there in society—someone who is competitive; who can hold her own in the rough and tumble of the jungle that our world has become. She can protect herself. In this sense she becomes a symbol of hope for women. She approximates the ideal person that can be objectified in two ways. She can be the objective type of person for young women to become—a kind of goal to be achieved or role model to be followed. Secondly what women want is made public in and through her. It ceases to be the pinning, wishes and private fantasies of the individual women but now becomes a commonly shared vision of what women are and should be.

But masked by this apparent strength is a grim reality that reveals moral confusion. The young lady does exactly what Immanuel Kant would object to from a moral point of view. She actually **objectifies** herself. She wants to be treated like a mere object rather than a subject of experiences who is rational and therefore deserving to be treated like an end in itself rather than a mere means as demanded by Immanuel Kant (Price, 2000: 245-246).

She is on display awaiting the whims of anybody who can choose to, like a radio, music system or television set, “*turn her on.*”¹⁵ When something can be turned on it can be turned or switched off. The switcher or turner has the power to do the turning or switching and the object being switched on has no say in the process. This t-shirt is like an advertisement put on a ‘hot’ piece of furniture for the attention of the shoppers whose interest is being appealed to. When we buy furniture after some time it gets worn out or we simply get tired of seeing it so we change and get better, modern and more fashionable one and get rid of the old. In other words, when the young lady becomes an object she at the same time becomes dispensable just like the furniture.

The young lady does not only want to be switched on, she also wants somebody’s flesh to be put in her. This is a further objectification of her. She has lost her subjectivity, rationality and autonomy. The tag is silent on her reaction to this activity. It is silent on what

¹⁵ This of course reinforces the idea of “the male gaze” whereby a woman is not an independent individual but a passive object that has to be presented to the gaze of the male. Laura Mulvey (2005:98) describes this situation “in their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*. Woman displayed as sexual object is the leit-motif of erotic spectacle: From pin-ups to strip-tease, from Ziegfeld to Busby Berkeley, she holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire.” Elaine Baldwin et. al. (2004: 59) present a box entitled “The invisible man” in which a woman is pictured in an advertisement. The picture of the woman shows the immanence and the ever-pervasive man even though he is not featured in the picture. The woman in the picture shows how woman is defined in terms of the man, without whom the woman has no being and relevance—everything about her presupposes the male gaze.

she does or ought to do when all these happen. It is clear that the things are happening, or they are being done to her. She is a passive receptacle of somebody else's activity. All these do not portray her as an autonomous being that is standing out for her wellbeing—she cannot be viewed as a liberated individual in spite of the initial appearances.

Rosemarie Tong refers to de Beauvoir expressing something I consider to be happening with our young lady that I may call moral confusion when she sees herself as an object rather than a subject. Her behaviour is not liberation. She argues:

Woman then becomes her own object. Believing herself to be an object—a belief confirmed by most everyone around her—she is fascinated by, and perhaps even fixated on, her own image: face, body, clothes. The sense of being both subject and object at once is illusory because the synthesis of Being-for-Itself and Being-in-Itself is wholly impossible, yet the narcissist is defined by just that sense of supposedly transcended duality (Tong, 1989: 209).

de Beauvoir is saying that a subject cannot wish to be an object at the same time like our young lady seems to want. If she wants to be liberated she cannot will to be an object. That duality is an illusion.

A clear example of moral confusion in the present day Botswana

Traditional Botswana respected women. That is why, whatever a woman did, she would not be punished by lashing/flogging. Girls can be lashed/flogged but as soon as she becomes mature and approaches womanhood Botswana would not punish a lady in the same way that they would punish a young man or a boy because of respect for her. It is also clear that in the traditional setting when people are gathered at a *kgotla* (the traditional court of Botswana) women need not stand, they speak while seated.

The Setswana¹⁶ saying that *mmualebe o bua la gagwe gore mona lentle a le tswa* (literally one who says a wrong or bad word does so in order for one with a good or right one to say it), meaning “every person has the freedom to express their views.” The other saying *mafoko a kgotla a mantle otlhe* (all the words spoken at the *kgotla* are beautiful or good), which means everything that is said at the *kgotla* is for the good is instructive. This reflects the inclusiveness of the tradition. People should be treated equally at the *kgotla* including women. The Setswana tradition is clear that people can be respected and treated justly and that does not mean they must always be treated in the same way—whereas men are equal to

¹⁶ Setswana is the language of Botswana. Botswana are people of the country known as Botswana. Setswana also means “the Botswana way—the way of the people of Botswana.”

women, when it comes to punishment respect demands that women should not be punished in certain ways—justice is not equal treatment.

In an apparent confusion about equality and justice one Member of the Botswana Parliament, Mr Pono Moatlhodi (Ntibinyane, 2007)¹⁷ is quoted as having called for the flogging of women. He calls for this type of punishment because he believes women committed the same crimes as men did. He is also quoted as having advocated for the flogging of the elderly up to the age of 65 years. He believes that justice demands the equal treatment of people in all situations. He misses the point that even in the traditional society women could commit the types of crimes that men committed but that in itself was never sufficient to justify the flogging of women let alone the flogging of 65 year old men. At sixty a man is approaching the age of wisdom and ancestorhood. It therefore amounts to moral confusion if one is to suppose that he should be treated like an eighteen year old boy in the name of equality and justice. A simplistic assumption that giving a teenage mother the job to dig a trench the whole day alongside a boy of her age is justice amounts to moral confusion.

Conclusion

I have argued that feminism as defined by the west raises problems. There are many suppositions in the west that must not necessarily be taken to be the case in the so-called developing world. The use of language as an oppressive tool against women is not necessarily what happens in the African continent. Language is either neutral or it is used by those who want to oppress in such a way that it appears oppressive. In some cases the gender biased language of the west is usually used to represent the African as being oppressed by use of language.

I have also pointed out that feminism as defined in the west goes against the traditions of some African societies. Issues such as homosexuality, prostitution and abortion are taken for granted in the west and they are shoved down the faces of African communities as part of their ‘liberation’ from patriarchal domination.

African women are oppressed as a result of the westernization of African societies. They have to abandon their own traditions for modernism a part of which feminism is packaged for their acceptance.

Bessie Head is quoted as having said that “writing is not a male/female occupation. My femaleness was never a problem to me, not now, not in our age. I do not have to be a

¹⁷ This view seems to be gathering momentum—some people actually believe women are favoured by many situations. One chief is quoted as having called for the flogging of women as well (Regonamanye,2007).

feminist. The world of the intellect is impersonal, sexless” (van Rensburg, 2007). This is a refreshing insight into the way the African woman can see herself. It flies in the face of the western idea that women are in contest with men for power, be it intellectual, social, political and so on.

Shameela Winston (2007) has expressed the view that:

A real woman, in terms of our cultural context, is someone known for productivity, assertiveness, cooperation, humility, leadership, respectability, courtesy, commitment, wisdom and strength. And so, as a Motswana woman, I reject, as we all should, the western stereotype of the pathetic, snivelling, hormonal, hysterical, and insecure creature that lashes out at imagined threats. I think, as educated women in this part of the world, we can actually demonstrate that, as '*basadi tota*', (real women) we really are the ones we've been waiting for.

Feminism for Shameela is the realization of what the Setswana tradition has always accorded women; not their westernization. African feminism is an oxymoron if it is understood in the western way of liberation. It is a moral confusion—saying something is wrong when it is not and failing to detect the wrong thing so that a viable suitable solution can be sought.

The challenge of African feminism is first and foremost, a definition of what the African woman wants. She does not want to be dislocated from her family who include males. She does not see herself in terms of gender but in terms of being human. Moral confusion happens when the humanity of a person is replaced by their gender. One must be respected as a subject of moral rights where even though gender is important, does not in itself determine the direction of community of moral rights that human beings have by the mere fact that they are human. This is realizable in African feminism when women are seen from an African perspective otherwise feminism will indeed be the creation of a moral confusion.

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