

# Introduction: African Feminisms

by Sanya Osha

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The field is one that requires different networks of interdisciplinary conversation since a common goal unites all scholars and activists of feminism, namely, the *condition* of the female sex. As such, the disciplinary approaches employed in the essays in this volume draw liberally from both the social sciences and the humanities. In philosophical terms, questions concerning freedom and agency are addressed by many of the authors in different ways. Psychological insights are also provided for injuries caused by multiple forms of violence and trauma. Indeed these readings of gender politics span a variety of situations which the contributors address: sexuality, widowhood, infertility, polygamy etc.

In a significant way, the volume unravels a considerable part of the silence concerning the ways in which female sexuality and sexuality/ies in Africa in general can be re-thought. In particular, one has in mind the contribution of Chi-Chi Undiwe and Kabwe Benaya which seeks to address a crucial question Molarra Ogundipe-Leslie posed concerning African female sexualities. Ogundipe-Leslie in *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (1994) had decried the absence of discourse on sexualities. Another way the present volume seeks to move beyond the critical impasse that afflicts much of the discourse on African feminisms is to applaud the manner in which Desiree Lewis reframes the question of African feminisms within the context of contemporary globalization; this in turn forces us to re-consider the effects of new levels and dynamics of institutionalization and also the new structures of power that emanate from them.

Chielozona Eze incorporates many of the concerns just mentioned using eastern Nigeria as a primary site of reference. He explores the configuration of gender politics in the works of a new generation of Nigerian female authors such as Lola Shoneyin, Seffi Atta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie all of whom reside and work in the west. In particular, she explores the feeling of *ressentiment*- in its Nietzschean connotation- in African forms of discourse and also the somewhat problematic status of African feminism(s). In other words, the discursive shifts in which African feminisms travel as a subject of discourse from colonial moorings into contemporary times. In many ways, Eze's essay rehearses and critiques at the same time, the clichés of victimhood, feminization, de-womanization and the politics of indigeneity. As part of its conceptual anchor, the essay foregrounds the work of two prominent Nigerian scholars of feminist discourse: Oyeronke Oyewumi and Nkiru Nzeogwu. It also suggests that African forms of feminism have some grave shortcomings. It is averred that the practice of female genital mutilation, polygamy, infertility and popular prejudices against female sexual pleasure erode the basis of female agency by being tied to obviously *anti*-modern notions of collective responsibility. In other words, the scope for the exercise of individuality by the female subject in these matters is quite

limited. Pinkie Mekgwe also examines the issue of agency and autonomy together with the possible conceptual flexibilities inherent in African feminisms. Furthermore, literary theory serves as the disciplinary grounds from which she conducts her explorations.

The paper by Chi-Chi Undiwe and Kabwe Benaya is quite fascinating because of its uncommon subject matter within the African context. They do quite well in reviewing the existing literature on African sexualities and on that score conclude that the available viewpoints on the subject are undergirded by a colonial paradigm. They also point out that the renewed interest in the question of African sexualities is informed by the usual considerations of Malthusian population growth and of course the HIV/Aids epidemic. It is clear, as they rightly observe, that scientific research in this particular domain of study is still quite scanty. In addition, the literature that exists does not demonstrate sufficient concern for issues of eroticism and sexual pleasure. In attempting to fill this vacuum, the authors bestow attention on the form of the female body, the dilemmas of female sexual pleasure and the rare instances in which the female genitalia is placed in a position of prominence in cultural terms in some African societies. In several ways, Undiwe and Benaya attempt to deconstruct the prevailing sexual orthodoxies by suggesting other analytical methods in which this grey region of inquiry can be approached.

On more familiar grounds, Agnes Apusigah makes a case against the culturalization of gender, the fetishization of ethnicity and in short, generalized essentialization via a re-reading of Oyeronke Oyewumi's famous text, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997).

Pumla Gqola's contribution revisits - if only in an oblique way- the colonality present in the discourse of sexuality by interrogating the various figures of Sarah Bartmann, the unfortunate woman who was carried off to Europe to be displayed naked during the period of brute imperialism. Employing history and different sites of textuality, Gqola demonstrates how the struggles for representation are waged around the figure(s) of Bartmann, the dilemmas of otherness, the violence of colonialism and the ambiguities of silence involved in the various processes of

subject (de)construction. Gqola's piece suggests that we have not heard the last of Bartmann as we can expect to be involved in a fresh phase of a politics of representation within a context of ever growing scientific activity and technologization. Sanya Osha's contribution also addresses the colonial implications of constructions of the black subject; the dynamics of representation surrounding the black subject in both anthropological and philosophical discourses. A recurrent question in this regard is how is the female subject constituted in African forms of textuality? Or rather what is the fate of the female presence within a largely male-constituted archive?

Of all the contributions, Desree Lewis's essay addresses most directly the neo-liberal co-optation of feminist demands. In this way, her deliberations assume the broadest global dimensions. She tracks the shifts in emphasis in the meanings of patriarchy and feminism together with other related concepts within the African context which are in turn assailed by powerful global economic and institutional forces. Lewis's insights on how to re-read African feminisms against the wave of contemporary globalization are most instructive. Indeed the concerns of a post-feminist North are usually markedly different from those of the regions in the South. Finally, the professionalization of knowledge in the domain of women's studies in the North and the transformation of the cultural capital derived from them under a postmodern rhetoric are quite glaring just as new forms of global injustice that continue to proliferate.

Quite a number of the essays in this volume approach the discourse of African feminisms rather directly, that is, as it has been conventionally approached. However, there are a few noteworthy points of departure. For instance, in addition to engaging the ever-present spectre of colonialism, Gqola's essay unveils several complicities between textuality, the collective memory and the politics of representation. Bartmann's figure is not simply one that is frozen within a lost colonial past. This is borne out by the fact that her remains were recently brought back from Europe to South Africa for re-burial. The journey back isn't one which is strictly physical, it is indeed far more telling than the movement suggests. It involves a re-constitution of history, a contestation between different

forms and contexts of textuality and finally, a re-ordering of collective memory. In other words, it represents many conceptual shifts from a hazy colonial past into more palpable textual forms as well as forms of popular consciousness where the struggles for representation have a more immediate impact.