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Decolonial African feminism for white allies

By Deirdre Byrne¹

Abstract

Feminism is a word, a discourse and a political position that is frequently met with suspicion in African circles. There are various reasons for this distrust. Some (often those in disciplines that have proactively embraced decoloniality) hold that feminism is a western colonizing construct, which has been imposed on the country by imperialists. This response implicitly or explicitly accuses feminism of complicity with a colonizing agenda that desires the subordination of African epistemologies. Others equate a feminist political position with an uncritical anger and aggression towards men. They argue that, far from being antagonistic towards men, women need to make alliances with men in order to craft an inclusive and sustainable future for the African continent. In the light of these discursive and political contestations, this article argues that centring African feminisms is an important decolonial move. It brings to light the dangers of a universalizing view of African feminisms, noting that feminism in Africa, as in other contexts, is neither monolithic nor univocal. In this way, it aims to decolonize feminism in African contexts and to demonstrate that feminism has a significant role in contemporary African political and theoretical discourse. Finally, it suggests a response to African feminism – and African feminists – for white feminists based on solidarity, ally-hood and respect, arguing that such a response is important in the decolonial project.

Introduction

Feminism and decoloniality share certain crucial points and strategies. Like feminism, decolonial theory protests against the internalized and normalized social and epistemological hierarchies that reinforce the self-proclaimed centrality of the European metropole and of masculinity. Although feminists in Africa, the Americas and India are united by their dislike of responses and meanings imposed by western scholars they are not, for that reason, automatic allies or in agreement about important points of gender scholarship or advocacy, as I will explain. Quite the opposite: difference and diversity are two key concepts of the decolonial turn, along with their corollaries — particularity and specificity. Difference is a key concept in Gilles Deleuze's *Difference and Repetition*, where the philosopher comments: "Difference is not diversity. Diversity is given, but difference is that by which the given is given, by which the given is given as diverse" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 222). What Deleuze means by this is that difference is a *general* condition, a "noumenon" (Deleuze, 1994, p. 222) which pre-exists diversity and enables phenomena to be perceived as diverse. In post-colonial contexts, diversity manifests in terms of the multiple inequalities between white people's experiences of sociality and the experiences of people of colour. This irreducible diversity is the foundation for this article, which explores African feminisms from my own point of view as a white academic living in Africa who identifies politically as feminist. While "white feminism" exists as an identifiable discourse, I am not writing

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about it in this sense. Rather, I am writing about my own positionality as a racially white feminist living in Africa. The question that guides my discussion is, “What relationship is possible between a white feminist living in Africa and African feminisms?” This is not to speak for white feminists living in different continents, whose experiences are modulated by factors including religion, ethnicity, education, age and disability. I am, therefore, speaking for myself here, while hoping that my reflections may illuminate the complex relations between white feminists and African feminisms. I propose that African feminisms should be centred in discourse about feminism in Africa (including educational curricula). Finally, I suggest three principles for white feminists to adopt in relation to African feminism: solidarity, ally-hood and respect.

What is the problem?

Decolonial feminists are profoundly sceptical of discourses that pretend to be universal, such as the notions of sisterhood and a common oppression of women. They include theorists such as Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997) and Maria Lugones (2008), who critique these discourses on the grounds that they are, first, disingenuous and, second, false. Authors who adopt a “universal” approach impose a view that originates in westernized white privilege on formerly colonized nations and communities without declaring its origins or interests in racial and class privilege. The idea that two women from vastly different socio-political contexts (one white and living in the Global North and one black and living in the Global South) can share a common need to resist and ultimately overthrow patriarchy is simply not valid, due to the fact of their intersectional experiences of patriarchy, which interlock with their experiences of racism and class oppression. Unfortunately, too, white feminists, as Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak (2010) famously pointed out in “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, have built academic careers on the backs of their research on women in colonized countries and women of colour. These articles tend to position white feminists as the saviours – morally or epistemologically – of women of colour, while denying the research participants a voice, agency or a defined perspective on their own life experiences. (Spivak’s essay was first published in 1988, but the practice of white researchers ventriloquizing the narratives and experiences of people of colour has not stopped.)

Sylvia Tamale’s Introduction to *African Sexualities: A Reader* offers one of the best-articulated discussions of the difficult relationship between western and African feminists. She argues that western feminist activists’ concern for African women whom they perceive as “victims” of clitoridectomy is misplaced:

The bulk of approaches to the subject matter are culturally insensitive, focus narrowly on the negative aspects of female circumcision and completely overlook the multifaceted nature of the practice and the meanings attached to the rituals associated with it (Nnaemeka, 2005). Although African feminists do not condone the practice, they take strong exception to the imperialist, racist and dehumanising infantilisation of African women. (2011, p. 20)

Tamale rightly berates European feminist scholarship for cultural insensitivity, but also notes that African feminists “do not condone” the practice of clitoridectomy. They focus instead on African women’s status as full adult human agents. Thus, Tamale avoids having to defend the practice, insisting instead that feminists recognise “the multifaceted nature of the practice and the meanings attached to the rituals associated with it”. To understand these only in terms of the dominant

(European, metropolitan) discourse is tantamount to “infantilisation of African women”. A dislike of colonial discourses about women in the Global South, and a need to put the record straight, also underpins Nthabiseng Motsemme’s excellent work on mothers and daughters in South African townships as they continue to “reclaim lives of dignity and sensuality amidst repeated negation and historical hardships” (2001, p. vi).

The angry resistance of Mohanty, Spivak and other theorists to patronizing and condescending behaviour by white feminists is well-founded. But, to rephrase my initial research question: In the face of such widespread and justified anger, is it appropriate for a white feminist simply to keep away from African feminism and African feminist struggles? Or can a white feminist engage with African feminisms without antagonism, but at the same time without patronage?

Abandoning “sisterhood”

The sisterhood of women, which was a staple of second-wave feminism, still has considerable traction in popular culture as a metaphor for connections among women.² Nevertheless, Mohanty points to Robin Morgan’s edited anthology *Sisterhood is Global* (1984) as exemplifying a deeply flawed attribution of a “*common condition* which, despite variations in degree, is experienced by all human beings who are born female” (Morgan 1984, 4, cited in Mohanty 2003, 111, original emphasis). Mohanty rightly critiques Morgan’s elision of both race and privilege as part of her argument for more nuanced relationships between feminists from diverse racial, ethnic and socio-economic contexts. Exploding the idea of a common condition shared by all women is the cornerstone of my understanding of the imperative for white feminists³ not to label themselves as the “sisters” of black feminists, or even of black women.

It is self-evident that a white feminist cannot be a black feminist and that, although both may be oppressed on the basis of their gender, they will not experience their oppression in the same way. To be white is not only to inhabit a “white” skin, it is – more importantly — also to occupy a socially constructed position of privilege (Nayak, 2007, p. 738). This is true irrespective of geographical location, which otherwise inflects white feminists’ experiences in unmistakable ways. In a post-Spivak era, white feminists must realize that, even if they experience compassion for women of colour, they cannot share those experiences and that it is unethical to speak for them. In addition, it is important for progressive white feminists to identify with racial oppression to understand that, despite sympathies with anti-racist struggles, white feminists remain part of the oppressive group and consequently are more part of the problem than of the solution. Rosemary Dixon explains this dilemma aptly:

How can one be ‘sisters’ with those one oppresses? ‘Sisters’ are in the same family, with the same history. Shared experience leads to a way of knowing and seeing the world, and each other, that is itself shared. The term, then, does not hold up well when I try to apply it to feminism or my black ‘sisters’. (Dixon, 2002, p. 104)

² Novels such as *The Sisterhood of the Traveling Pants* (Brashares, 2003), *The Divine Secrets of the Ya-Ya Sisterhood* (Wells, 1997) and, more recently, Young Adult fiction such as *Daughters of the Stone* (Llanos-Figueroa, 2009) and *She Would be King* (Moore, 2018) have demonstrated that, despite sisterhood’s having been critiqued by decolonial feminists, it still has considerable purchase in popular writing.

³ While “white feminism” is frequently placed within quotes to indicate its role as an identifiable discourse, I do not use the term here because it oversimplifies the diversity of thought among white feminists. When I write of “white feminists”, I am referring to individual, embodied white women who identify as feminist.

It is clear, then, that white feminists who share similar anti-racist concerns as black feminists must abandon the idea of sisterhood. Fidela Fouche, writing about the South African National Women's Coalition between the 1970s and the country's liberation from apartheid, makes a compelling case against appealing to sisterhood when she writes that "the stereotypes about sisterhood, which mask rather than transcend difference, and which mystify rather than clarify, persist" (1994, p. 79). One might add that the idea of sisterhood perniciously masks and invisibilises privilege. This is not to disparage the idea's currency in African cultures and scholarship. For example, the Zimbabwean scholars Anna Chitando and Ezra Chitando write in "Weaving Sisterhood: Women African Theologians and Creative Writers" that "women African theologians and creative writers have fashioned a formidable sisterhood ... [that] anticipates a new world, one where *not man, but God* reigns" (Chitando, 2005, p. 38, emphasis added). The choice of "man" to denote patriarchy as the dominant regime in the last sentence is no coincidence. In their article, Chitando and Chitando appeal to orthodox Christian understandings of humanity as a family as well as to communitarianism as a hallmark of African society. While sisterhood is valid in these contexts for creating cohesion, I remain convinced that it is not useful as a metaphor for political solidarity between women across the borders of race and location.

Many theorists have pointed out that the orientation and emphases of any particular kind of feminist thinking will depend largely on its concept of "women". Judith Butler famously opens *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* with an extended discussion of "'Women' as the Subject of Feminism" (2008, pp. 2-8):

For the most part, feminist theory has assumed that there is some existing identity, understood through the category of women, who not only initiates feminist interests and goals within discourse, but constitutes the subject for whom political representation is pursued. (Butler, 2008, p. 2)

Butler's questioning of the category of "women" is of the same order as Fouche's and Dixon's questioning of the idea of sisterhood. She goes on to use Foucault's understanding of discourse and power to explain how dominant discourses about gender construct and produce the subjects of which they speak, rather than these subjects having an inherent being outside of discourse. Using a social constructionist approach, Butler explains that there is no pre-existing identity or gender that accrues to all people who have female bodies. This means that there is no essential basis upon which women can be assumed to share common experiences. However, as I will argue later, the concepts of *ally* and *solidarity* can be useful for white feminists who share anti-racist sentiments with black feminists.

Centring African feminisms

In decolonial theory, as Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reminds us, *location matters*. He writes: "knowing oneself and one's environment [is] the correct basis of absorbing the world" (2008, p. 9). His collection of literary essays, *Moving the Centre: The Struggle for Cultural Freedoms*, advocates "moving the centre from its location in Europe towards a pluralism of centres, themselves being equally legitimate locations of the human imagination" (Thiong'o, 2008, p. 8). Ngũgĩ's plea resonates with the Latin American thinker, Ramon Grosfoguel, who argues for moving "the locus of enunciation", defined as the "geo-political and body-political location of the subject that speaks" (Grosfoguel, 2011, p. 4). The "subject that speaks", following Foucault's

logic, also assumes the power to know and to pronounce on the topic in question.⁴ To decolonize feminism is to shift the locus of enunciation from the Global North to the Global South, while remaining attentive to the problems associated with dividing the Aleem points out, the term “Third World” is outdated and patronizing, but the terms “global north” and “global south” have undesirable political subtexts (2015) besides being misleading. Not all countries South of the Equator belong to the Global South (for example, Australia is excluded on the basis of its high-income economy) and not all countries North of the Equator belong in the Global North. In light of these anomalies, it is doubtful whether insisting on an essentialist division between the Global South and North is useful at all. Prominent decolonial thinker, Achille Mbembe, insists, in the closing chapter of *Critique of Black Reason*, on there being “only one world ... composed a totality of a thousand parts” (2017, p. 180). In a similar vein, in an interview with Torbjørn Tumyr Nilsen, Mbembe argues that: “especially in the face of the kinds of ecological challenges we face, it is absolutely important to reinvent forms of life in common that go beyond the requisite of the nation state, ethnicity, race, religion, and so on” (Mbembe, Bangstad, & Nilsen, 2020). Mbembe’s decolonial agenda eschews hard and fast divisions, encompassing the planet and attempting to bring about a global adoption of reason as a faculty that will assist humans to live in more compassionate and sustainable ways (Mbembe, Bangstad, & Nilsen, 2020). He does not show similar inclusiveness towards gender, as Jeremy Weate notes:

The final reason Mbembe fails to fully open his thought to thinking resistance is because of an unconscious gender bias that pervades and structures his text. Mbembe is often explicitly scathing of feminism and African feminist analyses of power. (Weate, 2003, p. 38)

Despite Mbembe’s anti-feminist stance, his emphasis on common human challenges and powers, and on the global relevance of decolonisation (Mbembe, Bangstad, & Nilsen, New Frame, 2020), make his thinking incompatible with divisions such as North/South. On the other hand, Sabelo Ndlovu-Gatsheni emphasises that African epistemologies are grounded in African realities (2013, p. x). Ndlovu-Gatsheni also does not centre African feminism in his decolonial account of onto-epistemology. With this in mind, I propose not to use the categories of the Global South or the Global North, but to limit my discussion to Africa, in order to suggest that re-centring Africa as a locus of enunciation is a valuable decolonial move.

Much well-known decolonial feminism arises from India, Latin and North America, which has given rise to thinkers such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003), Donna Haraway (1988), Vandana Shiva (1989), Maria Galindo (2014) and Maria Lugones (2008). African scholars are not mentioned in scholarly conversations about relationships between feminisms from the Global North and the Global South as frequently as scholars from India and America. This is surprising, given that Africa was thoroughly colonized by western Europe, as Thomas Pakenham documents in *The Scramble for Africa* (1992), among other texts. Africa still bears the imprint of the colonial legacy in a myriad of places, practices and social relationships. Morgan Ndlovu locates the

⁴ Wolfgang Detel perceptively lists the aspects of the relationship between power and knowledge that structure Foucault’s views, including:

— which (kinds of) things are talked about;

...

— which forms of power are intrinsically related to the forms of language;

— which forms of knowledge and standards of rationality are used (1996, p. 300)

domination of colonial powers over knowledge production in colonized territories in “‘colonization of imagination’, ‘colonization of the mind’ and colonisation of knowledge and power” (Ndlovu, 2018, p. 99). In the light of this, centring African feminism is an important decolonial move. I argue that doing this will allow us to give due weight to the relations between embodiment, location and theorizing; it will unseat the dominance of Euro-American feminist thinkers; and it will give African feminists the opportunity to contribute centrally to our understanding of epistemologies in the twenty-first century.

Against notions that Africa is an undifferentiated mass of homogeneous social, economic and epistemic practices, African feminisms are distinguished by their diversity. Although Nancy Kachingwe pleads for “a feminism that will be “special to the continent” (2017), there is far from being one African feminism, leading scholars to discuss “African feminisms” rather than “African feminism”. There are too many kinds of African feminism for an exhaustive discussion of all of them in this article: therefore, I limit myself here to selected examples. My first example draws on two well-known African feminists: Oyèrónkẹ Oyěwùmí and Molará Ogundipe-Leslie. Oyěwùmí’s *Gender and the Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997) maintains that Yoruba society in the author’s country of origin (Nigeria) did not practise “gendering” male or female subjects prior to colonization. By contrast, only three years earlier, Molará Ogundipe-Leslie, another Nigerian feminist, wrote that in Africa “Wifehood in itself [in precolonial Nigeria] was a gender, not a sex or biological role (gender being a socially constructed identity)” (1994, p. 14). She holds that African women come off worst under patriarchy (Olaopa, 2016). Both Oyěwùmí and Ogundipe-Leslie are highly mistrustful of the symbolic order of western thought, which imposes binary divisions onto thinking, opposing women and men, children and elders, nature and culture, and so on. Yet they arrive at very different conclusions about women in Nigeria: Oyěwùmí holds that the Yoruba did not experience social divisions along gendered lines, while Ogundipe-Leslie argues that patriarchy is endemic to Africa. She proposes replacing “feminism”, which “seems to be a kind of red rag to the bull of African men” (Ogundipe-Leslie, 1994, p. 229), with the word “STIWANISM”, an acronym for “Social Transformation Including Women in Africa” (Stakahashi, 2017). Stiwanism focuses, not on relationships between men and women (antagonistic or not), but on the transformation of society. Ogundipe-Leslie’s approach is clearly problematic in its conciliatory agenda towards men.

A similar impulse to differentiate African feminism from its western counterparts is seen in Obioma Nnaemeka’s concept of *nego-feminism*, which, like Oyěwùmí’s theory, also draws on communitarian models of social arrangement, associated with Africa. Nnaemeka defines *nego-feminism* as follows: “First, *nego-feminism* is the feminism of negotiation; second, *nego-feminism* stands for ‘no ego’ feminism. In the foundation of shared values in many African cultures are the principles of negotiation, give and take, compromise, and balance” (2004, p. 377). Nnaemeka’s ideas are not popular, mainly because of the unfortunate connotations of the name she chose; but they are worth exploring in more detail since she insists on “building on the indigenous, and (re)claiming the third space” (2004, p. 376). In other words, *nego-feminism* is firmly anchored in the African context and draws on African epistemologies.

Another form of feminism that has recently found some traction is *Africana Melanated Womanism*, a new extension of Clenora Hudson-Weems’s idea of *Africana womanism*. *Africana womanism*, according to Hudson-Weems, is “a theoretical framework that is specifically designed to speak to the experiences of all women of African descent in opposition to the universalizing Western or Euro-centric feminist canon” (Chikafa-Chipiro, 2019, p. 9). Rosemary Chikafa-Chipiro explains that *Africana Melanated Womanism*, which was also introduced by Hudson-Weems,

refers directly to “a deliberate racial reconfiguration on Hudson-Weems’s part to specifically speak to a collective of black women, black men and black children” (2019, p. 9). Africana Melanated Womanism is, then, a transnational form of feminism in that it is geared towards people in the African Diaspora as well as those currently residing in Africa.

Akachi Ezeigbo and Naomi Nkealah’s conflict about feminism echoes the objections to Ogundipe-Leslie’s STIWANISM. Nkealah expresses discontent with Ezeigbo’s notion of “snail-sense feminism”, which proposes that women adopt a snail-like approach to overcoming patriarchy. According to this model, an oppressed woman should be a snail, slowly and unobtrusively negotiating obstacles instead of confronting them. This type of feminism “rejects transgressive female behaviour, but rather advocates survival through acceptance and perseverance” (Nkealah, 2017, p. 122). This is too passive an approach for Nkealah, who proposes that African women should embrace the camel, rather than the snail, as a symbol of their response to patriarchy. The camel, she explains, possesses an imposing presence; resilience; courage; and can deal with harsh and inhospitable conditions. Nkealah explains that “Cameline agency is all about the agency of women — the ability of oppressed women to act decisively to change their circumstances and regain control of their lives” (2017, p. 123). She argues vigorously that camels are more inspiring animal metaphors than snails for women in Africa, mentioning that Somali poetry uses the camel as an image of women’s beauty and endurance (Nkealah, 2017, p. 123).

While this section has not provided a comprehensive discussion of all kinds of African feminism, it has highlighted some prominent and interesting examples of African feminist discourse that might usefully find their way into educational curricula (including at university level). The diversity and range of African feminisms are enormous and researchers need to be made aware of this, in order to combat stereotypes of Africa as intellectually or culturally monolithic.

Possible responses for white feminists

Earlier in this article, I argued that white women living in Africa will not experience feminism in the same way as black feminists. At the same time, it is not helpful to pretend, either politically or intellectually, that any group of feminists does not exist. What is necessary is coequal dialogue within the African context between feminists from different positionalities. Here I want to propose three ethical principles that might guide such a dialogue: solidarity, ally-hood and respect. Solidarity is Mohanty’s alternative to the unsatisfactory term “sisterhood”. White feminists can express and experience solidarity with African feminists without negating or attempting to transcend the irreducible diversity of their life-worlds and life experiences. In this regard, Mohanty’s vision of “feminism without borders”, which acknowledges borders but also crosses them, encodes solidarity between feminists in diverse locations and life-worlds. It offers a realistic way forward for feminists, by including conflict, fractures and faultlines between them:

Feminism without borders is not the same as “border-less” feminism. It acknowledges the fault lines, conflicts, differences, fears, and containment that borders represent. It acknowledges that there is no one sense of a border, that the lines between and through nations, races, classes, sexualities, religions, and disabilities, are real — and that a feminism without borders must envision change and social justice work across these lines of demarcation and division. (Mohanty, 2003, p. 2)

In the current socio-political conditions, it is urgent for us to acknowledge the invisible social and political borders between feminists of different races. Mohanty distances her understanding of “antiracist feminism” – s “a feminist perspective that encodes race and opposition to racism as central to its definition” (2003, p. 253) — from a self-declared “border-less” feminism, which wants to conceal its own allegiance to systems of power and privilege. These include white supremacy and “capitalist patriarchy” (Eisenstein, 1979). She also argues for “feminist solidarity, as opposed to vague assumptions of sisterhood and images of complete identification with the other” (Mohanty, 2003, p. 3). In addition to this, I would like to propose that white feminists living in Africa can adopt the position of *allies* of African feminism. Allies do not identify with or participate in the struggles of oppressed people. At the same time, they are more active than mere sympathizers or people who are not prejudiced: “two characteristics ... separate allies from low-prejudice individuals, namely allies’ desire to promote social justice actively and their willingness to offer support to nondominant people” (Brown, 2013, p. 2212). Being an ally of an oppressed group is an ethical stance, founded on respect, which will help white feminists living in Africa to establish rapport with African feminists. Respect forges a powerful relationship between respecters and those they respect. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* explains that respect is “object-generated rather than wholly subject-generated” (Dillon, 2018): we respect others for their qualities, rather than ours. Respect is characterized by responses of careful attention and attributing value to those whom we respect (Dillon, 2018). The principles of solidarity, ally-hood and respect are all marked by holding others in esteem and value, while recognizing the inalienable diversity of their context and being.

Conclusion

This article has argued for a nuanced understanding of African feminism as simultaneously diverse and particular. It also proposes that centring African feminism is valuable in the decolonial project: a point that decolonial theorists such as Mbembe and Ndlovu-Gatsheni unaccountably ignore. African feminisms could usefully be central in decolonizing educational curricula (a role that is only beginning to be recognized). I have argued for dialogue between white feminists living in Africa and African feminists that is characterized by solidarity, ally-hood and respect. These principles take account of differences between feminists of different groups and allow colonial onto-epistemological hierarchies to be broken down. Ultimately white feminists living in Africa and African feminists need to grant each other the starting point of their own positionalities, but also to consider the ways in which they each oppose neoliberal, colonialist white supremacist patriarchy and how to work together.

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