

THE POSTFEMINISTS “BLAME NARRATIVE”: IMPLICATIONS FOR FEMINISM IN AFRICA

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Abstract

This paper entitled, ‘The Postfeminist “blame narrative”: Implications for Feminism in Africa’, is a reaction to the backwardness of the feminist struggle in Africa. The Postfeminist ‘blame narrative’ attributes women’s inequalities or failures basically to their own individual choices, attitudes, or behaviours rather than to structural gender discrimination or patriarchal institutions. The work has as its aim, the strengthening of feminist struggle in the continent. Using the qualitative method of research, postfeminism and its “blame narrative” are exposed and analyzed. It is highlighted that postfeminism, unlike anti-feminism, accepts feminism in all ramifications but points to the fact that second wave feminism promoting liberal feminism, fails to adequately address the focal issues of feminist struggle. The “blame narrative” targets mainly the focus on gender equality which according to postfeminists addresses only liberal equality thereby heightening the problem of gender inequality. Like the radical feminists, postfeminists canvas for more proactive feminist approaches for addressing feminist issues in the contemporary society. Focal among such issues are the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer and Intersex (LGBTQI), which bothers on not only inequality, but also gender differences. In addressing the implications of the “postfeminist narrative” for feminism in Africa, this paper notes that it is a call for African feminists to awaken to the demands of feminist struggle by going beyond second wave feminism to embrace other waves of feminism. It implies that feminism in Africa has been backward because it still anchors on liberal feminism, and therefore needs to traverse that scenario. However, this paper acknowledges that unlike Western Feminists, African feminists need not jettison liberal feminism which is still needed to increase awareness of feminist struggle among classes of people in Africa, for example, the uneducated. What the paper advocates is the amalgamation of all possible approaches to feminism, Western and African, for effective feminism in Africa.

Key Words: Blame, Feminism, Narrative, Implications, Postfeminists

1. Introduction

With the development of feminist consciousness emerged the different waves of feminism. Thus, the first and second waves are in recent times regarded as obsolete as they can no longer address the burning issues facing feminism in the 21st century.

While feminists in the Western countries have long realized the inadequacy of the second wave which focuses on liberal feminism in addressing feminist issues in recent times, African feminists are yet to awaken to this reality. The postfeminists, comprising of feminists of the third and fourth waves through the “blame narrative”, point out the shortcomings of the second wave and why it is unable to tackle topical feminist issues in the contemporary world. This paper is an attempt to analyze the implications of the “blame narrative” for feminism in Africa. The aim is to strengthen feminism in Africa.

The paper is divided into five sections, the ongoing introduction serving as section one. Section two is to describe postfeminism while section three is to analyze its “blame narrative”. In section four, the implications of the “blame narrative” for feminism in Africa will be discussed. This will be followed by the conclusion which serves as section five.

2. Postfeminism

The term postfeminism is a term used to describe a range of viewpoints reacting to feminism since the 1980s. It is different from anti-feminism because postfeminists believe that women have achieved second wave goals while being critical of third-and fourth-wave feminist goals. Anti-feminism on the other hand, is an opposition to feminism in some or all of its forms. Anti-feminists of the late modern period opposed women’s suffrage, later they shifted to opposition of women's entry into institutions of higher learning; arguing that education was too great a physical burden on women. Other anti-feminists opposed women's entry into the labour force, or their right to join unions, to sit on juries, or to obtain birth control and control of their sexuality(Simpson, 1989). In Africa, anti-feminism manifests in the opposition to feminism on the grounds that it is contrary to traditional values or religious beliefs. Anti-feminists argue, for example, that social acceptance of divorce and non-married women is wrong and harmful, and that men and women are fundamentally different; and thus their different traditional roles in society should be maintained (Kimmel in Kimmel &Aronson, 2003). In fact, anti-feminists oppose women's entry into the workforce, political office, and the voting process, as well as the lessening of male authority in families.

Postfeminism was first used to describe a backlash against second-wave feminism. The history of the modern western feminist movement is divided into four "waves" (Humm, 1995). The first wave comprised women's suffrage movements of the 19th and early-20th centuries, promoting women's right to vote. As its objective, the second wave, the women's liberation movement, which began in the 1960s, campaigned for legal and social equality for women. Around 1992, a third wave was identified, and it focused on individuality and diversity. The fourth wave emerged from around 2012, and it used social media to combat sexual harassment, violence against women and rape culture. According to Prudence Chamberlain, it is best known for the ‘Me Too movement’. She lists the objectives of the fourth wave as the focus on justice for women and opposition to sexual harassment and violence against women.

In her words, “its essence is incredulity that certain attitudes can still exist”(Chamberlain,2017, p.115). However, second wave feminism was the target of postfeminism; until recently that it became a label for a wide range of theories that take critical approaches to previous feminist discourses, and includes challenges to the second wave's ideas. Thus, postfeminism could be said to be a variant of fourth wave feminism.

In 1956, President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt initiated "state feminism", which outlawed discrimination based on gender and granted women's suffrage, but blocked political activism by feminist leaders. During Anwar el-Sadat's presidency, his wife, Jehan Sadat, publicly advocated further women's rights, though Egyptian policy and society began to move away from women's equality with the new Islamist movement and growing conservatism (Badran, 1996). However, some activists proposed a new feminist movement, Islamic feminism, which argues for women's equality within an Islamic framework. In Latin America, revolutions brought changes in women's status in countries such as Nicaragua, where feminist ideology during the Sandinista Revolution aided women's quality of life but fell short of achieving a social and ideological change. Betty Friedan's (1963) book, *The Feminine Mystique* helped voice the discontent that American women felt. The book is widely credited with sparking the beginning of second-wave feminism in the United States. Within ten years, women made up over half the First World workforce.

Third-wave feminism is traced to the emergence of the Riot Grrrl feminist punk subculture in Olympia, Washington in the early 1990s, and to Anita Hill's televised testimony in 1991 (to an all-male, all-white Senate Judiciary Committee) that Clarence Thomas, nominated for the Supreme Court of the United States had sexually harassed her (Wooley, 1992). The term *third wave* is credited to Rebecca Walker, who responded to Thomas's appointment to the Supreme Court with an article in *Ms. Magazine*, "Becoming the Third Wave" in 1992. According to Kira Cochrane (2013), fourth-wave feminism is "defined by technology", and is characterized particularly by the use of Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Tumblr, and blogs such as Feministing to challenge misogyny and further gender equality.

3. The “Blame Narrative”

The “blame narrative” describes the criticism of postfeminists on second wave feminism. Much of the criticisms were highlighted by third wave feminism. As the third wave feminist Rebecca Walker (1992) writes:

So I write this as a plea to all women, especially women of my generation: Let Thomas' confirmation serve to remind you, as it did me that the fight is far from over. Let this dismissal of a woman's experience move you to anger. Turn that outrage into political power. Do not vote for them unless they work for us. Do not have sex with them, do not break bread with them, do not

nurture them if they don't prioritize our freedom to control our bodies and our lives. I am not a post-feminism feminist. I am the Third Wave (p.39).

Third-wave feminism also sought to challenge or avoids what it deemed the second wave's essentialist definitions of femininity. They argued that second wave feminists over-emphasized the experiences of upper middle-class white women. Here, third wave feminist are pointing to liberal feminism. Liberal feminism is one of many overlapping feminist movements and ideologies which have developed over the years. Traditionally feminism is often divided into three main traditions, namely, liberal feminism, radical feminism and socialist/Marxist feminism. These are sometimes known as the "Big Three" schools of feminist thought (Artwińska&Mrozik, 2020). However, since the late 20th century a variety of newer forms of feminisms, have also emerged; some of which track the political leanings of the larger society to a greater or lesser degree, or focus on specific topics, such as the environment. The newer forms of feminism together with the fourth wave go for postfeminism.

Third-wave feminists often focused on "micro-politics" and challenged the second wave's paradigm as to what was, or was not, good for women. They tended to use a post-structuralist interpretation of gender and sexuality. Third-wave feminism also contained internal debates between difference feminism. There are those who believe that there are important psychological differences between the sexes; and others who believe that there are no inherent psychological differences between the sexes by contending that gender roles are due to social conditioning (Gilligan,1982).

In line with the third wave critique of second wave feminism, postfeminism through the "blame narrative", criticizes the second wave for its liberalism and progressivism. Postfeminists argue that liberal feminism seeks equality of men and women through political and legal reforms within a liberal democratic framework, without radically altering the structure of society. According to Linda Lindsey (2015), liberal feminism "works within the structure of mainstream society to integrate women into that structure"(p.17). An instance of what Lindsey is saying could be given using State feminism of some Nordic Countries. In 1956, for example, President Gamal Abdel Nasser of Egypt initiated "State feminism", which outlawed discrimination based on gender and granted women's suffrage, but blocked political activism by feminist leaders. During Sadat's presidency, his wife, Jehan Sadat, publicly advocated further women's rights, though Egyptian policy and society began to move away from women's equality with the new Islamist movement and growing conservatism. However, some activists proposed a new feminist movement, Islamic feminism, which argues for women's equality within an Islamic framework (Badran, 1996). What postfeminists are against is the liberal equality advanced by second wave feminism.

In addition to criticising the liberal equality of second wave feminism, postfeminists also criticize the imprecise nature of liberal feminism. Catherine Rottenberg (2014) has criticized what she described as neoliberal feminism, saying it is individualized

rather than collectivized. She argues that liberal feminism cannot offer any sustained analysis of the structures of male dominance, power, or privilege. Some modern forms of feminism that historically grew out of the broader liberal tradition have more recently been described as conservative in various ways. Some other postfeminists, while referring to liberal feminism, say that feminism is no longer relevant to today's society. Amelia Jones writes that the postfeminist texts which emerged in the 1980s and 1990s portrayed second-wave feminism as a monolithic entity. Postfeminism presents a situation where feminists are undermined for continuing to make demands for gender equality (Jones in Frueh, Langer, & Raven, 1994). In a "post-feminist" society, where "gender equality has (already) been achieved", Dorothy Chunn (in Chunn, Boyd & Lessard, 2007) posits that "many feminists have voiced disquiet about the ways in which rights and equality discourses are now used against them" (p.31). The scenario painted by Chunn characterizes the feminist struggle in Africa where it is argued that feminism is highly characterized by the second wave feminists' liberal equality till date. Thus, contrary to the view of Jones, gender equality is yet to be achieved in Africa.

4. Implications of the "Blame Narrative" for Feminism in Africa

The postfeminists' "blame narrative" as analyzed above has two major implications for feminism in Africa, namely:

1. Africa is backward in the feminist struggle: The general implication of the postfeminist "blame narrative" is that the second wave feminist struggle and by implication, liberal feminism, is misdirected. In addition, it seems to have outlived its importance, especially in Western countries. Women's liberation, the ultimate goal of feminism – has always been part of the narrative of Africa. Take Nigeria for instance, the very same year the country was formed in 1914, women staged a significant protest against both indigenous and British men who had jointly side-lined them in decision-making, which a scholar Nwando Achebe (2022) referred to as the "Ogidi Palaver". In 1925, the "Nwaobiala Movement" saw women forcefully rejecting colonial values, culminating in the riot of 1929 into what is known as the "Women's War", where 10,000 women participated and dozens lost their lives fighting back against a drop in female authority. Today, organisations such as Stand To End Rape, Afri-Dev Info, The Nigerian Women's Trust Fund, Coloured Africa and As Equals Africa, are emerging as pronouncedly feminist platforms (Achebe, 2022). However, the pattern of feminist struggle in Nigeria and other African countries, from inception till date, has been that of liberal feminism. Due to the focus on liberal feminism, feminists in Africa are championing issues of middle class or elite women, and neglecting the concerns of less privileged women.

The notion of middle class has now become a popular metric in African context, based on report of the Standard Bank Group in 2014 entitled, "The Rise of the African Middle Class". Unlike in the West, where the depoliticised middle class tends to shun tradition, middle class values in Africa are reversed. They are more conservative than in Western societies. Gender roles are pronounced among the African middle class,

and traditional customs and religious ideals play a significant role, too. While modernisation and economic growth tend to go hand in hand with secularisation in most parts of the world, religious commitment in Africa has not waned with modernity. In addition, middle class in African countries are more socially conscious than the middle class in the West. In recent years, contemporary organised feminism in Africa has been largely coordinated by educated, urban, middle-class women, while recognizing that feminist concerns extend beyond the middle class (Daniel, Melber&Stolle, 2023). Thus feminism in Africa being a middle class movement and capturing its complexities and not its realities should not be ignored.

Most of the issues of feminist struggle in Africa are politically motivated. Some of the critical issues include law reforms and affirmative action. For instance, feminists lobbied for the ratification of the Maputo Protocol, an African feminist charter of women's rights adopted by the African Union in Maputo in 2005 (Viljoen, 2012). This is one of the most radical feminist charters, not only in Africa but in the world at large. The Legislative Advocacy Coalition on Violence Against Women (LACVAM), which is a coalition of Nigerian feminists and women's rights organisations also drafted the 'Violence Against Women Bill' (Onyemelukwe, 2016), and there is also the 'Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill', though the latter was not ratified. The Nigerian Senate in March 2016 voted it down because it faced strong religious opposition particularly from Northern senators. It was seen as too provocative by male politicians. The bill tackles questions of domestic violence, girls' education, child marriage and sexual violence. The contention surrounding it owes to the reproductive rights it granted women, which men saw as marginalization against the male gender (Policy and Legal Advocacy Centre).

The above explanation shows that Feminism in Africa has been centered on advocacy of women's rights in the public sphere, like; participation in politics, for formal education and right to employment in various offices originally thought to be exclusive for men. As Helen Chukwuma (1994) says:

Nigerian feminists have only recently begun to strongly advocate for liberation in "the personal" space. The culture of challenging domestic roles and marriage, for example, is especially vigorous among modern feminists who use the internet as a main tool of resistance and consciousness-raising (p.54).

Thus, some works of African feminist, for instance, Chimamanda Adichie of Nigeria, are accused of focusing only on middle class feminist issues such as chivalry and sexual objectification (Nwosu, 2022). This shows that African feminists have a long way to go in acknowledging recent development in feminism, Topical issues of gender such as the Lesbian, Gay. Bisexual, Transgender and Queer (LGBTQ) movements are yet to gain full attention in feminism in Africa. In the West, feminist struggle has since transcended liberal feminism in the sense that feminists are now advocating for rights not only for the LGBTQ groups, but even for other components

of the ecosystem (eco-feminism). According to Karen Warren (1990), ecofeminism could be interpreted to mean that, "there are important connections between the oppression of women and nonhuman nature" (p.64). Writing on the pace at which African feminists have responded to burning issues that occupy feminist struggle in recent times, Gloria Chukukere(1995) notes that, although attitudes have begun to change (in 2015 only 30% of respondents thought that "homosexuals should have equal access to healthcare, housing and other public goods"), the feminist movement has not been sufficiently vocal about the rights of LGBTQI people. She reiterated that lesbians and trans women, in particular, face discrimination both on the grounds of being women as well as for being part of a sexual minority community.

Mohammed, Nagarajan&Aliyu in their book, *She Called Me Woman: Nigeria Queer Women Speak* (2018), has paved the way to include voices of queer women from a wide range of class, religion and educational backgrounds.

2. Africa needs to embrace legal feminism: Legal feminism which is still at its rudimentary stage in the continent is yet to gain root. As Mbella Sonne Dipoko(1969) observes:

Inside the academy, the development of an "African feminist jurisprudence" (theory of law) is still in its nascent stages. Feminist legal academicians on the continent are especially critical of the sexism, patriarchalism, stereotypes and ethnocentricity that is part of the received law, imported with colonialism. They also analyse the position of African women within the multiple legal systems that are a direct legacy from the Continent's colonial history (p.99).

One of the innovations that radical feminists have made in the struggle is to highlight the indispensable role of the legal system in actualizing the goals of feminism. Majority of African countries operate dual legal systems. In Nigeria, for instance, there are in operation, the Received English Law, the Sharia law and the native law and customs (Malemi, 2009). Cameroon has English law, French law & Custom, Guinea's legal system contains French civil code, custom law and Sharia-Islamic law. There is also the application of universal rights under international law, which further complicates the equation. The existence of dual or multiple legal systems presents obstacle to legal feminism; as initiating, reforming and enforcing women's rights are faced with contradictions

The complexities in the application of multiple legal systems in Africa are exemplified by the now infamous Zimbabwean case of *Magaya v. Magaya* that marked a serious setback in the advancement of women's rights for African women as a whole. The main issue in the 1999 case was whether a woman could inherit her father's estate if he died without leaving a will. The Supreme Court stunned human rights activists worldwide by denying 58-year old VeniaMagaya her inheritance right, holding that the "nature of African society" dictates that women are not equal to men,

especially in family relationships. Awarding the father's estate to her half-brother, the court made reference to unwritten African cultural norms that date back centuries, which say that the head of the family is a patriarch, or a senior man, who exercises control over the property and lives of women and juniors (Bigge&Briesen, 2000). The 5-0 ruling equated the status of a woman to that of a "junior male" or a minor. This dangerously repressive precedent deliberately overlooked domestic law, the constitution and international instruments that were cited as the defence. The Magaya case demonstrated that the struggle for African women's human rights confronts resilient structures and institutions of patriarchy whose primary role is to maintain the status quo. This case shows that feminism in Africa is thrown into confusion in trying to reflect the third wave and fourth wave dimensions when we are yet to achieve the goal of second wave feminism.

It is pertinent to note that African feminists are in the damning position of having to fight back against the effects of patriarchy in our societies. They are also to eliminate one-dimensional stereotypes and exploitation of African women by Westerners and also achieve the goals of feminism. Consequently, they cannot rely on one approach to feminism in actualizing this huge task. An amalgamation of several approaches is needed for Feminism in Africa to thrive. Emily Korth(2021) notes that:

Today's feminism isn't making the same progress or spreading the same message. There are still other problems that feminism could fix, but if we don't use feminism the right way then we won't be fixing anything. If we continue to misuse feminism then we really will be just a bunch of angry women protesting outside of buildings (p.88).

To address the problem of feminism in Africa, the standpoint theory is considered apt. Standpoint theory is a feminist theoretical point of view which holds that a person's social position influences their knowledge. This perspective argues that research and theory treat women and the feminist movement as insignificant while elevating the objectivity claimed by science (Cockburn in Shahrzad, 2015). The effect is that feminists are misdirected into seeking measuring equality in men and women; for instance, when liberal feminists see single working women as ideal feminists. Thus, they refuse to see traditional science as unbiased. Since the 1980s, standpoint feminists have argued that feminist movement should address global issues (such as rape, incest, and prostitution) and culturally specific issues (such as female genital mutilation in some parts of Africa and Arab societies, as well as glass ceiling practices that impede women's advancement in developed economies). This will enhance the understanding of how gender inequality interacts with racism, homophobia, classism and colonization in a "matrix of domination" (Collins, 1990). A typical glass ceiling practice is manifest in law when it regards both women and men as either breadwinners or caregivers. Such categorization overshadows the fact that women who serve as breadwinners equally serve as caregivers by virtue of caring for their husbands and their children. Thus, the law tends to undermine the essential difference that will enhance women's rights. It is the point that is reiterated

in MacKinnon's advocacy for feminists which highlights the important differences between men and women; so as to be able to identify peculiar women experiences (MacKinnon, 1989). Glass ceiling practices could be eliminated by making legal feminism effective in Africa.

The "blame narrative" points to only educated or so-called liberated women being feminists - a condition that has characterized feminist struggle in Africa for years. This narrative in essence is revealing that African feminists will achieve greater successes if they continue to tear down divisions among African women. Such divisions could be of class, sexuality, religion, profession or ethnic group. Thus, women from any class of the African society could be a feminist. In an imperialist and patriarchal society like Africa, African female knowledge systems were always a multiple-way learning stream. Thus, following the postfeminists' "blame narrative", African feminists are encouraged to acknowledge as many approaches as possible in the struggle. The more these facts are made subjects of awareness campaigns and consciousness-raising among feminists in Africa, the much African feminists will appreciate each other's voices and struggles thereby making feminist movements in the continent stronger.

5. Conclusion

This paper has considered the postfeminist "blame narrative" and its implications for feminism in Africa. It has highlighted that the narrative focuses on the second wave or liberal feminism which is prevalent in Africa even in this 21st century; with particular reference to the ineffectiveness and obsolete nature of liberal feminism. Therefore, the implications of the blame narrative for African feminism is that feminists on the continent should think of the possible ways of merging liberal feminism with other more recent approaches in feminism. Unlike the Western countries that seem to clamour for a jettisoning of the liberal approach, Africa seems to be at a stage where that approach is still needed to create awareness of feminist struggle among the various classes of people in the continent. So instead of encouraging African feminists to discard the approach, this paper encourages an amalgamation of different feminist approaches like, radical feminism, Marxist or social feminism, and any other approaches that will help to highlight the uniqueness of the African people. It thinks that by so doing, a widening of the horizon of feminism in Africa will be achieved as all classes of people in the continent will be awakened to feminist consciousness.

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