

**NEGO-FEMINISM: PROTECTING THE NEGOTIATOR AND KEEPING RADICAL FEMINISM AT BAY**

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**Abstract**

The African society is clearly patriarchal in its nature, which has over the centuries favoured the menfolk in governance, marriage, relationships, business and other spheres of human endeavor. The women themselves have on their own, come to accept their lot and like the proverbial beggar, try to pick a few scraps from the ‘master’s table’. Even in these modern days of self-awareness and actualization, women still have to play by the unwritten rules of engagement to be heard and to ascend the social strata. Many times, this compromise comes with a high price; loss of identity, broken dreams, physical and emotional abuse. However, there comes a time when the woman, after traumatic experiences, takes her destiny in her own hands and fights for what she believes. These outcomes may turn out positively or negatively depending largely on her mental or psychological state. This study examines selected writings of African female writers, who present these breaking points in their female characters and how they are able to negotiate culture and society to pursue fulfillment: very much unlike her western counterparts. The theoretical framework for this study is nego-feminism, which postulates that through subtle negotiations, the African woman can have her way without culture clash. The findings show that when women tow the path of negotiation and are not protected by the law, there are great tendencies for them to lean towards radicalism. This information is expected to guide policy makers in decision making. The study proffer possible ways government policies, laws and enforcement agencies can create a more balanced society, where her citizens regardless of gender, can have a healthy means of expressions, this most certainly will keep radical feminism at bay.

**Keywords:** Nego-feminism, Patriarchy, Negotiator, Culture, Self-Actualization.

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**Introduction**

News headlines in recent times have been inundated with news on domestic violence; the woman mostly being the victim. More disturbing is the mortality rate of such incidences. Nigeria Health Watch (2020) estimates the level of physical, sexual, and emotional abuse to be 69%. Despite these alarming statistics, many women especially the married still maintain a culture of silence to preserve the marriage and their reputation. The demise of a popular gospel singer, Osinachi Nwachukwu, whose death is attributed to the result of long years of

domestic violence, is beginning to bring up discussions, debates and more importantly greater awareness for women to assert and protect themselves. Feminism as an ideology has not been well received in Africa principally due to its perceived anti-patriarchal leanings. This perhaps necessitated it to evolve into more African-oriented theories like Stiwanism, Womanism, Nego-feminism and Snail sense. These theories advocate a subservient way of handling issues, away from the ideals of the radical West. The challenge has been this question begging for an answer. In

carrying this less radical approach to crisis resolution, how legally protected is the African woman? This study seeks to bring to the fore the implications of not protecting the rights of the African woman which exposes her to the radicalism of the West. It also proffers possible solutions that will enable her remain a negotiator.

### **History and Growth of Feminism**

Charles Fourier, a socialite and French Philosopher, is credited to have coined the word -Feminism in 1837. Feminism as a concept and movement realized its origins from the West with Mary Wollstonecraft, who wrote a book in 1792 titled, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* in which she made a strong argument for women's education. However, Charles Fourier is credited with having coined the word in 1837. Feminism is considered a range of socio-political movements and ideologies that aim to define and establish the political, economic, personal and social equality of sexes (Hawkesworth, 2006). It is globally expressed with various institutions committing to promoting women's rights. Since the advent of active feminist campaigns, there have been four waves (Chamberlain, 2017); each wave building on the success of the previous.

The first wave focus women's suffrage, while also canvassing for equal parenting, contract, marriage and property rights. The 60s' saw the rise of a second wave which sought legal and social equality for women. The third wave came up in the 90s' which focused on individuality and diversity. They also contained internal debates between different feminists who believed both sexes have inherent psychological differences which were against the argument that gender roles were based on social conditioning (Gillian, 1993). The fourth wave is argued to have arisen around 2012, when women

groups used social media to draw attention to rape, sexual harassment and violence against women. However, a lot of criticisms have greeted the third and fourth waves, especially on the African continent.

So far, scholars have identified four major types of feminism: radical, Marxist, cultural and liberal feminism. Radical feminism is a philosophy of thought that seeks to dismantle traditional patriarchy and gender roles. This theory rests on the assumption that all social activity is the result of certain restrictions and coercions. Although every form of social system contains specific forms of interactive constraints, they do not have to cause repression (Vukoicic, 2013). Marxist feminist analyze how women are exploited through capitalism and the individual ownership of private property, (Desai, 2014).

Gilman Charlotte (1898) argues that women's oppressions stemmed from being forced into the private sphere. She argues that, the condition of women would improve when their work was located, recognized and valued in the public sphere. Marxist feminist argue that women's liberation can only be achieved by dismantling the capitalist systems in which they contend much of women's labour which is uncompensated (Fergusson, 2010).

One of the most successful campaigns of this group was the International Wages for House Work Campaign, which sprang up in Italy. Though championed by a few women, it was able to birth itself in Brooklyn; New York. This movement was able to generate discourse in both public and academic domains regarding the value of housework and its relation to the economy (Heidi, 1981).

Cultural feminism came up in the 1970s to explain how male-defined constructions of women devalue female traits (Bromley, 2012). It is a philosophical thought that men and women have different approaches to the world around them and women's approach tends to be superior. It also describes theories that commend innate differences between men and women (Kramarae, 2000). The aim is to debunk this notion that the female's moral development is far less than the male. It drew its roots from radical feminism.

Liberal feminism seeks to achieve gender equality through legal and political reform with the framework of liberal democracy. It emphasizes the public space where women may easily be denied equality for example public institutions, education and laws. Liberal feminist have worked hard to bring women into mainstream politics. It is viewed as the dominant and default form of feminism (Zhang, 2021). It is actually a product of the first wave of feminism and progressive men have also played important roles alongside the women in the struggle for equal political rights since its inception in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

In all of these, African feminist have been compelled to draw their own identity and experiences as these feminism drawn from the west, do not capture African women's peculiar challenges.

### **African Feminism**

African feminism is a type of feminism innovated by African women to address the peculiar challenges African women living in Africa are facing. This is far removed from African Womanism and Black Feminism, which addresses the needs of diaspora African women. The concept behind African feminism is to creation of a free, productive and independent African woman, which

strives to create a new liberal, productive and self-reliant African woman within the heterogeneous cultures of Africa. Feminisms in Africa ultimately aim at modifying culture as it affects women in different societies (Nkealah, 2006). This is because the way African woman perceives gender equality will be based on her traditional culture and religion. Therefore, one cannot merge all women into a sisterhood of commonality using Western feminism as a yardstick.

African feminism recognizes that gender inequality in Africa has colonial roots. They suggest that slavery and colonialism were the origin of inequality on the African continent, except in societies that were steeped in Islam; women traditionally had a right of place in pre-colonial Africa. Traditionally, men controlled activities outside the home while the women managed the home front. Though African society is mainly patriarchal, women held traditional titles in their communities.

For example, in many Anioma communities of Delta North senatorial District in Delta State Nigeria, there was always a spiritual woman leader who handled women's matters and sometimes the spiritual protection of the people especially during war. In some dialects, they are called, 'Omu'. These titled women even sat in council with other male chiefs to represent the concerns of the women. In an interview granted by the Omu of Okpanam, in Nigeria, in the *Guardian Newspapers* of 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2017, she further reveals that *Omus'* are granted male rights and therefore vacate their matrimonial home immediately after installation. There were also highly revered priestesses of deities, especially water goddesses. They were not regarded as less powerful than their male counterparts.

In terms of economy, women could trade, farm, fish or carry out any other form of occupation and earn a living. The woman could control wealth which they used for their households. Such women were highly respected in their communities and were a source of pride, especially those that could distinguish themselves in their vocation. Socially, the women were not repressed beings.

The Ekpe secret cult, which originated from the Ibibio tribe in Nigeria, had women as members. The laws also protected the woman because motherhood was highly revered in Africa. The gender imbalance began to slowly creep in with the arrival of the Europeans. As African men negotiated taxes and governance with them, the role of the women decreased. In fact, as the African political structure bowed to colonial might, so did the power of women.

We must remember that the Western culture has for centuries been influenced by Christianity which is an offshoot of Judaism. Judaism as a religion and way of life for the Jews never made provision for womenfolk outside the home front. For example, women were never priests and could not inherit property or hold political positions. In fact, the only woman (Athaliah), who dared to be queen had to usurp the throne and she paid dearly for it (2<sup>nd</sup> kings 8:16-11). Since there was no provision for the woman of power in Judaism, it became a rub-off on Christianity and ultimately nations that adopted it. Western feminists had to battle for suffrage and the right to inherit property.

Remarkably, worthy of note is the role of African men during colonial rule. During colonial Africa, as the men negotiated taxes, trade and governance, the women's active presence began to dwindle in the public space. And with the focus on cash crops for

export, the women began to slowly lose economic relevance as they were forced into the informal economy. Boys were sent to school and soon got white collar jobs which became the new symbol of power. The women remained in trade, craft and on the farms. The girls had to play catch up constrained by home duties. This limits the girl child, and in the process, promotes patriarchal order in Africa.

However, Western feminism cannot be used to solve some of these problems created by the West. Thus, African Feminism comes to the rescue, since it takes into cognizance, the non-monolithic structure of Africa. Variants of African feminism vary from Motherism, Femalism, Stiwanism, Woman Palavering, Snail sense, African Womanism to Nego-feminism.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This study is based on Nnaemeka Obioma's theory of Nego-feminism. In her article, *Nego-feminism: Theorizing, Practicing and Pruning Africa's Way*, (2004) she first theorized and defined the term Nego-feminism. She states that, 'Nego Feminism is the feminism of negotiation, second, nego- feminism stands for 'no ego' feminism and is structured by cultural imperatives and modulated by ever-shifting local and global exigencies' This is not far from African inclinations. The African society is a deeply religious one, highly regulated by the spirits of gods and ancestors.

The typical traditional African tries not to offend the unseen by doing all possible to be morally correct: the moral correctness enshrined in unwritten laws. This may also play a role in the reason; traditional African kingdoms never set out to conquer the world. Chinua Achebe in his work titled, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) puts; it this way,

‘Umuofia does not fight a war of blame.’ This can be seen in the way, most colonized African nations, negotiated their way out of colonialism.

Understanding this background, the typical African woman upholds family, culture and even with the shifting times, family remains the bedrock for her. Living in a patriarchal system has never really been a problem for the African woman, because as earlier mentioned womanhood was well respected in the African sphere. With the advent of westernization, traditional values have gradually been watered down, adopting alien western ways. The nego-feminist has kept the peace through constant negotiations.

### **Methodology**

This study uses qualitative research method and data sources include *So Long a Letter* by Mariama Bâ, *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Adichie and online newspapers. The books were selected because they present different nations (Senegal and Nigeria) and different religious systems, namely Islam and Christianity.

### **The Negotiator**

The Cambridge Dictionary defines negotiation as the process of discussing something with someone to reach an agreement with them. It is a case of give and take. With the rise of radical feminism in the West, nego-feminism takes away the 'we are at war' tension between the men and womenfolk in Africa. Five conflict resolutions have been identified by Thomas and Kilman, (1976) which are compete, avoid, accommodate, collaborate and compromise

For negotiators who adopt *compete* style, they are assertive and drive towards target goals. “*Avoid*” tends to withdraw from conflict and are apprehensive. They stay

neutral and can be self-sacrificing because they look towards the interest of others. The accommodating negotiator tries to maintain a relationship with the other party. They focus more on cooperativeness than being assertive.

The collaborative negotiator is highly cooperative and assertive. They are concerned about finding solutions that will benefit the parties involved. The compromising negotiator stands in the middle ground seeking to ensure both parties achieve a certain level of satisfaction.

African women have employed these methods based on their temperament or environment. They have been able to record some level of success but not without a price.

### **The Vulnerable Negotiator**

While on the path of negotiation, African women tend to go through a lot of emotional draining just to be morally correct in the society. Chimamanda Adichie in her work, *The Purple Hibiscus* presents the typical Nego-feminist in her female character ‘Mama’, also known as Beatrice. She is the wife of Eugene Achike a wealthy businessman. He is a devout Catholic and a philanthropist. He is the picture of the perfect man any woman would wish for.

However, there are dark sides in his personality which Mama has to navigate through to keep her home intact. He possesses a diseased mind that makes the inhabitants of his home living statues, repressed and silent in an uncanny way. She is silent in the face of constant brutality against her person, children: living and unborn. Beatrice's miscarriages have been the result of physical violence being meted against her within the confines of the bedroom. She never calls for help in those occasions and for each ordeal she survives,

she carefully cleans the figurines in the living room.

She is the avoiding negotiator; the peacemaker. She is the one to carry Kambili silently out of a heated bathtub meant to scald because she had kept a forbidden picture of her grandfather. Not for once did she plan to leave her matrimonial home to save her life or that of her children. She stayed to protect the good name of her family, 'You know the small table where we keep the family Bible, *nne?* Your father broke it on my belly... my blood finished on that floor.' (p,249). Yet Beatrice stayed negotiating for a happy family. Jackeie Iketuonye, a victim of domestic violence featured on Independent New Daily explains the dire circumstance,

*Again we live in a patriarchal society. Though that perception is gradually changing, a woman is not considered complete until she attaches, 'Mrs. somebody... no woman marries with an exit plan. So she goes at any length to ensure that she remains married... with this mindset, she tolerates any maltreatment meted on her in the home... she is told to bear it.'*

There is the popular case of the Nigerian Gospel singer, Osinachi Nwachukwu who is believed to have died as a result of physical abuse meted on her by her husband. Eyewitnesses, including family, have come up to speak out on how she would constantly plead for the abuse to be kept secret, saying that the husband would change. An interview granted by her sister, to the Vanguard Newspapers reveals this much,

She did not die of cancer, her husband Peter Nwachukwu hit her with his leg on her chest. All this while, he had been beating her but my sister hid all

that she was passing through from us. Before now, we told her to come out of the marriage... just for her to stay alive and take care of her children she will tell us to relax that the man will change.

Osinachi didn't make it out alive and the case is presently in court, followed carefully by women rights groups.

Mariama Bâ in her epistolary novel, *So Long a Letter* set in a Senegalese Muslim society, presents two major characters both faced with the choice of polygamy. She summarizes their situation in these disheartening words, 'Yesterday you were divorced. Today I am a widow.' (p,1) Ramatoulaye the narrator is abandoned with 12 children for her daughter's teenage friend. This drains her emotionally and financially. Ramatoulaye refers to herself and the child bride as victims. She accommodates Modou's excesses because, even though her home is already in tatters, she doesn't want to be the one to throw in the towel. Aissatou, her friend, on the other hand, chooses not to accommodate. She falls into the class of those who want to compete. She berates Ramatoulaye for remaining in a loveless marriage and strikes out on her own. She divorces Mawdo, gains financial and emotional independence, a rarity in a typical Muslim society and finally leaves the country with her sons.

Negotiating places the negotiator in a vulnerable position; prone to abuse of power. For example, Beatrice in *Purple Hibiscus* practically escapes death every time she receives a beating from Eugene. But her unborn babies are not so lucky. Her children suffer emotional and physical deformity while on her path of negotiation.

However, when law come to women's rights are not enforced, there will be so much nego-feminist. She may begin to consider radical options to be free in asserting herself, which is not a preferred option considering cultural boundaries. Though the African female negotiator may suffer untold discrimination and ill-treatment; be treated like a second-class citizen and sometimes die in the process of negotiation, still radical feminism is not an option.

### **Protecting the Negotiator**

The African patriarchal society is at ease with a nego-feminist but there is a thin line between African nego-feminism and radical western feminism if the menfolk continue to take advantage of the negotiator's 'weakness.'

Beatrice in order to set the family free begins to poison Eugene slowly with tea. This submissive almost invisible character we meet at the beginning of the book gradually becomes a cold murderer. Her standpoint changed when Eugene broke a stool on her stomach: she was six weeks pregnant.

*...the firm voice would not penetrate the fixed smile on Mama's face. Mama's eyes were glazed, but she looked like a different woman from the one who had come out of the taxi that morning. (p, 251)*

One may ask? Why didn't she go get justice or protection from law enforcement agencies? Nego-feminism can only build a balanced society, when the right laws and policies are in place to protect the negotiator. Cultural inhibitions were restraining cords that prevented Mama from seeking legal help. Ramatoulaye in *So Long a Letter* does not go to the extreme of becoming a killer but she eventually takes up liberties that is considered un-Islamic.

Firstly, she turns down an attractive marriage offer from Dauda Dieng, for which she was considered a fool. She soon earns the reputation of a 'mad' woman in town as she continues turning down other suitors. In Islam, women enjoy special protection from males; whether father or husband. But Ramatoulaye chooses to weather the storms of life alone choosing personal peace above all else. She goes unescorted to cinema halls. Abused African women can negotiate their freedom by taking the route of Ramatoulaye, rather than killing. In achieving equality and equity for all sexes, all lives matter. It is this extremity of killing any oppressive African man, influenced by Western radical feminism that this essay seeks to decolonise.

This moderation through Nego- Feminism is needed, because in Africa, there are treaties protecting women's rights. For example, AU solemn declaration on Gender Equality, Universal Declaration of Human Rights Convention on the Elimination of all forms of discrimination against women (CEDAW), protocol to the ACHPR (African Charter on Human and Peoples Rights) on the rights of women in Africa. However, some of these agreements are yet to find themselves in domestic laws within Nigeria, More recently, the Gender and Equal Opportunities Bill (GEO), a bill designed to secure the rights of women and girls in the country was rejected by the Senate on the 1<sup>st</sup> of March, 2022. It would have guaranteed equal rights for women in employment, marriage, divorce, inheritance and equal access to education, property and land ownership.

It is pertinent to note that while the Nigerian Government pays lip service to women's rights, and enforcement of laws protecting the vulnerable negotiator without doing the needful, the women may begin to push

towards radicalism, which Africa is not ready for. Where equity and justice is missing, peace becomes elusive. Thus, to keep African women from adopting radical Western feminism, African nations should begin to take women's rights more seriously by enforcing already existing laws that protect them. The era of lip service to women's welfare is over. The womenfolk have become more aware socially and politically. The protests held in front of the National Assembly Complex in Abuja Nigeria, as a result of the failure of the Senate to pass the GEO bill reflect the growing drive for women welfare.

The law enforcement agencies should be retrained in handling cases women bring forward for justice. It has become a norm for women who report cases of abuse to become objects of mockery. This has only swelled crime and abuse against women.

School counsellors in primary and secondary schools should encourage students and pupils to quickly speak up when faced with any form of harassment and abuse. Prolonged silence on abuse usually has disastrous consequences, many times triggering extreme reactions.

### **Conclusion**

In reality, Africa as a continent is still averse to radical forms of feminism. Breaking cultural and religious boundaries is no small feat and the African woman has won more ground riding on the paths of negotiation. However, this path can turn awry because negotiation takes time. Decisive decisions take place in this wait, all depending on the experiences of the negotiator. This is where the Government comes in to ensure that women's rights are protected and timely justice is served. Every woman has the tendency to fight the status quo. 'I had remained the same Ramatoulaye... a bit of a

rebel.' There is a rebel in every woman. Protecting her as a negotiator is a sure way of keeping the rebel asleep. This is a much safer and peaceful path to tread, to keep the dreaded radical feminism at bay.

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