

Global Sisterhood or Global Hegemony?: A Theoretical Deconstruction of the Western-led Transnational Feminist Movement in Africa

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Abstract

Feminism, as an ideology and a movement, has for decades improved the lives of women around the globe. However, despite feminism's essentially emancipatory role, its positive effects have not been equally felt or interpreted by all women who have come in contact with it. This paper explores transnational feminist discourses rooted in the Western world and directed at the women of Africa. It argues that when the power imbalances between Western and African women are not properly addressed, feminism can be used to shield existing and re-create harmful, colonial discourses about cultural hierarchy and normativity. It concludes that for feminism to fulfill its full and positive potential, the intersectionality of African women's identities needs to be addressed and privileged by Western feminists.

Keywords: feminism, Africa, Western women, transnational feminism, power hierarchies, narrative

Feminism, as an idea and a movement, has deconstructed patriarchal power relations and promoted equality for women. However, despite the excellent work done by many feminists, feminism has also been used to veil the re-creation of other harmful discourses, including colonial ones. The potential for feminism to function in this regard is particularly acute when Western feminists attempt to propel the movement across national and cultural borders in a global movement known as transnational feminism. Africa has been a prime target for this particular kind of activism, as Western feminists have reached out in solidarity to other women in what is widely regarded as the most underdeveloped part of the world. While the intentions of these globally-minded feminists are

undoubtedly philanthropic, the power differential inherent in any relationship between the hegemonic West and the historically subordinated African continent creates a situation where careful scholarship and action are needed to avoid replicating harmful power hierarchies.

Western-led transnational feminism directed at Africa proposes to emancipate all women from the source of their collective oppression: patriarchy. However, by neutralizing all aspects of identity, such as race and class, as well as the multiplicity of struggles that may arise from these identities, under one global, feminist struggle, Western feminists project their unique identity and struggle onto the women of Africa. This idea of the "bond of sisterhood" legitimizes Western women who speak on behalf of African

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women and thus can be used to hide paternalistic, colonial narratives about the West's attempts to "guide" Africans towards modernity. However, this mission to spread the Western normative good of feminism and modernity mostly serves to empower the Western feminist, especially in relation to subordinated African women. The essentialist gendered analysis found in much Western feminist thought cannot truly liberate African women, as it does not address other sources of subordination, such as race or class. This paper will argue that without thoughtful consideration of cross-cultural difference and global power hierarchies, the Western transnational feminist mission of defeating patriarchy in Africa does not truly emancipate African women, but rather reinforces the image of the powerful, liberated Western woman by disguising colonial narratives of Western normativity in the bond of global sisterhood.

As a caveat to the issues raised above, it must be noted that brave, insightful, and innovative feminists have changed and continue to change the world we live in today, particularly for the generations of women who come after them. Their passionate activism and revolutionary scholarship have won many battles for gender equality and have effectively challenged the hegemony of patriarchal thinking in the West. This paper does not aim to undervalue in any way the vital work that these feminists have done and continue to do, as any feminist knows that the fight for equality is far from over. Instead, it argues that feminism, like any living, dynamic discourse, needs to be constantly evaluated and re-examined, and cannot be so presumptuous as to believe itself flawless. Indeed, carefully identifying and working to fix feminism's flaws can only make it stronger. Further, it is recognized that in using such broad analytic units as "African women" or even "Western feminists," as this paper does, it can be charged with falling into the same sorts of essentialist analyses it is arguing against. Africa is a vast continent, home to many women and multiple feminisms. Further, many Western feminists have completed mindful, de-colonizing transnational work. However, the goal of this paper is to consider, in the limited space provided, some of the harmful, dominant narratives coming out of the transnational feminist movement. Thus, while there is not space for a more careful case study, it is hoped that the theoretical arguments arising from this paper can be used in future scholarship.

Transnational feminism is a Western discourse in that it was built on the Western values of individual rights and personal autonomy, but with the intention of achieving these things for women. Western feminism's first public

issue was universal suffrage; however, groups that formed around suffrage quickly expanded to embrace other issues, such as equal labour legislation and peace. While these demands expanded into a global cry, suffrage movements were inherently focused on the local nation-state.¹ The period of the suffrage movements, from the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries, gave rise to some of the first widespread and outspoken movements demanding social and economic equality for women. However, it was only beginning in the 1950s, and continuing into the 60s and 70s, that these feminist discourses became more theoretical and radical in their demand for and ideological shift towards equality for women, in what is known as the "second wave" of feminism. This is also the period when Western feminists began applying their analyses to women of the Global South, where autonomous feminist movements were more intimately tied to colonial independence movements.² Currently some argue that we are living in a "third wave" of feminism that seeks to celebrate the multiple identities and struggles of different kinds of women. This is also the period when women from the Global South have begun speaking back against dominant, Western feminist narratives that still persist.³

It cannot be forgotten that these dominant feminist discourses evolved within the framework of global Western hegemony and as such inherently privilege Western ways of knowing and being. As they are still influenced by colonial thought, Western theories easily fall into the trap of normalizing Western identities against the relative "Other." Edward Said defines the process of "Othering" as the creation of hegemonic knowledge systems that cast "the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures."⁴ This thinking can present itself in feminism, but the authoritarian habit is more difficult to spot, since feminism exists to challenge power relations. However, a careful deconstruction of this type of Western feminist discourse reveals that, although gender inequalities are exposed, other inequalities are left unmentioned. Intersectional

1 Aili Mari Tripp, "The Evolution of Transnational Feminisms," in *Global Feminism: Transnational Women's Activism, Organizing and Women's Rights*, eds. Myrna Marx Ferree and Aili Mari Tripp (New York: New York University Press, 2006), 56.

2 *Ibid.*, 59.

3 *Ibid.*, 60.

4 Edward Said, *Orientalism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 7.

identities such as “white,” “middle class,” and even “Western” are normalized and privileged in Western feminist knowledge systems, rendering race- and class-based identity analyses invisible and gendered analysis central.⁵ Indeed, some Western feminists have argued that to consider gender anything but the primary basis of analysis is “non-feminist.”⁶ It is this privileged position that makes transnational feminism a potentially problematic discourse when articulated within a Western-based, colonial structure.

One of the core tenets of Western feminism is that the forces of patriarchy subordinate all women everywhere. This idea has been used to promote gender-wide solidarity and the idea of a collective force of women united in the same struggle. However, using this as a taking-off point for feminist thought turns women’s subordination into an unavoidable, almost biological, fact based on the differences between males and females. It is in this way that traditional feminist theory plays into the harmful Western, patriarchal ways of thinking that cast gender as the exclusive and absolute determinant of social identity. For example, in her groundbreaking text, *The Second Sex*, Simone de Beauvoir argues that “humanity is male and man defines woman not in herself but as relative to him.”⁷ Boiling down a myriad of social, economic, and legal struggles into an essential struggle between genders makes “male” and “female” the only two identities that matter. Rather than women being seen as lawyers, social activists, good cooks, or indigenous people, the overriding identity becomes “woman,” as understood in opposition to “man.”⁸ Though this analysis poses problems for Western women, its inherent issues are made all the more problematic when the gendered struggle is assumed to be global, and this

same analytic is projected onto the lives of women everywhere.

If Western feminists assume de Beauvoir’s binary gender analysis is applicable in African cultures, it is at the risk of making some grave cross-cultural generalizations. As Mohanty argues, it makes the assumption that “men and women are already constituted as sexual-political subjects prior to their entry into the arena of social relations.”⁹ It is widely accepted, maybe especially among feminists, that gender is socially constructed. Why, then, should feminists ignore one of the most crucial elements of social construction – culture? To assume that the patriarchal struggle of Western women is the struggle of women in Africa is to assume that men and women, and their relationship, is always constituted in the same way. It is also to assume that gender is the salient unit of analysis everywhere, when this is simply not the case. An examination of social structures delineated by age, which are prevalent in many African cultures, shows the impossibility of universally applying a gendered analysis. Arnfred argues that amongst the Yoruba of Nigeria the first thing established when speaking of others is their seniority, relative to oneself and to the rest of the community.¹⁰ Those more advanced in age hold the privileged social position, regardless of gender. Conversely, the first thing established in Western culture is a person’s gender, which is obvious in the prefaces of Mr. and Ms.¹¹ Considering this fundamental difference in the way that social relations are conceptualized, it becomes clear that Western feminism cannot be relevant in Africa if it is simply duplicated without the appropriate cultural transmutation.

Reducing all African social interactions to a feminist interpretation of gender relations cannot be understood only as generalization or ignorance. Calling for gender-wide solidarity in the face of a common enemy is to form a global strategic coalition.¹² It cannot be forgotten that feminism is a campaign as well as a school of thought, and the goal of any campaign is to mobilize numbers. Further, expanding the feminist campaign to global proportions ensures that feminism never loses momentum, as there is always a new, shocking example of patriarchy to rally around. However, the concept of the “global bond of sisters” united by

5 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and the Politics of Empowerment*, (New York: Routledge Press, 2000), 9.

6 Oyèrónké Oyéwùmi, “The White Woman’s Burden: African Women in Western Feminist Discourse,” in *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*, ed. Oyèrónké Oyéwùmi (Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 2003), 25.

7 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, (New York: Bantam Books, 1961), xvi.

8 Signe Arnfred, “Simone de Beauvoir in Africa: ‘Woman = The Second Sex?’ Issues of African Feminist Thought,” *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies* 2, no. 1 (2002): 12.

9 Chandra Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses,” *Feminist Review* 30 (Autumn 1988): 68.

10 Arnfred, “Simone de Beauvoir in Africa,” 12.

11 Ibid., 11.

12 Mohanty, “Under Western Eyes,” 61.

subordination legitimizes the idea that Western women can speak for African women and can thus hide the paternalistic and colonial processes actually taking place. The possibility for this occurrence is well documented by post-colonial feminist scholar Gayatri Spivak. In her seminal essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?," she argues that "women of dominant groups interested in 'international feminism'" are truly projecting the interests and desires of the Western movement onto the struggles of the silenced, Third World woman.¹³ Thus Spivak argues that the voice of the subaltern can never be heard within the constructs of foreign, hegemonic discourses – even feminist ones.¹⁴

Colonial thought embedded in Western feminism can be used to silence African women in this very manner. The persistence of old, colonial tropes makes Africa a prime case study for Western feminists testing their theory of the biologically engrained, universal subordination of women. Operating under the idea that African cultures are "close to nature" and that the underdevelopment of the African state is a reflection of an underdeveloped people, the presence of patriarchal structures in African society acts as proof defending the thesis of natural female subordination.¹⁵ Upon observing this inequality, the next obvious step for many feminists is to eradicate this inequality by prescribing a path of modernization for Africa. However, this enlightenment-informed trajectory for development misses an important step. Seemingly patriarchal cultural practices must be carefully unpacked to uncover the purposes and meanings behind them. To skip this step is to ignore Mohanty's warning of the dangers of assuming pre-constituted gender roles, without carefully examining the social structures that create them.¹⁶ However, a strictly gendered, feminist analysis based on female subordination clouds such nuanced readings of culture.

Western feminists working in Africa have undoubtedly been guilty of these sorts of generalizations and of assuming that "patriarchy" is to blame for every unequal cultural practice they see. Oyewùmí uses the classic examples of polygamous marriage, arranged marriages, and female circumcision to elucidate this point.¹⁷ All of

these practices were labeled by Westerners as sexist, as harmful to women, and as backwards and uncivilized. It is easy for a liberal-minded Westerner to see problems in these practices, but where, in the analysis, are the voices of the African women? Some African women who have spoken out about these practices have rejected them, whereas others have defended them as important parts of their culture and the social fabric of their communities. Arranged marriages, for example, involve a double-sided contract, binding the wife as well as the groom, and the groom is often required to make payments to his wife's family for the rest of his life.¹⁸ Further, all of these practices occur within the African societal framework that privileges collectivity and familial duty, making for a dissonant comparative analysis with Western values of individualism.¹⁹

Packaged into all of these critiques of African culture are notions about modernity as a commodity exclusively dispensed by the West. African women arguing that certain practices hold cultural importance simply does not cut it – "culture" is intimately tied with "tradition," which is inherently assumed to be "anti-modern." The secondary idea operating here is that if only African women would allow Western women to show them the secrets of modernity they have unlocked, African women would abandon their naïve attachment to their culture and enter the proud new age of the modern woman.²⁰ This is a core tenet of Western, feminist-led development: modernity is a pre-condition for feminist consciousness, and Western women, by virtue of their education, civility, and superior socioeconomic status, have discovered the key to both.

It is in the ways listed above that Western feminists colonize the struggle of African women. First, by supposing patriarchal structures that mirror those in the West, Western feminists make their unique struggle a global one, turning African women into objects in their subjective re-writing of society.²¹ Second, any win for feminism becomes a win for Western women, as it is they who both identified

13 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, eds. C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, (Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1988), 84.

14 *Ibid.*, 101.

15 Oyèrónké Oyèwùmí, "The White Woman's Burden," 30.

16 Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 68.

17 Oyewùmí, "White Woman's Burden," 31-33.

18 *Ibid.*, 33.

19 Nkolika Ijeoma Aniekwu, "Converging Constructions: A Historical Perspective on Sexuality and Feminism in Post-Colonial Africa," *African Sociological Review* 10, no. 1 (2006): 145.

20 Jane Haggis, "White Women and Colonialism: Towards a Non-Recuperative History," in *Feminist Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, eds. Reina Lewis and Sara Mills (New York: Routledge Press, 2003), 174.

21 Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 79.

and cured the problem with modern, Western thought. However, what truly problematizes the relationship between the Western “big sister” and the African “feminist protégé” is that, based on the grounds of the idea of global sisterhood and collective subordination, the power differential between these two groups of women is rarely properly addressed.

Because gender equality is regarded as a normative good, it is harder to see that one-sided interests are being served in many transnational feminist analyses. As an emancipatory discourse, transnational feminism looks less like imperialism and more like a philanthropic social mission. However, observed through a post-colonial lens, the social mission of the Western-led emancipation of African women in fact serves to reinforce the superiority and normativity of Western women. An extreme example is the campaigns in which Western women act as “surrogate mothers” to African children. The funds raised from these “adoption” campaigns go to mothers in Africa and help them provide for their own children and families. However, the campaigns are imbued with the idea that a more capable, Western woman has now taken charge who, in “rescuing” the African child, is filling the gaps the African mother cannot.²² This “white saviour” complex is heightened and sensationalized when celebrities, such as Madonna or Angelina Jolie, legally adopt African children.²³

By taking on the social mission of emancipating African women, Western feminists cast themselves as agents of positive social change. Indeed, this process of Western women defining themselves in Africa began in the early stages of European contact. Jane Haggis argues that female missionaries sent to the British colonies were the earliest example of Western women finding legitimization based on the relative and constructed inferiority of colonized women.²⁴ Sent across the world to convert colonized women and teach them the ways of European feminine civility, these missionary women held some of the first professionalized and publicly lauded positions available for single, independent European women. As such, they would have jumped at the chance to establish themselves in

the increasingly internationalized and competitive world of the late nineteenth century.²⁵ However, their work was reliant on the assumption that Third World women needed their help, and that Western women, by virtue of their modernity and shared womanliness, were the legitimate actors to deliver this help.

The underlying logic of many feminists working during the 1960s and 70s was not entirely different. The second wave feminist movement was gaining momentum and projecting the struggle onto African women not only gave it global proportions, but also endowed these feminists with the grandiose identity of world-wide freedom fighter. For example, Ester Boserup’s 1970 *Women’s Role in Economic Development*, while an important and galvanizing text for the era’s feminist movement, drew on some damaging stereotypes of African women. In her analysis of African female farming systems, African women are depicted as trapped in polygamous marriages and completing the most difficult work in the fields or producing offspring at the behest of their dominant husbands.²⁶ This parallels colonial stereotypes that Africans are primarily sexualized beings and that women operate as slaves to lazy, brutal, and dominant African men. A more nuanced and empowering analysis might explore the agency allowed African women by virtue of their role as agricultural labourers, explore the innovative ways African women in agricultural societies make do with scarce resources, and locally contextualize their perspective and social reality as wives in polygamous marriages. However, Boserup’s telling not only casts African women as passive and in need of aid, but also inherently contrasts the oversexualized and economically reliant African woman with the sexually controlled, independent Western woman.²⁷ The parallels behind feminism and the traditional colonizing project are uncomfortable but not difficult to draw. After being discovered through research, emancipated African women become the objects conquered by Western feminism. The political and historical agency of African women is wiped out, as their identities serve to verify the Western feminist struggle. Finally, biased interpretations of Western feminists’ work help them to establish the rewards of being empowered, Western women, as understood in direct contrast to the disempowered African woman.

22 Nandita Dogra, “The mixed metaphor of ‘Third World Woman’: gendered representations by international development NGOs,” *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 2 (2011): 343.

23 Katherine M. Bell, “Raising Africa?: Celebrity and the Rhetoric of the White Saviour,” *Journal of Multidisciplinary Studies* 10, no. 1 (2013): 3.

24 Haggis, “White Women and Colonialism,” 179.

25 *Ibid.*, 180.

26 Ester Boserup, *Women’s Role in Economic Development* (London: Earthscan Publications Ltd., 1989), 41.

27 Oyewùmí, “White Woman’s Burden,” 37.

The process of normalizing Western women relies on the "Othering" of African women, as it is only in the absence of African women's agency that Western women's role as emancipator becomes appropriate, or even necessary. The creation of the African woman is based on what Mohanty has referred to as the "third-world difference – that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all" third world women.²⁸ This difference creates the "average third-world woman," who "leads an essentially truncated life based on her feminine gender (read: sexually constrained) and being 'third world' (read: ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family oriented, victimized, etc.)."²⁹ This is a classic and tired colonial discourse, as infantilizing the third world woman inherently casts the Western woman as superior and thus properly suited to guide the African woman on her path to modernity and emancipation.

This is where it becomes essential to realize that even in post-modern, liberating narratives such as feminism power relations continue to play out. Western feminists exist in the framework of Western hegemony. Just because feminism exists to challenge one power structure (patriarchy), does not mean that it can override all other power structures generated by other identities, such as race and class, or other relationships, such as colonized to colonizer. The assumption that it does makes transnational feminism, as articulated by many Western feminists, impossible for their African counterparts.

For African women, true liberation cannot be achieved strictly through traditional feminism. This is because, as Patricia Hill Collins argues, African women experience the "intersecting oppressions" from multiple aspects of their identity, including race and class.³⁰ Jacqueline Castledine argues that an early example of successful transnational feminist solidarity between black women, though motivated in large part by feminist goals, was predominantly a struggle for self-determination.³¹ Castledine examines the relationship between the Sojourners for Truth and Justice fighting against Jim Crow Laws in America and the African National Congress Women's League fighting apartheid South Africa. Her

argument documents the important ways in which nationalist struggles, racial equality, and feminism intersected in the missions of these two groups or, as she calls it, their "mutual commitment to racial and gender liberation."³² After all, what would gender equality amount to for black women if racial segregation still dominated a society?

The necessity for African women to balance multiple identity struggles makes the reductive demands of Western feminism impossible. How can African women attack the patriarchal attitudes of African men when racial solidarity is needed in the fight for racial equality? How can African women align themselves with Western women when they are members of the ruling, colonial class that is the source of much of African women's oppression?³³ Of course, these sorts of coalitions are possible. What they require, from both sides of the Western and African transnational divide, is a sensitive understanding that gender identities differ across cultural boundaries and a nuanced, localized appreciation of the ways in which women can support and criticize one another in their multiple struggles for a more just world.

Western feminists who bring the transnational feminist struggle to Africa without adequate attention paid to cultural difference and power relations do not in fact emancipate African women, but rather use colonial narratives of Western normativity to re-create the image of the powerful, liberated Western woman. The strict focus on gender equality called for by Western feminism does not work in the African context, as African women's subordination arises from a variety of class-based and racial sources. By silencing African women's voices and turning the Western feminist struggle into an absolute one, Western feminists are able to cast themselves as necessary agents of positive social change. Western feminists' ability to speak for African women is legitimized not only by colonial notions of Western supremacy and modernity, but also by the idea of a collective, global struggle uniting all women. Western feminists can only strengthen their cause by realizing the intersecting and overlapping identities of women of the world and working to find solidarities that do not suppress these identities in the name of a Western agenda. In our globalized world, there are unequivocally forces that oppress us collectively, if in different ways. Our task is to resist these forces in a way that continues to honour the spirit of each woman's struggle.

28 Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes," 63.

29 Ibid., 65.

30 Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 9.

31 Jacqueline Castledine, "'In A Solid Bond of Unity': Anticolonial Feminism in the Cold War Era," *Journal of Women's History* 20, no. 4 (2008): 58.

32 Ibid., 60.

33 Aniekwu, "Converging Constructions," 148.

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