

Philosophy and Women Emancipation in Africa

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Abstract

The various cultures of the world embody customs and traditions through which they display their specific identities. The social aspect of culture encapsulates the various strata of human social institutions with the attendant characteristics they express. Within the socio-natural milieu, humanity is gender driven. A society is either patriarchal or matriarchal depending mainly on the historical circumstances that must have informed such designation. The popular feeling of wide discrimination against women is found mainly in patriarchal societies where their freedom, fundamental human rights are deemed limited by the artifice of the men folk. Such setting tends to adopt a sense of gender divide which ascribes inferiority to the feminine gender. The sense of injustice informed by this kind of situation gave meaning to the necessity of women emancipation. This paper therefore brings into focus the African women existing mainly in a patriarchal driven setting of whose culturally informed subjugation engender sustained quest for emancipation. Using Philosophical tools, the paper examines the essence, nature and approaches to African women emancipation. It submits that in as much as African cultural practices which defile women dignity should be abolished in totality, African women emancipation ought not to take the African woman away from her essential motherliness.

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1. Introduction

Africa is reckoned with rich cultural values which continue to survive the dilution attempt of colonialism, imperialism and modernity. Mainly a patriarchal society, the place of the woman in Africa has been culturally defined by men's controlled traditions. She is mainly a domestic person loathsome for religious and political affairs of the society. Even as a post colonial person, she still struggles for emancipation from ancient cultural practices which continues to inhibit her existential freedom, dignity and humanity.

The colonial interaction with Africa and her eventual independence stimulated and rooted changes of some traditional baggage and paved way for the possibility of women liberation from the clutches of stalling aspects of culture. Determined to change the gender narratives of African women, several efforts have been made to redirect the wheels of culture to be more gender friendly. The efforts are yielding gradual positive results without daunting challenges, especially its antithetical effect to basic human values. This paper is aimed in furtherance of the project by adding philosophical lens to not only enhance the emancipation moves but readdress the dialectic effects of the moves.

The paper will critically expose and examine in the beginning section, the nature, purpose and approaches to the emancipation. The preceding section will discuss the challenges faced by African women in the struggle for their emancipation which will be followed by a critical examination, using philosophical apparatus. Relevant literatures obtained from the library and the web including United Nations documents on human rights will be explored and used as research sources.

2. Women Emancipation in Perspective

The idea of women emancipation, a synonymy of women liberation, already entails a presupposition of restraint from freedom. The reality of limitation to the freedom of women rests within the various world cultural practices embodied in the sands of history. But the content in the likes of gender discrimination and inequality, debasement of their human nature, systematic socio-cultural conscription into accepting themselves as inferior beings than men have been age long realities. Pope John Paul II's 1995 remarks on women's dignity as articulated by Chiegboka (1997: 16) have it that "... Women dignity are many places unrecognized, their prerogative misrepresented, relegated to the margins of the society, reduced to servitude; valued for their physical appearance than the very dignity of their beings."

Adding to these is the problem of systems disrespect for their fundamental human rights. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights which was adopted by the UN General Assembly on 10 December 1948, proffers a road map to guarantee the rights of every individual everywhere irrespective of age, race and gender. The

declaration reflects the recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family as the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. In the Charter that generated the declaration, the people of United nations, "... reaffirmed their faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity and worth of the human person and in the equal rights of men and women and have determined to promote social progress and better standards of life in larger freedom." (United Nations, 2013)

Before the advent of women liberation drives, women participation in governance of society has been very poor. Roles of development policies and strategies were simply patristic and the place of women abnegated. In her article on structural Adjustment, Peggy Antrobus argument reflects the place of the woman. Her complaint is captured thus:

When I first started to analyze the impacts of structural adjustment policies on women, I argued that they represented polices which failed to take women into account. Today on further reflection I am persuaded that, far from not taking women into account, the structural adjustment polices are actually grounded in a gender ideology which is deeply exploitative of women's time and labour. (1993: 13)

The consistent lack of women freedom and exercise of human rights amounted to injustice and violation of their fundamental right. The need therefore to salvage the women folk from the ugly inhuman situation remains the cradle and objective of women liberation. In further consideration, Noeleen Heyzer posited that:

In almost every Arian country, women comprise a large percentage of the poor and very poor. Yet even with the most effective economic development policies, most poor families would not be able to survive without the contribution of the female members. However women typically earn lower wages and have much more limited access than men do to development resources such as land, credit, technology, and opportunities.(1993: 22-3)

Violation of women's fundamental rights reflects also in violence against them. Samer Muscati commenting on The Human Rights Watch section on women's rights relates that:

Despite great strides made by the international women's rights movement over many years, women and girls around the world are still married as children or trafficked into forced labor and sex slavery. They are refused access to education and political participation, and some are trapped in conflicts where rape is perpetrated as a weapon of war. Around the world, deaths related to pregnancy and childbirth are needlessly high, and women are prevented from making deeply personal choices in their private lives. (2014)

These efforts for the advancement of women have resulted in several declarations and conventions one of which is the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on 18 December, 1979. In summary:

Among the international human rights treaties, the Convention takes an important place in bringing the female half of humanity into the focus of human rights concerns. The spirit of the Convention is rooted in the goals of the United Nations: to reaffirm faith in fundamental human rights, in the dignity, value and worth of the human person, in the equal rights of men and women. The present document spells out the meaning of equality and how it can be achieved. In so doing, the Convention establishes not only an international bill of rights for women, but also an agenda for action by countries to guarantee the enjoyment of those rights. In its preamble, the Convention explicitly acknowledges that "extensive discrimination against women continues to exist", and emphasizes that such discrimination "violates the principles of equality of rights and respect for human dignity". As defined in article 1, discrimination is understood as "any distinction, exclusion or restriction made o.l the basis of sex...in the political, economic, social, cultural, civil or any other field". The Convention gives positive affirmation to the principle of equality by requiring States parties to take "all appropriate measures, including legislation, to ensure the full development and advancement of women, for the purpose of guaranteeing them the exercise and enjoyment of human rights and fundamental freedoms on a basis of equality with men"(article 3).

The Beijing conference on women's rights produced a declaration that:

1. Defined women's rights,
2. Reaffirmed their determination and commitment to the equal rights and inherent human dignity of women and men,
3. Stated their conviction about women's empowerment and their full participation on the basis of equality in all spheres of society, including participation in the decision-making process and access to power.
4. Stated their determination to ensure women's equal access to economic resources, including land, credit, science and technology, vocational training, information, communication and markets, as a means to further the advancement and empowerment of women and girls, including through the enhancement of their capacities to enjoy the benefits of equal access to these resources, inter alia, by means of international cooperation.

Moves for elimination of all forms of discrimination against women came with a wild surge of women's rights movements including all forms of feminism.

3. Critical Issues Facing African Women and their Emancipation

The customs and traditions of many African cultures embody practices oppressive of African women. Their emancipation entails according to Hirshfield (2013) "...their liberation from religious, legal, economic, and sexual oppression, their access to higher education, and their escape from narrow gender roles..." In the Igbo African society, the widowhood practices elicit some form of oppression women even by fellow women. The following citation provides an insight:

In Nanka town, Orumba L.G.A. the only peculiarity of this people is that the widow is forbidden to see the corpse of her husband. Christianity or not, " , any widow who contravenes this customs laterality ceases to exist, She neither buys from nor sell to any other member of the community. All men run away from her, She is avoided like death, , " . In Ogbunka town, still in Orumba South L.G.A., a widow is secluded behind the house immediately the husband dies. The Umuada force her to observe the routine wailing from morning till night for many days. This widow is in turn expected to provide the oku awa i.e. yam meal with a chicken, for the Umuada (on daily basis). (PlusQueen, 2008)

Female Genital Mutilation (FGM), a fundamental human rights violation, takes different forms in different African countries. The Gambian-born producer and social development expert, Neneh Faye-Khan posited that, "FGM affects many areas of a woman's health, physically as well as psychologically. It is an issue that needs to be addressed worldwide. It is a health issue but more importantly, it is a fundamental question of human rights."(Sokoto TV Shows, 2013)

Women's trafficking in the African sod is another form of dehumanizing African women. One problem that overlaps both of the critical issues mentioned above is forcing young girls into early marriage, which is against the law in most countries. Sub-Saharan African women constitute only 15% of the region's landholders, and they face disproportionate challenges ranging from sexual exploitation to illiteracy and disease. In Africa, girl child education is grossly low. Values are placed more on the birth of a male child than female. Child bearing is considered one of the cardinal socio-cultural African values. Hence, African idea of marriage centres on begetting of offspring. But then, there is the issue of begetting a male child. For the purposes of succession and inheritance, every typical African man would desire a male child. Thus, a married woman is considered to have attained real womanhood when she must have borne a male child. To this end, the plight of a woman without a male child is pitiable and worse is a childless woman. In such situation, the woman takes the entire blame without recourse to a possibility of the man's reproductive problems. Chiegboka submitted that in Igbo cultural setting, "A woman who is childless is pitied, scorned and declared incomplete irrespective of the fact that the husband might be impotent and sterile. She suffers from the parents of the husband, the members of the kindred and the society at large."(33)

So the *emancipation* of African women means basically to set the *women* free from any kind of bondage, help them to enjoy their fundamental human rights as well as restore their dignity. This should differ from some radical forms of feminism that propagate imperialist gender equality at the expense of family institution. African women themselves have been making serious moves in the area of their own emancipation and empowerment. Several African women liberationist movements and associations are in place. The famous Aba Women Riot of 1929 took

the form of non violent revolution that advanced the course of Igbo women against oppressive and exploitative warrant chiefs. In very recent times, African Women Development Fund (AWDF) is in the frontier of the project. Its mission and vision are succinctly stated:

The vision of AWDF is for women to live in a world where there is social justice, equality and respect for women's human rights. To this end, *our mission* is to mobilise financial, human and material resources to support African women and the work of the African women's movement to advance women's rights and gender equality in Africa. We believe that *if* women and women's organisations are empowered with skills, information, sustainable livelihoods, opportunities to fulfill their potential, plus the capacity and space to make transformatory choices, *then* we will have vibrant, healthy and inclusive communities. (<http://www.awdf.org/our-work/about>)

Despite concerted efforts directed towards effacing the trend of women subjugation in Africa, dehumanizing anti women practices still maintain a stronghold in the customs of many African societies.

4. The Role of Philosophy

Philosophical reflections directed towards the emancipation of African women will primarily find expression in addressing critical issues surrounding the subjugation of the women. It supposedly focuses on determining either the rational cum ethical justifications or otherwise of the African cultural practices inimical of the place, rights and dignity of African women. The philosophical dictum that man is a rational animal is a generic statement that is basically non gender discriminatory. Thus, any human society that places the women as inferior humans essentially proposes the inferiority of rationality, a position of absurdity, since there is nothing like superior or inferior rationality. It equally debases and negates the human nature of the woman. Both men and women are humans essentially on the basis of their rationality. Thus, the primary argument about the equality of gender is the argument of the generic rational characteristic of man. The African woman is not inferior to men on this basis. She possesses the power of reason and knowledge like every other human being and like the women of other cultures. Advocacy for African women's rights makes meaning basically within the locus of the fundamental human rights. Every human being possesses some inalienable rights irrespective of race, religion, gender and affiliations. This position takes its root from the philosophies of natural rights, equality and liberty which remain strong basis of arguments for the emancipation of African women. The abolition of slavery was followed by strong arguments for the restoration of the basic rights of women in the 18th and 19th centuries. Hence:

The views of 17th century natural law philosophers were opposed in the 18th and 19th century by evangelical natural theology philosophers such as William Wilberforce and Charles Spurgeon, who argued for the abolition of slavery and advocated for women to have rights equal to that of men. Modern natural law theorists, and advocates of natural rights, claim that all people have a human nature, regardless of gender, ethnicity or other qualifications; therefore all people have natural rights.¹²

Jean-Jacques Rousseau conceived of natural rights in terms of equal political participation and freedom. For him as captured by The Global Ethic Foundation:

Each individual possesses **the right to political participation on an equal footing** with all other citizens. In this way, a state is created, according to Rousseau, which decides issues in favour of the common good. Thus the right to freedom is the basis for the state, without it the state is inconceivable. (www.global-ethic-now.de)

Prior to Rousseau, John Locke identified fundamental and inalienable rights to life, liberty and property, indiscriminate of any gender, which the state has the moral and legitimate duty to guarantee and uphold. When it fails to do so, it loses its legitimacy. Despite his reflections about human freedom in general in *On Liberty*, J. S. Mill dedicated his work *On Subjugation of Women*, specifically and passionately to arguments for the rights, liberty and equality of women. His Arguments are summarized in Wikipedia thus:

a. Mill attacks the argument that women are naturally worse at some things than men, and should, therefore, be discouraged or forbidden from doing them. He says that we simply don't know what women are capable of, because we have never let them try - one cannot make an authoritative statement without evidence. In this, men are basically contradicting themselves

because they say women cannot do an activity and want to stop them from doing it. Here Mill suggests that men are basically admitting that women are capable of doing the activity, but that men do not want them to do so.

b. Women are brought up to act as if they were weak, emotional, docile - a traditional prejudice. If we tried equality, we would see that there were benefits for individual women. They would be free of the unhappiness of being told what to do by men. And there would be benefits for society at large - it would double the mass of mental faculties available for the higher service of humanity. The ideas and potential of half the population would be liberated, producing a great effect on human development.

c. If society really wanted to discover what is truly natural in gender relations, Mill argued, it should establish a free market for all of the services women perform, ensuring a fair economic return for their contributions to the general welfare. Only then would their practical choices be likely to reflect their genuine interests and abilities.

d. Mill felt that the emancipation and education of women would have positive benefits for men also. The stimulus of female competition and companionship of equally educated persons would result in the greater intellectual development of all. He stressed the insidious effects of the constant companionship of an uneducated wife or husband. Mill felt that men and women married to follow customs and that the relation between them was a purely domestic one. By emancipating women, Mill believed, they would be better able to connect on an intellectual level with their husbands, thereby improving relationships.

e. Mill attacks marriage laws, which he likens to the slavery of women, "there remain no legal slaves, save the mistress of every house." He alludes to the subjection of women becoming redundant as slavery did before it. He also argues for the need for reforms of marriage legislation whereby it is reduced to a business agreement, placing no restrictions on either party. Among these proposals are the changing of inheritance laws to allow women to keep their own property, and allowing women to work outside the home, gaining independent financial stability.

f. Again the issue of women's suffrage is raised. Women make up half of the population, thus they also have a right to a vote since political policies affect women too. He theorizes that most men will vote for the MPs which will subordinate women, therefore women must be allowed to vote to protect their own interests.

g. Mill felt that even in societies as unequal as England and Europe that one could already find evidence that when given a chance women could excel. He pointed to such English queens as Elizabeth I, or Victoria, or the French patriot, Joan of Arc. If given the chance women would excel in other arenas and they should be given the opportunity to try.

In the primitive African setting, the masculine physical power was the basis of determination of integral human power. As such, the woman's mental and intellectual power were undermined and subjugated under the andocentric culture. What transpired in the past is that culture and tradition simply co-opted the advantages of physical power to overshadow the abilities of African women. Considered as weaker sex, their abilities were simply confined to the domestics. But thanks to modernity in its bid to reflect and uphold the place of reason and knowledge in the domain of power. History has now shown that African women also possess competitive rational and intellectual abilities. What is left is for the resilient patriarchal African culture to accept that fact. There is no choice. Nnamani alluded to this position when he stated that:

With the arrival of modernity, however, the andocentric monopoly of power started shaking from the roots. The powers of reason and knowledge have begun to be identified as the source of power. Since then, women have got the basis to dispute the inferiority status assigned to them. Thanks to modernity and post modernity, which have come to bid farewell to the ancient and medieval conceptions of power; step by step, science and technology have delivered the lesson that brute physical force and sheer size no longer determine power. (2005:33)

Many aspects of cultures are mere human contrivances couched in various garbs suitable for their codification and enforcement. Many African norms are deified and left in the realm of the gods in order to ensure sustenance to the extent that they command blind adherence even when they defile the basic law of reason. For instance, why would a woman be denied the performance of dust to dust ritual to her departed husband? There is absolutely no rational argument that has justifies the denial. People would mostly say it is just their custom while some would say it is abominable without a meaningful explanation. But a critical investigation shows that in some cases, it is an avenue to psycho-spiritually expose the widow to sexual exploitation by the immoral men. Such scenario is anchored on the belief that performance of the dust to dust by the woman will not ensure her marital separation from the dead husband. The simple philosophical submission is that the reason behind some aspects of the African cultures oppressive of women is the bid by the men folk to maintain conventional masculine sense of superiority together with the psychological intolerance of gender equality. J. S. Mill argued in this regard thus:

On the other point which is involved in the just equality of women, their admissibility to all the functions and occupations hitherto retained as the monopoly of the stronger sex, I should anticipate no difficulty in convincing anyone who has gone with me on the subject of the equality of women in the family. I believe that their disabilities elsewhere are only clung to in order to maintain their subordination in domestic life; because the generality of the male sex cannot yet tolerate the idea of living with an equal. (constitution.org)

It is pertinent to aver that culture suppose to be open to reality. Culture ought to be a harbinger of reality instead of being at variance with it. Any culture of whichever aspect manipulates objective reality requires ethical redress. The age long African practice of feminine genital mutilation, which exposes the young girls to health hazards, has been found to be based on cultural superstitions. Man is not a slave to culture since he stands in the position to prune it of any dint of inhumanity. Nevertheless, it is not the view of this piece to overturn the patriarchal structure of African societies or even dispute it. It could be rationally stated that nature makes the human society patriarchal. Any attempt to overturn it would amount to aberration. It would look like same sex sexual relationship of which nature did not make any biological provision. The argument is that in as much as the equality of gender is tied basically to man's generic rational and epistemological power, the preponderance of man's physical power is a sign of something. Call it dominance, but do not call it superiority. In consideration of the genders, it is in the nature of the man to be in ascendancy but that does not entail inferiority of the woman. The hierarchical gender positioning within the social institution of the family is role oriented and natural. Where the problem lies is to consistently recognize and uphold the special place of the woman within the patriarchal system. Ogundikpe (2013) noted that, "The ability to give life to another human earns African women a large role in the patriarchal society."¹⁷ Rousseau accords to this view in his position on women, marriage, and family in this account:

Rousseau's view on the nature of the relationship between men and women is rooted in the notion that men are stronger and therefore more independent. They depend on women only because they desire them. By contrast, women both need and desire men. Sophie is educated in such a way that she will fill what Rousseau takes to be her natural role as a wife. She is to be submissive to Emile. And although Rousseau advocates these very specific gender roles, it would be a mistake to take the view that Rousseau regards men as simply superior to women. Women have particular talents that men do not; Rousseau says that women are cleverer than men, and that they excel more in matters of practical reason. (<http://www.iep.utm.edu/rousseau/>)

Marriage is an institution through which a family is established. Within the institution, there is a hierarchical structure which reflects the parents and the children. The parents are at the fore of the structure while the children are at the lower level. But then, as an institution, there must be a head. No institution whether empirical or ontological is structured without a head. To that effect, the man in his nature of ascendancy remains the head of the family. So nature places the man in position of authority. Such structure is role oriented.

The point of need for emancipation of women is that point when the men folk overstretch their patriarchal power at the expense of the nature and place of the women. The physical power of the man is protective in essence of both the women and human society at large. Thus, his natural placement in the position of authority is for that crucial purpose. In that dominance rests primarily the security of the woman. Attempts at using that advantage against the women amount to injustice. In the African setting, women emancipation finds expression in the bid for African cultures to redress all forms of cultural injustice against women.

The restoration of the dignity of the African woman is a vital component in the quest for African women emancipation. The philosophical thought of Simone de Beauvoir is quite significant in the quest. Her work entitled

The Second Sex (1949) embodies her criticism of the Western culture for regarding men as normal and women as mere objects and she called for the recognition of the special nature of women. Thus, to respect and also appreciate the special nature of women is to invariably uphold their dignity. To this end, elimination of all forms of violence and discrimination against African women is of basic importance. It equally entails acts and policies directed towards African women empowerment beginning with emphasis on girl child education. Through education, the African girl will come to know and uphold her rights. She will be properly informed to make free marital choice at a ripe age. Both governments and African traditional institutions ought to redress archaic cultural conceptions and practices that undermine and suppress the strengths of women. Women affirmative action should be accorded chance by the inclusion of a good percentage of women in the business of political governance.

5. What African Women Emancipation is not

What women emancipation is not has to do with the kind of radical feminism which seeks to upturn the natural patriarchal structure of human society in the name of advocacy for gender equality. Gender equality relates more to the organic equality of human nature, equality of fundamental human rights and gender equity in the dispensation of goods and services. It negates claims of equality in the organic distribution of roles within the social institutions of nature. To this end, feminism differs considerably from *womanism*.

Feminism has assumed not just the nature of revolution but that of gender war. With an admixture of western imperialism, it is gradually diluting the positive aspects of African traditional family values. Feminism has come to engender a false idea of women empowerment which negates the nature of the African woman. It is beginning to make African women lose their sense of respect, diligence and modesty. They are simply beginning to assume the masculine nature. The experience now is that when a woman assumes a position of authority, instead of objectively attending to the constitutional demands of the position, she will be fighting a gender war with men. Gender equality nowadays entails that a woman is utterly negligible of her marital roles. She is totally aloof to indigenous knowledge. The result is rampant marriage break ups, immodesty in dressing and other forms of immorality. Thus, empowerment is drawing them to the extremities of the advocacy and the women themselves are bastardizing their feminine nature.

The dignity of African woman lies hugely in her ability to be a mother. Thus, to be an African woman is to be a mother. This relates more to *womanism*, since to be a real woman is to be a mother. Molaria Ogundipe(2013) collaborated this idea in her assertion that, "Though the rest of the world generalizes African women as submissive and oppressed, women actually hold power and are considered sacred, ... Women have more power as a mother, not a wife." Motherhood in this sense differs significantly from *motherliness*. Motherhood relates strongly to her reproductive ability. *Motherliness* defines her special nature which draws essentially from her unique universal loving and caring ability. In *motherliness* lies her nature and limitless feminine abilities whereas motherhood limits her motherly potentials and abilities. The African woman's motherly nature is very extensive and all inclusive. In Igbo cosmology, the female deity *ala* (earth goddess) occupies a significantly dignified place. It is a matriarch deity of fertility and morality under which supernatural motherly womb the entire community draws strength. In Yoruba cosmology also, the female deity *Osun* is the mother goddess of knowledge, wealth, power and motherhood. Both deities depict the organic nature of the African woman. Thus, the African woman is a mother to all. Her *motherliness* is not limited to her biological children, but includes the husband, if married and the entire humanity. Thus, the idea of African feminism, Ogundipe (2013) had argued, makes meaning in the context of African motherliness.

The need for women emancipation and empowerment is the societal need to allow for flourishing of the feminine nature of the African woman. The continuous suppression of the women will lead to diminishing their *motherliness* and the African society gravely suffers from their lack of care. In other words, the society suffers series of tensions which her *motherliness* supposes to douse. Thus, the traditional training of a spinster is not just about the requirements of becoming a wife but a mother. She is trained in proper home making and to have sufficient indigenous knowledge.

6. Conclusion

Concerted efforts have been made in this piece to attempt relative expositions of issues related to gender equality and women emancipation in Africa. As a science that dwells more on raising questions than proffering answers, philosophical tools were deployed to establish and uphold the rights and dignity of the African women. Empowerment of African women entails exposing them to viable platforms of existential possibilities aimed towards their self realization and actualization. The African woman in essence is to locate her dignity in the extent to which she upholds her motherly nature.

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