

Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Transformative Feminism in Africa

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1. Introduction

This paper examines the concept of transformational feminism in the context of African Women's struggle for freedom, equality, and justice in their social, political, and economic lives. This idea of transformational feminism is in part informed by the work of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the Somali politician and critic of traditional African and Islamic oppression of African women and western notions of women's liberation from all forms of oppression.

The paper examines Western notions of feminism, contributing factors to Hirsi Ali's acceptance of western feminism and the limitations of that feminism in the pan-Africa context, even in an age of globalization.

Lastly, the paper offers preliminary suggestions and recommendations, informed by the concept of transformational feminism, as a more pertinent paradigm for pan-African feminism.

2. Women's Liberation Movements in the West:

Western women's liberation movements in Europe and the United States have had a long history, and this history has largely been a struggle for equality between men and women, in education, politics, economics, and therefore sexual politics.

In 1792, we are told that, Mary Wollstonecraft penned her A Vindication of the Rights of Women, in which she lamented "the failure to educate women for any independent role in life as the great source of their difficulties;" that "men led women to be docile and attentive to their looks to the exclusion of all else" (Time, 2010:80).

In the western world, the feminist movement has been said to have gone through several phases or waves: the Suffrage, the Civil Rights, and the fight for the rights to be economically, politically and socially equal with men in the public sphere; and, this continues to be the platform.

Undoubtedly, these western feminists' preoccupations with equality with men in the public sphere- pay equity, political representation, to be leaders of public corporations, educational, social and religious institutions- have found their way into the African cultural, political, and social landscapes through western media- text books, music videos, newspapers, magazines, novels and the other pervasive cultural hegemonic agents of the western world.

With the downfall of the former Soviet Union in the late 1980s, the United States remained the sole superpower militarily, economically and culturally. In his book, Global Cities, Mark Abrahamson

(2004:103) shows New York City at the apex of the global cities that dominate the world culturally and economically; New York City is followed by London, Paris, Tokyo, Los Angeles, Toronto, and Hong Kong; African cities like Lagos, Nairobi, Cairo, Johannesburg, Accra, etc are nowhere to be found in Abrahamson's scheme of global cities.

3. Forces informing Ayaan Hirsi Ali's feminism:

It is within this globalizing context that we now examine some of the forces that inform Ali's feminism.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali's socio-cultural background is informed by traditional African, Islamic, and western cultural experiences. The first two socio-cultural forces socialize the female child to be subservient to boys and men and all elders; men and boys are in the public sphere, while girls and women are in the domestic sphere, shielded and protected by men.

In her autobiography, *Infidel*, Ali records her socialization experiences in Somalia, Saudi Arabia, Ethiopia, and Kenya. Ali's grandmother's Islam, informed by her traditional African culture, was often expressed in proverbs, folk tales, fables, and other traditional African verbal expressions, rooted in the nomadic life of her people.

In Islamic culture, Ali was socialized to fear exposing her body, deny her sexual urges, and to not date outside her clan and religion; she also was not to fornicate or drink alcohol.

In Kenya, however, she discovered the *infidels*, those who mistrusted her Islamism; in western education and fiction, she read about freedom of the individual to love outside one's clan, religion, and family; in popular western fiction and in the movies in particular, there was freedom to choose one's lovers.

Her introduction to western culture in Kenya challenged her 'traditional' sensibilities; the messages from her body and mind and those from her Islamic religion and traditional African culture dictated divergent impulses and created in her a dystopia; she was confronted by the possibilities of her personal freedom as well as the 'traditional' forces that compelled her to remain true to her indigenous culture; she chose personal freedom rather than remain, say, in a marriage not of her choosing. She was not going to remain in a marriage to a man she did not know, even if that man was in a developed nation like Canada; on her way to that Canada, she defected to Holland.

In Holland, Ali was more deeply exposed to western literature, culture, and a number of philosophers that affirmed her infidelity to 'anachronistic' African and Islamic traditions; from a western educated African female's point of view, she was no longer going to be submissive to a religion and culture that caged women.

Ali has now championed the movement for the liberation of women from Islam and the traditional African restrictions on African women at all levels, and has embraced uncompromising western ideas of feminism and the total liberation and equality of women with men.

In her ten minute play, "Submission: Part1," for which Theo van Gogh was murdered in broad day light by Islamic extremists, Ali presents five Muslim women appealing to Allah to alleviate their dystopia here on earth; one of them wanted to know why she should be publicly flogged for fornicating while the man she fornicated with was spirited out of the country into safety (*Caged Virgin* ; 125-127). All five Islamic women had 'submitted' to Allah, but their lives had remained grim under Islamic and traditional African cultural patriarchy. In the same text, Ali writes an open letter to Islamic women who want to escape their caged lives; in this letter, Animist African women should also be able to see themselves as being oppressed by men; she writes:

You don't want to spend your life bearing the children of a husband you don't even love; cleaning, doing the shopping, and cooking three times a day; serving tea and baking cookies each weekend for people who have no interest in you; doing the washing and ironing, talking about curtain patterns, and hemming sheets; you no longer want to spend your freetime with women who do nothing but gossip. You are fed up with your sisters and cousins who refuse to use their mental capacities for anything but the creation of yet another perfect recipe for cookies. ... You have seen the trap into which the bride and bridegroom fall after three days of wedding festivities. (113)

This modernized African woman would rather live in a secularized western society, in which absolute freedom is the norm and in which, therefore, there are no more forced marriages, and men and women, lesbians, and homosexuals are free to live their lives as they see fit, without molestations; "tribalism and religious dogma," she writes, are indeed "only for the ignorant and the naïve (that) cannot see that societies built on tribalism and religious dogma are destined to fail" (176).

In a letter to her unborn child in *Nomad* (p. 272), she exhorts her daughter that,

Love between a man and a woman is not a hoax, -but it is conditional. It is contingent on chemistry, compatibility, temperament, lifestyle, even income, but if you fall in love and it's mutual, then it's a very powerful force. Love between a man and a woman can be generous, and should be generous. Unfortunately, my dear child, you will hear of many love stories where the basic desire is to possess one another, to change one another, to control one another. It's precisely these things that kill affection and passion. Steer clear of those, if you can.

From these citations above, one can see that Hirsi Ali's feminist paradigm is one based on oppositions between man and woman, bride versus bridegroom, wife versus husband, male versus female, and domestic versus public sphere.

These two spheres suggest that, in order for a couple to get along, they must have the appropriate chemistry, similar lifestyles, temperament and even comparable income. Where the male, husband, and the public sphere attempt to possess, change, and control, the female must resist; there must be equality with men, from where the female feminist stands.

This division between male and female would undoubtedly end into two adversarial camps, and yet these competing camps are the very things that transformative feminism attempts to de-polarize. After all, "women, men, children and all of society stand to benefit from relationships and family arrangements that are less polarized, more mutually supported, and influenced by both feminine and masculine characteristics" (transformationcentral.org/wordpress/2007/10/129...3/6/2011).

4. Transformational Feminism

As opposed to the feminism that pits men against women, boys against girls, feminine against masculine spheres, transformational feminism reconstructs the traditional barriers between men and women, femininity and masculinity; it is eclectic and recognizes the integrality of humanity; it also critically examines the grey areas between what is masculine and what is feminine, economically, socially, and even sexually. Furthermore, it recognizes the integrality of humanity or Ubuntu-ness, if you will; in Ubuntu philosophy, we are taught that, we ourselves are diminished when we diminish others (Ramose, 2002: 644).

Transformational feminism, according to Moema L. Viezzer (2001: 11), ... means much more than putting women into positions of power, even if it is important to have women as promoters of change in power positions. It is transformative in the

sense that it challenges the existing structures of power; it is inclusive, in the sense that it takes into account the needs, interests and points of view of the majority of the marginalized and poor in society; it is integral, in the sense that it attends to all forms of social injustices. Feminist transformative leadership can be exercised, given impulse or defended by women and men, young or old. It is not by chance that in the various countries of the world, groups of men are now organizing themselves to put an end to the institutionalized violence against women. Nor is it by chance that within the international development agencies a growing number of men lead initiatives and actions committed to the promotion of human rights and equality between women and men. ...Feminist transformative leaders work to eliminate all kinds of social inequalities. They put gender analysis at the centre of their attention. They take affirmative action which leads to the transformation of the present inequalities between women and man (sic) in all forms and at all levels of society.

Transformational feminism is therefore not content with the simplistic division of men and women into two distinct, antagonistic categories that fight over scarce resources in our communities and in the global village at large.

In this global village, African people are at distinct disadvantages, *visa-vi* men and women of the Northern Hemisphere. There are men in the Southern Hemisphere that have no power over women or their labor or even their wages. And "...most women," writes bell hooks, "are not continually passive, helpless 'victims' (that) women's liberationists (have) embraced...making shared victimization the basis for woman bonding" (p. 45). The fact is that, men and women in the Southern Hemisphere are at the mercies of men and women of the Northern Hemisphere politically, economically, and culturally.

When African feminists then talk of equality with men, which men do they want to be equal with or to? If they want to be equal with middle class African men, where does this leave their brothers and sisters at the bottom of the global village in terms of education, economics, politics, and the global social structure?

Transformational feminism, like liberation theology, is concerned with the economic, educational, social, and political liberation of the most oppressed, and the most oppressed come from both sexes, from all tribes, ethnic and social groups, and from all regions of the global village. It is therefore more pertinent to fight against all forms of oppression of human beings across the board; the fight against oppression should not be sexualized; it has to be comprehensive to include gender, class, sex, race, color, caste and other forms of dehumanization.

Transformative Feminism is not narrow minded or myopic; instead, it is inclusive, eclectic, analytic, and critical about arbitrary boxes that pit men against women and encourages them to compete for scarce resources made available to them by our Northern Multinational Corporations, administered by upper class northern men and women and distributed by them, to their less valued brothers and sisters in both the northern and southern hemispheres.

'Individuals from the privileged classes,' says bell hooks, 'rely on a number of institutions and special structures to affirm and protect their interests. The bourgeois woman can repudiate family without believing that by so doing she relinquishes the possibility of relationship, care, protection. If all else fails, she can buy care.' (p. 3)

How about those men and women in both the North and the South that cannot afford, say, childcare? Where do we put them in the paradigm of a feminism that pits men against women, black women against white women, western and non-western women in our contemporary global village?

These concerns and other similar issues are, to me, some of the criticalities that must be considered in our Pan-African confrontations with feminist paradigms from Europe and the United States.

5. Summary

In this brief paper, we've examined the major preoccupations of Western Feminism, Ayaan Hirsi Ali's socialization in Islam and traditional African cultures, her introduction to European ideas and her partiality to the total liberation of African women from African traditions and Islamic (religious) practices. She appears to have embraced, above all, the western notion of the perennial competition between the sexes in which the female sex must not stand to be bamboozled any longer, but must strive to be equal to men at all levels.

This paradigm of the competition between men and women for the status that men have traditionally held in society was contrasted with the paradigm of transformational feminism that is submitted as more in tune with the African philosophy of Ubuntu or human-ness (Ramose, 2002: 626-649).

6. Concluding Remarks.

It is now left for me to reiterate and remark that Transformational Feminism is not oblivious to the old, established traditions of female oppression and exploitation of women in all societies, and in Africa in particular. It is only to say that Transformational Feminism is more pertinent, eclectic, critical, and akin to our traditional cultural and philosophical values associated with humanism and inscribed in Ubuntu-ness, which is that humanism that recognizes and practices the fact that each individual's humanity is sacrosanct and of innate worth; it is a philosophy of reciprocity in which one is valued in the community, and in turn the community values the individual, with all of his or her own unique characteristics.

6. Lastly, I must remark that African people, globally, are generally devalued, and suggest that the two ways in which we can add value to the African personality are through pan-African economic integration and the institutionalization of pan-African education that will help us get to know each other in more fundamental ways (Haile Selassie, 1963: 287-288), not just in the ways Africans are depicted as always competing amongst themselves over land or other scarce resources. For far too long, African people have been taught to devalue themselves and each other, including their cultures, customs, other tribes, and ways of thinking; they have also been taught to embrace political, educational and social philosophies from outside their culture, even as these may be to their detriment and a continued de-evaluation of themselves and each other.

In a more developed and integrated continental Africa, we will be able to name, make, and do most things from our own cultural bases and vantage points of views, rather than be continuously inundated by paradigms that are problematic even in their own Western cultural settings, such as the idea of the perennial struggle for equality between men and women; African feminism must be about cooperation between the sexes for continental African integration and development, and for the more equitable distribution of resources amongst people, regardless of sex or gender. The high value placed on human-ness in Ubuntu philosophy transcends male-female competing with each other for power over political and economic resources.

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