

Feminism in the African Contemporary Moment: Social and Political Imperatives

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I would like to say that in a wonderful way, I feel like the weaver bird woman – given the special task of weaving the many threads that have flowed through our thoughts and feelings these past two days as we listened to each other stating and restating the critical elements that must be woven together into a new and inclusive tapestry of lives of dignity and wellness for all humans on our planet. Thank you for inviting me to be part of this generous and deeply thoughtful community.

I will begin by establishing the context within which I shall be discussing the social and political challenges that face the African continent, and the larger human society, from the perspective of women's demands and entitlements for lives of sufficiency and dignity at the present time, and why feminism, as an ideology, a politics, and an identity that women have been crafting for over a century on the African continent, and for longer in many other societies, is increasingly becoming the alternative discourse and route to transforming our social realities. From the **#metoo** and **blacklivesmatter** movements here in the US to **#rhodes must fall** and **total shutdown** in South Africa – two of the most unequal societies in the world, which not accidentally bear similarities that are accounted for by a long and brutal history of impunity and racism, a shift is happening across the lives of individuals and groups, and change is causing the pillars of might and greed to waver, albeit just a tiny bit.

There is little doubt that those at the helm of all African societies have failed the majority of their people – who are women and girls – and that the promises made at independence have not been fulfilled, largely because of the political and ideological choices that black men have made at the moment of independence in all our societies. Almost without exception, all the liberation movements and parties that took power maintained the colonial state with all its repressive infrastructures and systems of exclusion, thereby continuing the practices of exploitation and subordination of the majority of African people. In the rare instances when a male leader did choose to break out of the colonial status quo, as was the case with Thomas Sankara in Burkina Faso, and Patrice Lumumba in the present day Democratic Republic of the Congo, they were quickly deposed and eliminated through a collusion between the emerging black ruling class elites and the colonizer.(1)

Colonialism in Africa, and elsewhere, consolidated class rule among the indigenous elites, and created a class of people whose main intention, through anti-colonialism, was to regain control and occupancy of the state, and to secure their class (and sometimes ethnic) interests, by continuing the colonial project through the ideology of neo-colonialism, neoliberal policies and collusionary relationships with the former colonizers, for purposes of acquiring wealth (often immense wealth) and power. This has served the ruling classes of the West and of Africa well. Cyril Ramaphosa of South Africa, the latest heir to the neocolonial largess, is a billionaire, barely a quarter century after independence in that country, while millions of black South Africans continue to live precarious and miserable lives. The core economic and social infrastructures of

apartheid society remain largely intact, with a small black elite presented as evidence that South Africa has become a democracy where anyone can make it – if they work hard...as if cheap black labour were not responsible for producing hundreds of years of incredible wealth which settlers and new black elites have enjoyed and continue to flout without any sense of shame.

Therefore, for the working people, independence has remained largely a pipe-dream. With barely any real changes in the quality of the lives of most people, and a deepening crises of social and economic reproduction across the continent, aggravated by wars that are targeted specifically at the civilian populations (on a continent that does not produce a substantial amount of arms – most of the wars are driven by arms that are either sold to regimes in power by western governments, or are brought in by mercenary arms dealers). Consequently, African women are faced with a seemingly impossible challenge – how to reclaim our worlds and create new and sufficient societies.

As a radical feminist intellectual and activist for over a half century, I have been passionately engaged with the forces that continue to subordinate and repress women on the continent, consistently pushing for an alternative political vision, for a different future. I come out of the nationalist struggles for independence across southern Africa, having moved arms, comrades, and publications in my battered old Datsun car during the most volatile period of anti-apartheid struggle of the 1980s. I had been recruited into the struggle much earlier as a teenager in the 1960s, at the same time that I was encountering feminism – textually – as a world of wonder and new insights into myself, my identity and my passion for freedom. At that point, freedom was an instinct that I refused to submit to the patriarchal socialization process at home and at school – resisting without even realizing how foundational my rebelliousness against being ‘tamed’ into a submissive female would become for my later life as a radical black woman.

My writing and activist work soon attracted the attention of the state operatives in both South Africa and Swaziland, and I had to flee into exile, however, without any recognition of an exile status, because Swaziland, which has always been a repressive feudal dictatorship, without even the most minimal pretenses to democracy – was considered a ‘stable society’. And still is. I spent two decades roaming the continent, engaging in women’s struggles wherever I was, and usually having to move on because the governments did not like my influences on ‘their women’. In Zimbabwe, particularly because of my support for the Queer movement, which operated largely underground, I was issued with a deportation order and can never live or work there again.

I eventually moved back to Swaziland where my parents have a family farm, and I currently live on a small holding, growing my organic food and exploring the possibilities of a vegan lifestyle in strengthening the core feminist concepts that have inspired and undergirded most of my life.

I often am asked – how did you become feminist, and why? It’s a question that I suspect all women who rebel against patriarchy encounter, probably because rebellious women will always be considered ‘other’ in societies that remain deeply steeped in the traditions and practices of patriarchy as a norm. The journey to feminism and the experience of becoming feminist is both a personal and political one, a choice that every woman can and should make, because no other

political discourse or practice provides the full possibilities to a life of wholeness and dignity for all women.

Feminism is the oldest and most universal struggle against human oppression. Women have been resisting patriarchy – a supremacist system which provides males with power through the institutionalization and normalization of privilege - from the moment that humans realized their capacity to separate themselves from nature and accumulate surplus, the basis of wealth and power in all our societies.(2)

It is in this moment of intellectual consciousness that the separation between male and female is invented, and heteronormativity as the core value of human relationships and life is established.

It is also in this moment of separation from ourselves as part of nature, when women become the first form of private property; a commodity to be exchanged between male-owned households, that the resistance which nurtures feminist passion and resilience is anchored in.

In the normative narrative of human progress, this moment of appropriation of women's bodies, creativities and very lives, is touted as the turn to human progress, when man (as in male) became the master of the universe.

It is a narrative that has legitimized the devastating practices associated with industrialization and development, which have laid waste to both human and material realities across the planet, and which, we are increasingly realizing, represents the rupture that we seemingly are unable to repair. Our societies are rent apart by previously unimaginable inequalities, brutalities and banalities that pass for success and achievement. A hand full of mainly white males control 90% of the worlds' wealth, while the rest of humanity tethers on the knife-edge of precarity and despair.

To quote Susan Griffin ‘

If one would create an egalitarian society, nature must be restored as the common ground of existence. Yet this common ground cannot be reclaimed without the transformation of an unjust social order. And every aspect of this transformation demands reflection. The task is to study the nightmare that has driven us to self-destruction’.(3)

Therefore, in personal terms, my coming to feminist consciousness was a turning point in my life's trajectory. Through a critique of nationalism within the liberation movements, and later as an expression of my disillusionment with the apparent contempt with which African post colonial regimes have treated the issues of human dignity and fair access for all to the material resources of our respective societies, I stepped away from the gendered nationalist movements where I had worked as a dedicated activist for many years, and began searching for new sites of inspiration and rejuvenation in my ideological and political practice.

Let me quickly explain why I distanced myself from nationalism and the gendered politics of the African women's movement about a decade ago. There is no doubt that the anti-colonial struggle provided African and Asian women with a crucial discursive and activist space to become publicly political and visible. Up till the time of organized resistance to colonial occupation and

plunder, African women struggled against patriarchal repression within the confines of household, families and communities that were tightly controlled by black men as chiefs, kings, husbands, brothers, uncles, grandfathers, sons and nephews. The romantic notion that African women lived in egalitarian, genderless societies is exactly that – a romance with the past which serves to sooth the sense of indignity and outrage brought on by the arrogant and brutish behavior of colonials towards Africans during the colonial encounter. In my opinion, realities of class, gender and other forms of social differentiation were rife and an essential part of African life prior to colonial restructuring of African societies.

However, with organized resistance to colonialism, African women of different classes and social locations were able to unite on the platform of liberation struggle, even bear arms in rare situations, and thus become contemporary political subjects who articulated a political viewpoint and stance that was centered on their demands as Africans and as women.

Therefore, it is important to recognize the progressive contribution that nationalism as a broad front contributed to rupturing the private public divide across the African social landscape, in spite of strong resistance by males within and outside liberation movements.

However, nationalism remains essentially a limited, masculinist ideology, whose *raison d'être* is to facilitate for males (and in the African case, for black males) to occupy the state and all the key social institutions, and acquire economic and financial power in order to rule. After the event of independence, no new ideology, encompassing new ideas of how these formerly colonized societies would be transformed, was formulated and or discussed beyond a few debates in the academy. Those in the state simply continued with the economic and political systems that had facilitated for colonial rule.

Women were and still are considered an inconvenient prop that must be tolerated, given the local and international calls for gender equality and a redistribution of national resources.

Those women who did not challenge male hegemony of power and social status; who acquiesced to the patriarchally defined roles of being a 'good and descent woman – as mother and wife'; who toned down the political fervor of their political demands and were grateful for whatever crumbs fell from the table of the new rulers, were positioned in visibly feminized posts within the state and global infrastructures of the UN and other international agencies, as proof that women were getting the recognition they are entitled to and deserve.

But the question remains. Can a handful of middle class, elitist women provide the solution to the challenges facing billions of women in Africa and across the societies of the planet? No. Regardless of the many conventions and well intentioned programs that flow out of the UN and government policy think tanks, the reality is that life has not changed in sufficiently substantive ways for the majority of humans. And, most importantly, there is no getting around the imperative of an overhaul of the existing social order, everywhere, for the initial steps to be taken in transforming our societies in new and dignified ways.

Thus my argument that it is only through a feminist politics that is lived and continuously expanded (through alliances with other groups that strive for similar goals and intentions), that we can begin to re-imagine life as possible and beautiful for everyone.

Feminism centers the lives and knowledge of women at the core of all political, activist and policy considerations. It recognizes the necessity of fairness as a value which will provide a crucial anchor for human interactions and relationships that are healthy and sustaining. It does not compromise on the inalienable fact that all humans are born inherently free, and that freedom is the source of our creativity, courage, beauty, love, and humanity. Becoming feminist is to embrace the gift of freedom that women bring into the world when they are born; a sensibility which is systematically erased and often violently stamped out of the female, body, psyche and experience of life through socialization and various practices of so-called culture and tradition and convention. Females are coerced in all our societies to learn a becoming that is suited to patriarchal needs and presumptions.

It is only by embracing feminism that women can begin to unlearn the submissiveness (which is called respect); the collusion with patriarchy (which is called traditions); and the loss of self (which is called femininity) – all of which form key elements in the maintenance of patriarchal privilege and power over women.

In conclusion, allow me to share another small vignette about the ways in which I continue to live my life as fully as possible as a feminist who loves herself. As we all know, loving yourself in healthy and self nurturing ways is the starting point of any kind of alternative relationship with other humans. Beyond the greed and narcissism of reckless wealth accumulation and the exercise of power over other people, it is essential to first of all return to yourself and ask the difficult yet necessary questions of yourself, in relation to nature, to other humans, to the multitude of sentient beings who are also entitled to life on our planet, and to the spiritual being who gives you strength and guides your moral compass.

The old ways of doing transformative political and social work have been eclipsed by the exigencies of the new moment we are in. We must creatively search for and find the new ways of doing the important work, proactively rather than reactively. Surely, the influences of right wing nationalism on the lived realities of working people across the world, are posing new questions and challenges for us all.

But we cannot return to the past, anywhere. We must excavate the new moment through a sense of contemporarity – a curiosity and passion for the essential features of a new future, which we will craft and translate into lived realities in each of our specific locations.

For me, as a middle-aged, middle class, radical black woman who lives on an ancient mountain on the eastern boundary of the second smallest country in Africa, my life at the present time provides me with a contemporary opportunity to become the person I dream of being; a free and independent woman, who is socially and politically supportive of women in my community and across the world, yet who is also fiercely combative and resilient against any and all forms of oppression, exploitation, impunity and brutality.

In the same breadth, as I allude to earlier, I am searching for new energies and inspirations from the close and respectful relationship that I am growing between myself and life within the natural ecosystem of the mountain where I live and sustain myself each day. I bring the foundational feminist notions of sexual and bodily integrity, dignity, inclusiveness and love to my daily encounters with the plants and small beings who are my life's companions on the mountain. My hope is that, through a mutual recognition of each other's inalienable right to be on this amazing planet, at this point in time, I will re-learn the power of nature and the intelligence and courage that has enabled the planet to exist these many millions of years. Through this encounter, I hope to re-invigorate my understanding of these powerful concepts – these stepping stones into my political, social and spiritual landscape – and make a new contribution to feminism as the most powerful contemporary discourse and politics for an alternative society.

So let me close with a quote from Audre Lorde, known to some of you, and hopefully others of you will open your minds and hearts to her after you hear her wisdom. She said during her commencement speech at Oberlin College in 1989:

'We learn to use each others' difference as creative tools for change by learning how to acknowledge all of the conflicting parts within ourselves and learning how to orchestrate them into action behind our beliefs wherever we are'(4)

Thank you for your attention

References:

1. Amber Murray (ed) – A Certain amount of madness: The life, politics, and legacy of Thomas Sankara' – 2017
2. Gerda Lerner – The Creation of Patriarchy, 1987
3. Susan Griffin – The Eros of Everyday Life: essays on ecology, gender and society, 1995; A Chorus of Stones: the private life of war. 1993
4. Audre Lorde – Oberlin College Commencement Address, May, 1989; Sister Outsider, 1984 ; Zami: a new spelling of my name, 1983