

Feminists' Body Sensitivity: An Overview of the Western and Nigerian Perspectives

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Abstract. Feminism is the bedrock of the campaign for the guarantee of women's right to choose abortion. Consequently, the radical feminists continuously canvassed for equality between men and women and felt that in order for women to be able to stand on equal footing with their male counter parts, women should be given the right to choose whatever they want to do with her body. Women, the so-called radical feminists, want to possess the right to determine whether or not to carry a pregnancy to term. A right which they claim ought to be free from any intervention. Radical feminists, since the 1960s have fought vigorously to ensure that, the right to choose whether or not to have an abortion, is left to the women, and they are sensitizing women all around the globe to be aware of the existence of such right. This research therefore set out to know whether this idea of western notion of body sensitivity fit into the Nigerian notion of body sensitivity. Consequently, a case study was carried out in Nigeria, wherein interview and focus group discussion was carried out in order to know the exact meaning of body sensitivity as it applies to women in Nigeria. The result shows that, body sensitivity to Nigerian women does not extend to abortion.

Keywords: Feminism, body sensitivity, abortion, autonomous, culture

1. Introduction

Feminism was (and still is) a western perception. The movement for gender equality emerges from the enlightenment ideas of freedom, equality and dignity of human person. In the laudable works of John Stuart Mills and Mary Wollstonecraft, two of the earliest and the most influential feminists, we constantly see references to reason, rationality and objectivity. Unfortunately, with these apparently lofty thoughts and

ideals, came western exceptionalism and its negative aspects- ethnocentrism, racism and imperialism.

Through the colonialist prospects and projects, western modern thoughts were introduced to the future nations of the third world. And since then, we have witnessed the uneasy relationship between feminism-with all its western intellectual and philosophical baggage.

The second-wave feminism which gained much ground in the 1960s, 70s and early 80s was very much a product of enlightenment thoughts with its almost messianic belief in unlimited progress. Feminists, at this point, had a less nuanced vision of the world. They emphasize universality of their mission. It did not cross their minds for once that, women in other parts of the world had their own rooted culturally specific notion of 'women's right'. Western feminism did not avert their minds to the well nurtured notion of rights as perceived by other women in other part of the world.

Second-wave feminists all over were supposed to come together as women and not as anything else- not as Black women, not as Arab women and not as Catholic women. The common and over-riding denominator was supposed to be the oppression at the hands of men that each and every woman experienced. This feminism is often equated and linked with radical feminism and hatred for men, the rejection of African traditions and fundamental rejection of marriage and motherhood, and an endeavor to invert the power relationship of genders.

It is here asserted that, there are different values and concerns raised by both Western feminism and feminism in other parts of the world. It is based on this contention that the authors have put forth the arguments that western notion of body sensitivity is different from the Nigerian conception of body sensitivity.

2. Methodology

Qualitative research is very labor intensive. Analyzing a large sample can be time consuming and most often impractical. Thus, '15' has been said to be the smallest acceptable sample for all qualitative research. However, Charmaz has suggested that '25' participants are adequate for small project and according to Ritchie et al, qualitative samples often lie under '50'. 'Experience of most qualitative researchers (emphasis added) is that, in interview studies, little that is 'new' comes out of transcripts after you have interviewed 20 or so people'.

A non-probabilistic sampling was favored as statistical generalization is not within the purview of this study. The non-probabilistic sampling employed in this study is the purposeful or judgment sampling, wherein the authors' uses their judgment as to who can provide the best information needed to buttress the fact that, Western notion of body sensitivity is quite different from the Nigerian notion of body sensitivity. In a purposeful sampling, random sampling makes little sense. The author therefore selects samples from which the most can be learned.

In the light of the above, '31' samples were selected for the purpose of this study, '10' out of which were participants from the '2' focus group sessions. Samples were not selected at once. The authors picked a sample representing each unit of analysis one at a time, until the whole unit of analysis was exhausted. Initial contacts were made via telephone calls to the selected samples. If he or she agrees to participate, a meeting was then fixed.

Data was collected through structured interview and unstructured interviews relating to how the participants perceived the idea of a woman being sensitive to her body in order to determine whether or not to carry her pregnancy to term. Focus group discussion, as a form of participant observation was also employed in this study in order to elicit views from these groups. The views of these participants will be analyzed to see whether the western idea of body sensitivity is the same with the Nigerian perception of body sensitivity.

An interview guide (pre-drafted questions) was used in order to avoid losing focus and to ensure that relevant questions are asked. Questions asked were both closed and open-ended. While some indicators require a brief and precise answer, it is also desirable to let information emerge from the field. Participants were given opportunity to express their thoughts on the topic as freely as possible. Participants serving as interviewee for this study are non-governmental organizations, league of Muslim and Christian women, African traditionalists, doctors as well as married and unmarried men and women.

Engaging various participants was essential as this study seeks to analyze their views to know the different perceptions attributed to body sensitivity of women, which will aid the study in realizing its objective of distinguishing between western perceived notion of body sensitivity and Nigerians' perceived notion. During the data collection, the researcher secured 21 Key informants and 2 focus group sessions (the focus group '1' comprised of four participants, while the focus group '2' comprise of six participants) consisting of both Christians and Moslems. They came from various backgrounds and professions, had varying qualifications and worked in both government as well as non-government organizations.

The participants that took part in the study lived across eight towns within Nigeria namely, Ilorin, Ile-Ife, Osogbo, Ilesha, Lokoja, Ajaokuta, Lagos and the Federal Capital Territory, Abuja. These towns can conveniently be distributed within five different States within the country namely, Kwara State (Ilorin), Osun State (Ile-Ife, Osogbo and Ilesha), Kogi State (Lokoja and Ajaokuta), Lagos State (Lagos) and FCT (Abuja). The choice of location is further to ensure heterogeneity of views.

TABLE I. Background information of focus group session ‘1’

	Study Area	Occupation	Education	Religion	Sex	Unit of Analysis
FGS1a	Ilorin	Nurse	School of Nursing Certificate	Christianity	F	Women Wing of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)
FGS1b	Ilorin	Headmistress of Public School	National Certificate of Education	Christianity	F	Women Wing of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)
FGS1c	Ilorin	Trader	Secondary School Certificate	Christianity	F	Women Wing of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)
FGS1d	Ilorin	Secretary Women Wing of Christian Association of Nigeria	B.sc	Christianity	F	Women Wing of Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN)

Source: Field study 2012.

TABLE II Background information of focus group session ‘2’

	Study Area	Occupation	Education	Religion	Sex	Unit of Analysis
FGS2a	Ilorin	National Trustee of FOMWAN and Proprietor of Secondary School	BA	Islam	F	Federation of Muslim Women Organization of Nigeria (FOMWAN)
FGS2b	Ilorin	Teacher	National Certificate of Education	Islam	F	Federation of Muslim Women Organization of Nigeria (FOMWAN)
FGS2c	Ilorin	Business Woman	Secondary School certificate	Islam	F	Federation of Muslim Women Organization of Nigeria (FOMWAN)
FGS2d	Ilorin	Civil Servant	B.sc	Islam	F	Federation of Muslim Women Organization of Nigeria (FOMWAN)
FGS2e	Ilorin	Civil Servant	B.sc	Islam	F	Federation of Muslim Women Organization of Nigeria (FOMWAN)
FGS2f	Ilorin	Trader	Primary School Certificate	Islam	F	Federation of Muslim Women Organization (FOMWAN)

c. Source: Field study 2012

FGS: Focus Group Session

3. Results

It was the belief of the majority of the participants that sensitivity to the body of a woman to the extent that the woman will want to do away with the baby inside her is quite foreign to Nigeria. The participants will want to believe

that, no woman in Nigeria will ever take that as an opportunity. Taking that as an opportunity, they say, will mean the woman is sidelining her husband. The view expressed by the participants is illustrated in the table below:

TABLE III Subtheme of Body Sensitivity by interviewed participants

Western Idea	1	2	3	4	5	6	10	16	17	18	19	21
Spiritual Idea	4	9	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Cosmetology	10	11	12	13	14	-	-	-	-	-	-	-
Procreation	7	8	16	18	19	20	21	-	-	-	-	-

d. Source: Field study 2012.

e. Numbering in the table represents key informants (KI)

TABLE IV: Subtheme of Body Sensitivity of Focus Group Sessions

Western Idea	FGS1	FGS2
Spiritual Idea	FGS1	-
Cosmetology	-	FGS 2

Source: Field Work 2012

This table reveals that the majority of the participants view the issue of body sensitivity as a western phenomenon which does not fit into the Nigerian set up in terms of spiritual idea, cosmetological idea as well as the Procreation role expected of women in Nigeria generally. The emerging themes from the multiple group sessions are similar to one another. The subthemes that emerged from the study are discussed hereunder.

4. Discussion of Findings

a. Western Idea of Body Sensitivity

Most of the participants' interviewed said that being sensitive to what happens to a woman's body in Nigeria is a new phenomenon which cannot be viewed as an opportunity for women in Nigeria. Viewing it as an opportunity will be tantamount to going radical and western.

The Western notion of body sensitivity has been linked to female inequality brought about by female biology. The 'Dialectic of Sex', written by Shulamith Firestone, in 1970 was one of the first studies to outline a radical feminist explanation of female inequality. According to her, it is the system of reproduction within the biological family which is the fundamental cause of gender inequality. Women are dominated primarily by men because of female biology; menstruation, childbirth and the menopause, all created physical difficulties. Women are particularly dependent upon men

when they are pregnant or are breastfeeding and the long period of human infant dependency created further dependency for women since they are obliged to care for these infants.

This being the case, if women are to achieve gender equality, they must first achieve biological equality via elimination of their biological disadvantages. The way suggested by Firestone is the technological separation of reproduction from the female body, which is a necessary condition for women's liberation.

The feminist truism that, 'the personal is political' may never be more apt than in body politics. 'Body Politics', the dispute over the degree of individual (female) and social (male) control of the body, eventually became a driving force behind the campaign for reproductive right for women. The right for women to make decision about their own bodies was a sine qua non for women's liberation. Feminists believe that, they will never be free and healthy if they did not have the right to reclaim their bodies from the sexual slavery of pregnancy. Hence, the focus on sexual liberation and reproductive right, particularly the right to abort an unplanned or unwanted fetus.

In a related work by Frances Olsen, it has been observed that women should have a voice of their own. They should have autonomy so as to be able to decide what to do with their bodies. To her, any regulation by the state to prevent women from doing whatever she wants is a form of patriarchy.

Gaining the access to safe and legal abortion finally allowed women to have the basic right of controlling their own bodies. Right to abortion has equalized women by giving them the right to determine whether or not to carry a pregnancy to term. This is equivalent to giving them the right

to manage their own bodies. Without abortion, women would be unjustly forced into motherhood. Denying women this right will also force them into submissive role in society.

b. Nigerian Idea of Body Sensitivity

While the western idea of body sensitivity has been linked to women's inequality as a result of her biology, and consequently, the hatred for pregnancy, Nigerian woman idea of body sensitivity is in the opposite direction of the westerns'. This is because, in Nigeria, pregnancy is loved, not hated, because, it constitutes power. Motherhood is often defined as an automatic set of feeling and behavior that is switched on by pregnancy and the birth of a baby. It is an experience that is said to be profoundly shaped by social context and culture. Motherhood is seen as a moral and psychological transformation whereby a woman comes to terms with being different in that she ceases to be an autonomous individual because she is in one way or the other connected to another- her baby.

Motherhood is a joyful and privileged state for a woman because in pregnancy, the woman is said to 'glow and shine' and she receives special attention especially from her husband and mother-in-law. No matter the skills, the desires and the talents of a woman, her primary function is that of motherhood.

Motherhood is considered to be very paramount in Yoruba culture as the preservation of the entire humanity depends on the role of mothers in the society. This is another reason why some of the participants interviewed viewed that, the western perception of body sensitivity is quite different from the Nigerians' perception of body sensitivity. The view was that, procreation is an important aspect of Nigerian women.

Other reasons that distinguishes western body sensitivity from the Nigerian women's notion, is that, while some of the participants talked about body sensitivity in line with their spiritual beliefs, some linked body sensitivity to cosmetics. The former held the view that, they cannot unilaterally take decisions as regards their bodies since their bodies; do not belong to them exclusively. This category of participants emphatically places the authority of decision

making over their bodies on God, followed by their husbands. They said that, their bodies are the temple of God.

Our bodies would be in God's image. Our bodies would be the house of our spirit. We came to this earth that we might have a body and present it pure before God in the Celestial Kingdom. The great principle of happiness consists in having a body. The devil has no body, and here in, is his punishment.

Satan learned about this truth about our body. Therefore, he tries to do everything he can to get people to abuse or misuse this precious gift- the body. He has filled the world with lies and deceit about the body. He tempts many to defile this great gift of the body through unchastity, immodesty, self-indulgence and addiction. He seduces some to despise their bodies; others, he tempts to worship their bodies. In either case, he entices the world to regard the body as an object.

It is the contentions of the participants that, sensitivity about the body to the extent of wanting to do away with a pregnancy is a satanic idea. They feel that, it is because the devil has no body that is why he has filled the heart of people with such an idea so that, the people will do something which is against their body as the temple of God.

If the body is treated like a temple, there would be a dramatic increase in chastity, modesty, observance of the words of wisdom and similar decrease in the problems of pornography and abuse. This is because the body, like the temple, will be regarded as a sacred sanctuary of the spirit. Just as no unclean thing may enter the temple, people will be vigilant to keep impurity of any sort from entering the temple of their bodies. Likewise, people will also keep the outside of their bodily temples looking clean and beautiful to reflect the sacred and holy nature of what is inside; just like the church does to the temple.

While trying to keep the outside of bodily temples clean, the contention linking body sensitivity to 'body being the temple of God' has also gone in line with cosmetics and appearances because, people have been urged to appear in dresses and act in ways that reflect the sacred spirit inside them. Hence, the body is

God's sacred creation. People should respect it as a gift from God, and should not defile it in any way. Through the way you dress, you can show the Lord that you know how precious your body is. The way you dress is a reflection of what you are on the inside.

The latter group of participants linked their being sensitive about what happens to their bodies, to cosmetics. These set of participants viewed body sensitivity in the way they look, their appearances as well as their attractiveness. In short, they went cosmetological.

Dressings are meant to serve some definite purposes. They are part of people's culture and they define their tribal or ethnic identity. Apart from dresses being a means of cultural identity, they are for ornamental or aesthetic purposes, for protection of the body against harsh weather conditions as well as covering the intimate parts of the body.

5. Conclusion

In the light of realizing the fact that, African feminism as a body and movement is shaped by African contexts and experiences, it is clear from the facts above that body sensitivity as perceived and believed by the western feminists is very different from the way body sensitivity is perceived by Nigerians. The problem that most African female scholars have with western feminism is its failure to consider the historical and social specificities in which African women struggle to determine their individual and collective destinies.

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