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Christianity and Literature: The Need for Feminism in the Church

Chinyere T. Nwaoga*, Anuli B. Okoli, Lawrence Okwusa, Christopher Ibenwa

Department of Religion and Cultural Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Nigeria

*E-mail address: nwaogachichi@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

For centuries, women have been victims of social prejudices and discrimination. Literature reveals various ways women have worked to breakthrough from the point(s) where men have relegated them. Their movements are seen as feminist movement. Merging feminism with Christianity, Christian feminism would mean an aspect of feminist theology which seeks to advance and understand the equality of men and women morally, socially, spiritually, and in leadership from a Christian perspective. A few of the 21st century women in Nigeria are seen to be a bit open in terms of sexuality; we see nursing mothers going out to work; women engaged in new industries and professions, and the acceptance that women will work outside the home, have children outside marriage, as well as the right to control their own sexuality. Despite these accomplishments by women, they are still prone to more problems, basically in the Church. Most persons in the Christian religion do not feel that feminism should come in or be exercised by Christian women. From their view of the feminist's approach to life, these Christians see feminism to preach a woman's right to have abortion, practice lesbianism as well as marry, be free from traditional roles, and even reject God as the ultimate authority. This is absolutely untrue. Based on the above premise, this paper tried to justify the reason why Christianity as well as the Church desperately needs feminism. The descriptive and the comparative phenomenological methodology were utilised in this paper, with the advantage data so collected to speak for themselves.

Keywords: Christianity; Religion; literature; feminism; liberation

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminism is a movement with the objective of making women gain some recognition politically, socially, economically, culturally, religiously, among others. Feminism is being defined as “the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men; the struggle to achieve this aim.”^[1] These rights cover all spheres of life. Helen Chukwuma also states that Feminism means therefore, a rejection of inferiority and striving for recognition. It seeks to give women a sense of self as worthy, effectual and contributing human being.^[2] It aims at boosting the self-esteem and ego of women.

Feminism in literature is a social theory and its movement is primarily motivated by the experiences of women in society. This gives women a sense of belonging, self-worth, making them to be effectual and contributing human beings. As a theoretical and ideological framework, it directly opposes sexism by supporting gender equality. Many feminist writers see feminism as a reaction to such stereotype of women, whereby women are seen as helpless, dependent and voiceless in society.

Olive Banks in her book, *Becoming a Feminist* believes that feminism is “... in part a desire to address particular injustices in parts a vision of a new moral world.”^[3] Katherine Frank in her essay titled “Feminist Criticism and the African Novels”, an article which analyses the relevance and usefulness of feminism to the study of African female writers, gives the impression that the feminist ideology in its emphasis in individualistic growth and interests must necessarily be opposed to traditional tendencies which place values on group interests^[4]. Germaine also supported this view, when she states in “The Female Eunuch”, “The beginning of feminism in a woman is manifested in her ability to devise her own method of revolt, a revolt which will reflect her own independence or originality.”^[5] This seems to be a call for civil disobedience from the women folk.

There is no doubt that feminist theology began as a result of women’s experience, and the rejection of ‘patriarchy’ which is a societal and ideological structure in which men rule women. Hence, women in the Church still face an extent of patriarchy. It is believed that women will be able to assert their rights as truly human should patriarchy come to an end.^[6] Attaining this frame in the Church by women needs the help or inclusion of the concept of feminism – thus, the concept of Christian feminism.

Christian feminism is said to be an aspect of feminist theology which seeks to advance and understand the equality of men and women morally, socially, spiritually, and in leadership from a Christian perspective. The argument which Christian feminists propose is that contributions by women in that direction are necessary for a complete understanding of Christianity.^[7] Moreover, Christian feminists hold on the believe that God does not discriminate on the basis of biologically-determined characteristics such as sex and race.^[8] Some of the major issues which Christian feminists propose range from the ordination of women, male dominance in Christian marriage, recognition of equal spiritual and moral abilities, reproductive rights, down to the search for a feminine or gender-transcendent divine.^[9-12]

The advent of women into an exclusively male world was made possible with an increasing sensitivity to inequalities of sexism. This issue has formed the base of the feminist writers. The women came to the awareness that there is a need to change the image of women from the oppressed and as a second class societal structured citizen. Because of these reasons and more, gender scholars and feminist writers have continuously lamented the sad plight of

women, especially women who are not adequately empowered, in their works. Most novels written by women display fundamental feminist concepts like women's agency, women's empowerment, sisterhood and gender equality.

Women, as it is argued, will only become truly human, with the ending of patriarchy.^[13] Therefore, Christianity should be synonymous with feminism. As the religious belief with "Christ" in its name, we should be the ones leading the bout for gender equality. Unfortunately, one of the groups of people that perpetuate a sexist mentality in society is our Christian Churches. Patriarchy, male-headship and gender bias is rampant in Christian culture, all of which force women into only two acceptable roles: mother and wife.^[14] The methodologies employed in this paper are the descriptive as well as the comparative phenomenological qualitative method of research. Data were analysed based on experienced phenomena as well as indicators of gender bias, based on male and female fight for equality. The aim of this paper is to ascertain if the church has contributions to lay in a bid to aid feminism. The data proved that women were relegated to the background and contemporary society.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This paper utilized the liberal feminist theory which is a major rare of the feminist theory. Feminists like Sheila Collins in her work "A different heaven and earth (1974); LettyRussel "Human Liberation in feminist perspective" (1974); and Letha Scanzon, "All we were meant to be" (1974) projected a world where men and women have equal rights. Their goal is on gender equality and balancing.

Consequently, the theory of this paper is based on the liberal perspective feminists, a perspective that is largely derived from the works of early functionalists, and is based on two types of justification, biology and religion. Liberal feminists appear to favour gender equality (i.e. preferring complementarities between men and women or total in action rather than aggression on the part of women in demanding equal rights and opportunities for men and women), but lack the power to challenge the gender in equalities that persist.

Liberal feminists have played a major role in bringing about significant reforms like advocating for justice in work places; this means equal pay for work of equal value between men and women granting women maternity leave, pressing for more services for abused women among others.

3. THE PLACE OF FEMINISM IN LITERATURE AND THE BIBLE

There is no doubt that literature is an imaginative/creative work of art which when viewed closely stands for a mirror of life. In other words, it reflects that which can be obtained in real life situation. In addition, it suggests to real life the best way to manage affairs. Most things that are being achieved in the society today or the world at large first existed in the world of literature. To this, literature has a lot to inform with much to back up through the idea of intertextuality or a text standing alone.

In Nigeria, the background of some female characterisation seen in the novels of male writers in such as Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, J.P. Clark and Elechi Amadi have

awakened the zeal and interest of some female writers like, Flora Nwapa, Ifeoma Okoye, Mariam Ba, Zulu Sofola, Zaynab Alkali, Chimamanda Adichie, Akachi Adimora, Emecheta Buchi, and others to vividly portray the status of women in society and project the positive image of womanhood in society. Their works portray a form of reaction, resistance to meanings of womanhood provided by men. It is observed that through their personal experiences on womanhood, women's sensibilities, reactions and reviewers in a heterosexual relationship, politics and sex, portray assertive female characters. As a result of their stereotypical neglect by society, these female characters in the process of searching for their true identity prove their confidence and individuality by asserting themselves in their different communities. To boost the ego of their characters, these female writers give manly qualities to their female characters and make the men to play a secondary role.

Women are said to be a set of people who seek freedom and liberation from the unfortunate situation in which they find themselves. Women have been contributing to their societies in one way or the other. Not only have women been relegated to the back seat of Nigerian literary tradition, they have also been grossly misunderstood and misrepresented. The enigmatic nature of woman in African literature arises from the dual and often times conflicting role which writers especially the male writers ascribe to women. Through the process of idealization, woman is supreme and subordinate, the idealization of woman correspond to the writers ideological and philosophical inclination.

Ojo-Ade argues that women's voices must be recognised and their "role in the struggle to decolonise must not be overlooked".^[15] In Nwapa's *Efuru*, Efuru becomes a role model and a catalyst for change in her own society. *Efuru* is a feminist manifestation as it addresses the ability of a woman to be a leader and a reformist in her community. In spite of her success, brightness and wealth, her marriages failed twice. Her first marriage only begets a daughter who dies while the second marriage has nothing to show for it. Regardless of these, Efuru remains firm and strong, maintaining very successful and prosperous business and standing as a perfect example of generosity, intelligence, and care among her peers. Efuru does not live for herself only; she commits herself to the mission of helping others live right. This is the real meaning of sisterhood and woman empowerment which Western scholars fail to see in the Third World womanhood. She excels in saving other people's lives and having an influence on their personalities.

According to Ezeigbo, the woman is often overwhelmed by responsibilities in her life those created by society and by her. She is expected to perform her traditional roles efficiently run her home; be a good wife, a super mother and a supportive member of the extended family. She is expected to contribute to the family income and she must perform creditably at her job to make progress. This task she has accomplished in a culture where she is taught that she is inferior to her male counterpart.^[16]

In Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*, Kambili finds strength to narrate her experiences at home which reflects a society that is governed by patriarchs. Emecheta in *Joys of Motherhood* tells us how Nnu-Ego struggles alone to raise her children when her husband starts misbehaving. One is right to ask if women must suffer the inabilities of men to manage the affairs of his home.

A close reading in literary works reveal that women are often overwhelmed by responsibilities in their lives as well as those created by society and by them. They are expected to perform their traditional roles efficiently, be good wives, super mothers and supportive members of the extended family. They are expected to contribute to their family's

income and must perform creditably at their jobs to make progress. These tasks they have accomplished in cultures where women are taught that they are inferior to her male counterparts.

It would be wise to state here that feminists' literature have served a great deal in educating the female child on her rights which she could assert as a human being, and not to be confined to cultural or societal norms. Her ability to speak out against the patriarchal confinement has indeed changed the cause of things overtime. However, most works of art by these female writers have not displayed the appropriate right which the girl child can exhibit in the religious aspect. The common thing that is found among them is females raised to be submissive to their husband as well as being good wives and good mothers. Although some writers have sought of how to display their feminist concerns in the religious circle such as the Church, their efforts have not yielded much fruit.

The Church still exercises degrees of rights towards the relegation or subjugation of women. Even though most women are rising up to the challenge, there is still so much doubt that they can be heard. The ones who have tried to exercise their female rights were excommunicated or given the back seat in the Church. This is against the teaching of Jesus Christ who is the head of the Church. Jesus beckons on "all" who are weary to come to him. This does not specify the gender that has the sole right to come to him.

Looking at feminism from the New Testament, Jesus was a Feminist. Jesus advocates for equal right and justice between the men and women. The Bible can serve as a good literature to explain this notion. Jesus stood up to defend the women against the injustice men present against them. This boils down to the fact that women are unjustly treated. Jesus as the head of the Church used his relationship with Mary Magdalene to teach the men how to treat women, specifically those who are rejected. He defended her when she was shamed as a slut telling them that he who is without sin should first cast a stone.^[17] The answer that came from the accusers were worse than the one who has been accused. It shows that no one is perfect, therefore the reflection of the term 'Holier than thou' which the men wear is unwarranted.

There is another aspect when Mary Magdalene washed His feet with her hair, which is relayed as an act of complete service, the disciples were upset that He would let a sinner touch Him. Looking at it critically, the disciples of Jesus Christ were all men. He said to Simon in Luke 7: 44-57:

Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has wet My feet with her tears and wiped them with her hair. You gave Me no kiss; but she, since the time I came in, has not ceased to kiss My feet. You did not anoint My head with oil, but she anointed My feet with perfume. For this reason I say to you, her sins, which are many, have been forgiven, for she loved much; but he who is forgiven little, loves little.

From Jesus' statement above, we can deduce that women are veritable assets in the service of God. There is no way women can be relegated to the background of the Church otherwise things will go wrong. Mary's attitude is very significant. Their meekness is what the Church need to preach the gospel. Their loyalty, understanding and dedication is what God demands of every Christian. Perhaps, Jesus was trying to educate the men by using the women. Even though he has been with His disciples for a very long time, they have not been able to sacrifice much. Jesus also protects and defends them as babes.

The promise of the saviour was made possible because of Mary the mother of Jesus. The angel called her "Blessed". The Bible also informs that Mary is found worthy to bear Jesus. She is a virgin and has retained sanctity for the eyes of the Lord. There was no time she forgot the personality of Jesus even though she was His earthly mother. At the wedding where Jesus turned water into wine, Mary told the people around to do as He says. She exhibits great understanding in what the angel has decreed about Jesus Christ. This is the standpoint of every Christian who has not seen but believed that Jesus is the son of God.

The Bible and literature has proofed that there is the need to recognise feminist approach in the Church and not to view it as devilish approach. Using the Bible stories on women, it is seen that women first believed in the saviour Jesus Christ before the men did. Even Jesus had to ask his disciples at a juncture who they say He is. Only one person answered correctly through the power of the Holy Spirit. The women had no difficulty in accepting this. The Bible's validation alone is enough for Christianity to understand why feminism should be recognised in the Church. The roles of women during the lifetime of Jesus are unquantifiable. Because Mary the mother of Jesus Christ believed in her son, there was a miraculous wine provided at the wedding occasion. The women followed Jesus and never denied nor betrayed Him like His own disciples did. Even when Jesus resurrected, these women were the first to break the news because they never took their eyes off from the Saviour. To have these same women subjugated in the same body of Christ which they are the true pillars is a very bad idea. The reason is that female rights and prospects should be respected as the male wished to have theirs respected too. The body of Christ is one and Christians are one, no male or female. Everyone should be given equal rights and justice in the Church. The men should show gratitude to women for bringing salvation to their doorstep. The women should not press so hard for their voice to be heard but should be given that sole right to speak out for the betterment of every member of the Christian folk.

4. THE NEED FOR FEMINISM IN THE CHURCH

From the forgoing, there is no doubt if we should say that the silencing of women in the Church is the silencing of Jesus Christ. The marginalisation of women in the Church should stop because the founder of the Church did not perform such act. If the Church wants to understand what women are fighting for, the concept of feminism should be their guide. Therefore, there is need for the Church to embrace Christian feminism. These are some guides to achieving that.

4. 1. Feminism Advocates that Both Men and Women Are the Image of God

When God created man, he also created women. It was not man that created woman. There is no doubt that both man and woman are created outside the image of God. Galatians 3:28 says, "There is neither...male nor female for all are one in Christ Jesus." The body of Christ is one and the Church is one with the worship of only one God. If women are treated in a different manner, it therefore means that they are created by a different God whom they wish to leave worshipping, and start worshipping the God who created men.

The Christian feminism advocacy here is that if men and women are the image of God, they should be saddled with equal rights and privileges so as to achieve the goal of the head of the Church. Their plans should be harmonised so as to correct the ills that have penetrated the

Church at this time. It is recorded in the Bible too that there is neither male nor female in heaven. All shall be transformed. Therefore, it is baseless for the Church to imagine that women do not deserve the full right to be free and to assert her sole right in the house of God.

4. 2. Feminism Encourages the Health Aspect of Christian Women

The Christian religion, as well as most religions in the world has neglected the health aspects of women in their promulgation of laws. Conservative religious groups are often at philosophical odds with many feminist and liberal religious groups over abortion and the use of birth control. Flann Campbell who is a sociologist as well as other critics have argued that conservative religious denominations tend to restrict male and female sexuality^{[18][19][20]} by prohibiting or limiting birth control use,^[21] and condemning abortion as sinful murder. This has posed a great danger to most homes and endangered the lives of many females. In order to address this issue, some Christian feminists like Teresa Forcades contend that a woman's "right to control her pregnancy is bounded by considerations of her own well-being" and that restricted access to birth control and abortion disrespect her God-given free will.

The feminist movement in this aspect has led to a number of socially progressive mainline Protestant denominations as well as certain Jewish organizations and the group Catholics for a Free Choice have formed the Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice.²² The RCRC often works as a liberal feminist organization and in conjunction with other American feminist groups to oppose conservative religious denominations which, from their perspective, seek to suppress the natural reproductive rights of women.^[23]

The advocacy here is that the Christian foundation should consider their reproach to some things they take in as laws especially when the lives of women are endangered. Here, it is imperative that Jesus' example on "Let he who is without sin first cast the stone" does not remind the Church on some doctrines they have blindfolded themselves with. It is a fact that some Church's indoctrination have led to the loss of lives and properties that could have been avoided. It is also true that these doctrines are not based on the teaching of Jesus Christ. An example of it is Jesus' question on what should a man whose sheep fell into a pit on a Sabbath day do. Should he leave it because it is a Sabbath day? Anyway, what the Church should evaluate here is the teaching of Jesus as against their own established doctrine which they feel can lead them to Christ.

4. 3. Feminism Understands the Christian Teaching on Virginit

The teaching on virginity has been seriously taken on women more than the way the men are referred to it. This tends to tie the woman's worth to her virginity as if she has no other worth as a person. There are even horror stories of families paying to repair their daughters' hymen (a membrane that surrounds or partially covers the external vaginal opening) which can be broken outside of vaginal sex doing activities like active sports, to repair the daughters' "virtue."^[24]

On this note, the feminists are not saying that the teaching on virginity is bad, but that the act of tying a woman's virginity to her self-worth is dangerous. If women are seriously taught to keep their virginity, the men should also be taught in the same direction, instilling the same fears which the women are made to feel. In ordinary parlance, women's self-worth should not be seen or noted in their virginity.

A woman's dignity is more than that. Most women who were not married as virgins have become breadwinners in their various homes through respectable and honourable means. Women have even given more to the Church than the men have.

It is undeniable that women have greater things to achieve and live for if their voices can be heard in the Church. Feminism absolutely understands the Christian teaching of virginity but the idea of restraining women's self-worth to virginity will always make them to avoid taking major risks that will assert them as humans. Therefore, women should be encouraged to live as truly humans.

4. 4. Feminism Will Encourage the Church in Fighting against Sexual Abuse

Feminism has been a long time movement for the protection of sexually abused victims of all genders. A spade should be pronounced by its name. It is a fact that the Church finds it difficult in discussing about sex, let alone sexual abuse. In the world today, there are atrocities that are perpetrated by some leaders in the Church.

Little or no action is taken against a Church leader who is accused of sexually abusing a female. The abused is left to suffer the psychological impact of the abuse alone. This is absolutely unfair. Why should the women be the ones to suffer such abuse and the Church wants them to remain quiet? Most men hide under the umbrella of the Church to do evil. It is not a lie if some single mothers living around have been victims of the Church leaders who knew that doctrine will not permit them to get married.

The question remains, what has the Church done to these men? Are they not the Church themselves? The idea of feminism here is to ensure that these men are brought out to the public rather than allowing them hide under the Holy umbrella of Christ whom they consistently defy.

Every sexual abuse allegation in the Church deserves to be investigated. Covering its shame should not be the case but to bring the perpetrator to book. This can perfectly be handled when feminism is incorporated in the Church. No matter who is involved, the person, if found guilty, should be made to face the charges as the judgment may be. This idea will promote growth and respect for the Christian fold. It will encourage general Holy living. Most people who have left the worship of God due to the activities of some so-called men of God will return and worship Him in truth and in spirit.

4. 5. Feminism Will Encourage Christian Women to Reject Staying with Their Abusers if it is against their Will

Women have always been encouraged to forgive and stay with their unfaithful or abusive husbands. Most times, this puts them further in danger. When it comes to divorce, women have been encouraged to stay with their partners because divorce is a sin in the eyes of many Churches. There have been cases where most clergies have been caught by their wives in adulterous acts, yet these women have been asked to remain in the marriage even when they have appealed. The Church's view on a divorcee is usually bad for women. In other cases, the Church refuse to take serious actions against wife battering. If feminism is encouraged in the Church, women will be able to speak out and call the attentions of the authorities against such treatments.

5. CONCLUSION

National development is realizable when women are empowered in all spheres of the society. It should not be seen that women are struggling with their male counterpart to achieve supremacy. Although feminist movement has tried to achieve a lot in the liberation of women against some cultural confinements, women are still clearly marginalized even within our Churches. This paper has x-rayed the reasons why Feminism should be deployed to the Church. The views it presented are not bad but are geared towards achieving a goal, unity and oneness before God. Therefore, Christianity and feminism should work as one. As Jesus Christ exemplified in his relationship with women and the activities of the women around him, the Church should be the ones leading the bout for gender equality.

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