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**A Womanist Approach to Selected Works by Chimamanda Ngozi
Adichie and Sefi Atta**

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Dedication:

I dedicate this thesis to the memory of my mother, Mona Qotb, who always encouraged me to take this step although she passed away before I start this thesis.

I also dedicate it to my father, Mohamed Shabana, who always provides me with unconditional love and endless support.

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Abstract:

This thesis attempts a Womanist analysis of two contemporary Nigerian novels, *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *Everything Good Will Come* by Sefi Atta. Womanism is a term coined by Alice Walker in 1983, and it aims at bridging the gaps of Feminism. It refutes the allegations that consider Feminism the only platform that empowers women. It also provides a room for black women and women of color, who were marginalized in the Feminist discourse, to express their struggles and moments of triumph. Hence, it intersects with Post-Colonialism in their attempt to eliminate different forms of racism.

The thesis exposes the injustices and the gaps Feminism caused to black women and women of color as it either marginalized them or distorted their image. Thus, many African authors and critics believed that they were not present in the Feminist discourse, and they needed a more inclusive movement to give a more authentic representation of their life. It also presents a detailed analysis of the two texts to prove that African women are not always victims, yet they are capable of fighting several forms of oppression on both the social and cultural levels.

One of the core features of Womanism that differentiates it from Feminism is its inclusivity. Unlike Feminism that focuses only on white women's problems and antagonizes men, Womanism tends to give voice to women all over the world and men as well. In this sense, it aims at having both men and women together fighting against the Western racism and marginalization.

Both novels reflect Womanist aspects. They present all the challenging circumstances that Nigerian women face in terms of social oppression and violence, but they also present how powerful and resilient women become in Nigeria. Most of the female characters in both novels show determination and are “womanish” in their attitude. They also developed a sense of solidarity that enables them to support each other in order to grow and stand against all forms of injustice. Both novels used Bildungsroman to show how characters developed and became more mature.

Key Words: Womanism, Postcolonialism, African Literature, Bildungsroman, empowerment, Feminism.

Chapter One

Womanism: Historical and Theoretical Framework

A. A Feminist Critique:

Western Feminism has always been perceived as the only acknowledged dominant mode for articulating the experiences of women for many years. Allegedly, the movement succeeded in achieving many of its objectives, and it was believed to be the principal advocate for women's rights all over the world. The movement's proclaimed aim is to empower women and create a discourse to call for their equality with men. The first and second waves of Feminism epitomized the advancement of white women's conditions in many spheres. In literature, as well, there was a significant depiction of women and their traumas as women authors started taking an effective part in the literary scene which gave them the space to express the dilemmas of their own sex. When critics started evaluating the movement from a different scope, in contrast to all its achievements, they discovered many limitations in this movement. Ironically, the movement was charged with being racist, classist and sexist.

Racism is the most dominant critique against the Feminist movement. The movement was accused of being supremacist because it gave priority to the mainstream European women. It restrained the whole female experience to the white women's experience. Black women and women of color were either absent or distorted in the Feminist discourse. Feminist writers focused on reflecting the

experience of the European and white American women; they depicted their problems and gave them a voice in literature; consequently, they provided them a tool to resist the patriarchal hegemony. The mainstream experience, hence, was taken as the standard model for women all over the world, the fact that stood for the racial stance of the movement that marginalized other women.

Black women and women of color occupied a marginal position in the feminist movement. This characterizes vehemently the double standards of the movement, for it was given the credit for empowering helpless mistreated women while it ignored other women who were facing real dilemmas. At the time, when Feminism was flourishing, women in different areas around the world were fighting silently the socio-political injustices against them. For instance, Black women and women of color in America were suffering from racism and slavery, and women in Africa were facing colonialism and imperialism, in addition to their poor social conditions. Consequently, they were suffering thrice oppression, namely, colonialism, poverty and patriarchy. They needed room to utter their sufferings, present their experience and help them overcome their miserable situation when feminists were concerned only with their elitist issues.

Bell Hooks, in her *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* argues that Feminism raised racial questions about the existence of the black women and women of color in Western writings. Hooks denied the inclusivity of the feminist movement saying that "White women who dominate the feminist discourse today rarely question whether or not their perspective on women's reality is true to the lived experience of women as a collective group" (3). This proves that the feminist movement was detached from the reality of women who were suffering across the world and focused on selective issues of the Western women. Ignoring and marginalizing groups of

women considering them as "others" or inferior was against the acclaimed aims of this political movement, namely Feminism.

Hooks, furthermore, viewed that total alienation of the black and colored women from the white supremacist feminist movement enhances the feeling that they are different and do not belong to this group of women. She added "The condescension they (European feminists) directed at black women was one of the means they employed to remind us that the women's movement was theirs ... They did not treat us as equals" (11). Thus, white feminists triggered, intentionally or unintentionally, double discrimination for black and colored women instead of empowering them to end their suffering.

Black women in the United States were denied to have any impact on the women's right movement though they were very influential. Hooks, in *Ain't I a Woman*, highlighted the marginalization of the black women's efforts in the women's right movement and the American history in general. She explained that "the role black women played as advocates for women's rights in the 19th century is never mentioned" (161). Not only did they ignore their contribution to the feminist resistance to patriarchal "chauvinism", but they also denied the black women's interest in women's freedom (161). Therefore, Feminism made it more difficult for black women around the world to rebel or resist the racist and sexist oppression in their society instead of helping them to gain voice and power.

Aligning with Hooks, Gayatri Spivak criticized Feminism for having an imperial agenda that serves the colonial ideology. In "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism", Spivak claimed that the Feminist criticism was the "axiom of imperialism" (243). For her, Feminism prioritized European and Anglo-American

women and isolated any different figure of women who belonged to the "Third World"(243). Consequently, Feminism added to the marginalization and oppression of the Third World women, and it isolated and stereotyped them.

The class conflict is another struggle that challenges many women and one of the main critiques against Feminism. Women who belong to the working class face tremendous difficulties to get the daily needs of their families. Some of them are the main supporters of their family, and others help their parents or husbands in finances. Those women suffer from terrible and inhumane working conditions; moreover, some of them get very low payment less than their male partners because they are women. Consequently, they fight both gender and class injustice. Feminism should have given a due concern to the working class women who are fighting many battles for humane life conditions, yet the focus of the feminist discourse was mainly on the middle class and bourgeois.

The Feminist stance from the issue of class was viewed as vague and superficial. Some Socialist Feminists showed some support to the poor and working class women, but this support was not real or effective to make a concrete difference in their situation. They did not develop effective strategies to end the class conflict or improve their conditions. Hooks stressed this point in *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*; she stated that white "outspoken socialist feminists" stressed in their work the class conflict, but "they have not been effective in changing attitudes towards class" in the movement (61). She also claimed that despite the feminist social support to poor and working class women, "their values, behaviors, and styles continued to be shaped by privilege" (61). Hence, the stance was not strong or effective to make any evident difference in the social status quo.

Another fact that showed that the Feminist movement was one-sided was that their fight against Capitalism and social inequality was only to serve their economic interests. Bourgeois Feminists aimed mainly at refining their financial status and making it equal to men. Radical Feminists were jealous, "envious and angry" at the rich and more privileged white men because they denied them the same share in "class privilege" (Hooks 68). They did not give appropriate attention to the inhumane working conditions of women who belong to different classes or the idea of class exploitation itself. They did not build an effective defense to eliminate capitalist injustice. They just focused on the theoretical connection between Marxism and Feminism. In addition to being racist and classist, one of the main pillars of Feminism is their enmity with men and how to be equal to them.

The antagonism with men was a main feminist feature that, indirectly, made it a separatist movement. As the movement started, all its effort was to portray women as victims of patriarchy. They exaggerated, somehow, in depicting men as the main oppressors of any society and ignored all other aspects that might oppress women. The white feminists, unlike the black women and women of color, did not find it necessary to unite with men to fight other suppressing factors, like racism or capitalism. They ignored any problem that did not harm their own concerns or priorities.

Hooks argued that the enmity with men was a core reason for alienating many oppressed groups from the feminist movement. For her "the anti-male sentiment alienated many poor and working class women, particularly non-white women, from the feminist movement" (*Feminist Theory* 68). The excess of criticizing the patriarchal deeds made them double marginalize other women who might have truly needed their help. Furthermore, Hooks added that the "insistence" on the concept of

having a "women only" theory highlighted the "race and class background of its participants" (67). On the other hand, some white women who belong to the poor class were not given the due attention although their struggle needed to be vocalized more than the bourgeois. This made the elitist side of the movement very evident.

The fact that Feminism was a sexist movement did not only antagonize men, but it victimized some of them as well. "The separatist ideology encourages women to ignore the negative impact of sexism on male personhood. It also stresses the polarization of sexes" (*Feminist Theory* 73). Not all white men were privileged, for some of them were struggling equally as poor women. Feminism foregrounded the ideology that all men are oppressors, privileged and made use of sexism in order not to deviate from their main target, namely antagonizing men and maintaining equality with them. This fact caused injustice to some men who were suffering, for instance, from the exploitation of Capitalism without being recognized; on the contrary, they were regarded as oppressors.

Thus, the feminist movement was proven to be exclusionary due to the huge gaps that hindered it from being the only inclusive movement for all women and for humanity. It failed to be an efficient cultural and political movement. On the contrary, it shared in subjugating many other groups while trying to serve the interests of a limited group of mainstream women. Consequently, placing all women under the umbrella of Feminism can be considered as social arrogance, for it indicates that white women's experience is the standard model for all women around the world. Black women, women of colour, poor women and unprivileged men needed a new movement to express their dilemmas. The movement was deprecated by the black and Marxist critics because they were annoyed with belittling their conflicts.

This led to the emergence of many other movements that supported the diminished groups. Some of these groups were Black Feminism, Womanism and Africana-Womanism. These new black movements challenged the cliquey whites-only feminist movement and aimed at projecting a new vision of women politics. The three movements have similar objectives and grounds although they differ in many aspects. They all aim at offering another realistic version of the black women's real life experience, challenges, and empowerment rather than the distorted image built by Feminism. They did not antagonize Feminism; however, they targeted filling the gap caused by the feminist movement and correct the false ideology that feminists provided earlier. They differ, however, in some minor aspects that will be discussed in the next section, yet these differences show the diversity of their thoughts.

B. Alternative Theories:

Womanism, Black Feminism and Africana Womanism are three sub-feminist movements and literary theories that try to create a new discourse for black women and women of color in the United States, Africa and around the world. Some critics consider them alternatives to mainstream Feminism. They share many common aspects, and all aim at giving voice to black women and highlighting their genuine experiences. However, they slightly differ in aspects related to their definitions, main concerns and agendas. They emerged to complement what the feminist movement failed to deliver. The three theories will be explained in detail in this section to understand their similarities and differences and discover how they are more inclusive and relevant to reading African texts than Feminism.

First, Womanism is a term coined by the African American writer and activist Alice Walker in her collection of essays *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* in 1983, and later Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi seconded this theory and added to it. Walker, after recognizing the silence of black women and women of color in Feminism, decided to portray their experience in a new theory. Layli Phillips in the introduction of her *The Womanist Reader* explained that Womanism is a “social change perspective rooted in black women and other women of color’s experiences and everyday methods of problem solving in everyday spaces, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people” (xx). Therefore, Womanism focuses on merging the gaps in Feminism. Phillips differentiated between Womanism and Feminism in the sense that Womanism did not focus or give the privilege to gender or sexism despite its name; rather, it tackled all types of oppression based on “social-address categories like gender, race or class” (xx). This makes Womanism an inclusive theory, unlike Feminism.

Second, Black Feminism was a pure African American movement that aimed at ending sexism and racism against the black women in the United States. US black women had to create a new social theory to represent historically oppressed groups. Patricia Hill Collins pointed out in *Black Feminist Thought* that the movement was formed to reflect “similar power relations” (9). It targeted obtaining equality with white women and creating an alternative competitive movement that bridges the gap caused by Feminism. Furthermore, it was designed to “resist” the stereotypes against black women and fight the “discriminatory social practices” towards them (10).

Black Feminism underscores, implicitly, the white racism in the American society. Collins analyzed the term Black Feminism in her article “What’s in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism and Beyond” stating that it “disrupts” the racism

inherent in the mono-sided feminist ideology. She added that using the adjective “black” in the theory’s name challenges the alleged whiteness of the feminist theory (13). This also highlights the segregation triggered by Feminism. She claimed that the term highlights the contradictions between the mainstream feminist discourse and the black discourse exposing the false feminist attempts for women emancipation.

Third, Africana Womanism is a theory introduced by Clenora Hudson- Weems in her *Africana Womanist Literary Theory*. Like Womanism and Black Feminism, it is an Afrocentric theory that rejects the Western form of Feminism and seeks to shape a new theory for the marginalized African women. Weems gave eighteen characteristics for Africana Womanism in her *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*:

The Africana womanist is 1) a self-namer; 2) a self-definer; 3) family-centered; 4) genuine in sisterhood; 5) strong; 6) in concert with the Africana man in struggle; 7) whole; 8) authentic; 9) a flexible role player; 10) respected; 11) recognized; 12) spiritual; 13) male compatible; 14) respectful of elders; 15) adaptable; 16) ambitious; 17) mothering; and 18) nurturing. (154).

Many of these characteristics are echoed in Womanism, yet others might seem contradictory.

Accordingly, the three movements have complementary aspects. Basically, they initiate a platform for the different experiences of black women in different areas all over the world. Ending racism, sexism and classism is a core common agenda for them. Therefore, they are more inclusive than Feminism. Womanism and Black Feminism, as Collins referred in “What’s in a Name? Womanism, Black Feminism and Beyond”, stand for the similar agenda of “black women self-definition and self-determination” (10); these two aspects are echoed in Africana Womanism, as well.