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Boundless Whiteness?
Feminism and White Women
in the Mirror of African Feminist Writing

In 1992, the future Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison pointed out that a “good deal of time and intelligence has been invested in the exposure of racism and the horrific results on its objects,” but that any examination of racism and cultural identity remains limited when “the impact of racism on those who perpetuate it” and “the effect of racist inflection on the subject” remain avoided and unanalyzed. Only the inclusion of whiteness as a construction and category makes it possible to develop a complex and dynamic understanding of social and individual cultural identity in its interrelationship to colonial traditions and racist constructions. Morrison continues: “What I propose here is to examine the impact of notions of racial hierarchy, racial exclusion, and racial vulnerability and availability on non-blacks who held, resisted, explored, or altered these notions.”


In the early 1990s this approach led to the development of the discipline which, following David Stowe, is called “Critical Whiteness Studies.” The present article fits into the context of this scholarly approach. Embedded in an examination of whiteness as a construction of colonial processes, it explores the unspoken assumption of whiteness as a norm in the context of white Western feminism as well as the issue of how whiteness is regarded by African feminists. In this connection I will discuss three African-feminist novels in which white women play a prominent role. The literary presentation of whiteness is the prime focus of these interpretations. In addition, encounters between African and European women that occur in the novels are discussed and interpreted with respect to the question of how they relate to the given novel’s perspective on the relationship between African and white Western approaches to feminism. Although Ama Ata Aidoo’s Our Sister Killjoy, Mariama Bâ’s Un Chant écarlate and Calixthe Beyala’s Tu t’appelleras Tanga are more or less canonical texts, this aspect has not yet been discussed in the sphere of literary criticism. This corresponds to the fact that literary scholars have not yet examined conceptions of whiteness in African-feminist literatures – as well as literatures from Africa in general.

Perspectives on the whiteness of feminism

When feminism took form, its proclaimed goal was to reflect upon existing gender relations and overcome discriminatory aspects. However, the thrust of this emancipatory movement and theory was limited from the outset, insofar as its early adherents spoke of women and in fact meant ‘white women’. Thus, when women such as Olympe de Gouges and Mary Wollstonecraft criticized the practical realization of the proclamation of human rights brought about by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, they in effect confined themselves to claiming rights for white women. Even though the Second Women’s Movement, feminist in its self-understanding, developed partly in the context of the black civil rights movement in the USA, this did not alter the fact that whiteness is the unspoken norm.

Prompted by postcolonial discourse and theories of deconstruction, the concept of gender was broadened in the early 1990s. Part and parcel of this new approach is the assumption that multiple dimensions of identity and difference exist. The problem, however, was that differences such as ‘queer’ and

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