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Theorizing African Feminism(s) The ‘Colonial’ Question

Colonialism returns at the moment of its disappearance.¹

DEBATES ON THEORIZING ‘THE POSTCOLONIAL’ have been, and continue to be, vigorous. Deriving from these debates are different espousals of what postcolonialism is and/or seeks to do. Such theorizing has lent itself to different formulations such as ‘postcolonialism’, ‘the postcolonial condition’, ‘the postcolonial scene’, ‘the postcolonial intellectual’, ‘the emerging disciplinary space of postcolonialism’, and ‘postcolonializing’.² These formulations attest to the varied directions subsumed under ‘postcolonial studies’ and the associated problem of defining and mapping-out discrete ‘postcolonial borders’. Each formulation also denotes ‘multiplicity’, which, as I argue after Anne McClintock, inscribes history as the single issue of importance in postcolonial enquiry.³

Emphasizing the centrality of history for postcolonial literature, the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* state that postcolonial literature expresses “the

¹ Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism’” (1992), in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory*, ed. Patrick Williams & Laura Chrisman (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993): 293.

² McClintock, “The Angel of Progress,” 293; Ato Quayson, *Postcolonialism: Theory, Practice or Process?* (New York: Blackwell, 2000): 156.

³ McClintock, “The Angel of Progress,” 293.

rationale of the grouping in a common past.” Further, they note that “feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant.”⁴ Such assertions underline the colonial past and its derivatives in the present as a defining point for the espousal of postcolonial theories, with the result that ‘colonialism’, as denoted in the epigraph to this essay, endures as a perpetual reference-point even as ‘postcolonializing’ seeks to subvert it. In the different developments pertaining to the theorizing of African feminism(s), we are presented with a case in point.

African women’s writing, when it emerged in the 1970s, mainly set out to dispel misrepresentations of African womanhood that proliferated in African literature at the time. Feminist practitioners, in writing and in activism, sought to demonstrate that they were relevant to the African context and, in particular, that they did not simply seek to emulate their Western feminist counterparts.

Feminism – both as an activist movement and as a body of ideas that underline the need for a positive transformation of society, such that women are not marginalized but are treated as full citizens in all spheres of life – has received extensive theoretical treatment. It is beyond the scope of this essay to offer a comprehensive survey of these debates; I will, instead, focus on those that are most pertinent to my project. In the past three decades, seeking to define feminism has proven to be anything but simple. In a recent enquiry into the character of contemporary Western feminism, Chris Beasley notes:

The notion of ‘defining’ feminism is controversial. In addition to problems associated with a complex, shifting and sometimes inaccessible field, defining feminism also involves considering whether it is in any sense distinguishable from ‘other’ forms of thought. [...] the issue of feminism’s ‘borders’ is a matter of debate.⁵

The issue of borders that pertain to the definition of feminism goes beyond distinguishing feminism from “other forms of thought.” The border problem is discernible within the general body of feminist thought itself. Whereas contemporary Western feminism broadly divides into such categories as liberal, radical, marxist, and socialist feminism, there is a general tendency among theorists to speak of feminism and Western feminism in particular, as though it were monolithic. The past three decades have also been characterized by a marked presence of those ‘feminisms’ that are widely regarded as addressing

⁴ *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, ed. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (London & New York: Routledge, 1989).

⁵ Chris Beasley, *What Is Feminism?* (London: Sage, 1999): xi.