

Africana Womanism: A Cultural Response to Patriarchy, Colonialism, and Feminist Limitations

Al-Shaymaa Samy Mubarez^(*)

Abstract

The present study seeks to investigate the theoretical paradigm of Africana Womanism which is designed to explore the African women's racial and social suffering. The framework of Africana Womanism is formulated by Clenora Hudson-Weems in her attempt to respond to the struggles, quest for identities, and aspirations of African women. Such framework addresses the shortcomings of its precedent feminist theories - Western Feminism, and Alice Walker's Womanism - that have failed to depict the particular historical, racial, and cultural realities of Africana women. Instead, the movement provides a more inclusive and culturally-based analysis of African women's racial and social suffering and their role in the struggle for liberation. In this context, the study attempts to examine the factors which have led to the emergence of Africana Womanism—namely the ubiquitous influence of patriarchy, the inheritance of colonialism, and the diasporic displacement of Africans. Moreover, the study tackles how Africana Womanism differs from its previous feminist and womanist theories which do not adequately capture the lived experiences of Africana women. In addition, the study delineates the fundamental principles of Africana Womanism in an attempt to summarize its essential philosophy and goals. By placing Africana Womanism in its historical, cultural, and theoretical contexts, this study demonstrates its relevance as an intellectual and practical movement for promoting the empowerment and agency of African women.

Keywords: Western Feminism – Alice Walker's Feminism – Africana Womanism – Patriarchy – Diaspora

^(*) Teaching Assistant at Department of English, Faculty of Arts, New Valley University

Introduction

Throughout history, the African woman has experienced multifaceted oppression and marginalization either from the inherited cultural practices of her own community or from the impact of colonialism. In her motherland, she is often ignored and undervalued simply because she is a female in a patriarchal society. Moreover, with the arrival of colonialism, the African woman's life has become harder. Colonizers have deepened Africana women's suffering by favouring men in opportunities, forcing women into hard labor and exposing them to sexual abuse.

Furthermore, being considered cheap labor, some African women have been forced to emigrate while others move voluntarily hoping for better conditions. However, in Europe, the African woman has faced racism and discrimination because of her skin color. When the African woman has sought to express her suffering in a realistic and truthful way, none of the existing feminist theories truly have captured her unique reality. It is in response to this gap that Africana Womanism emerges giving voice to African woman's experience and affirming her identity. (Cooper 55)

Patriarchy, Colonialism and Diaspora

Among the earliest factors that have led to the emergence of Africana Womanism is the widespread dominance of patriarchy in some African communities. Patriarchy is defined as "a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women" (Walby 20). Patriarchy manifests in multiple forms that operate at social, economic, and political levels making it a pervasive and deeply embedded system of gender inequality.

Socially, girls' birth is not appreciated like that of boys and consequently, they are granted limited educational opportunities. In most African cultures, girls are left behind by their parents to do household chores while boys are given priority to go to school. Even those few females who hardly manage to get an education often have to stop at an early level to stay at home and serve their families. When they become mature enough, they often marry without their choice to be exposed to physical violence and sexual exploitation.

Marriage customs also reflect the patriarchal culture as it reinforces women's secondary status. For example, customs like a bride's dowry objectifies women as a commodity to be transferred between families, their own families and their husbands' families. Even after marriage, African women have no right to make decisions about their own lives. They only have to bear the burden of the housework, raising children and taking care of elderly family members.

For economic reasons, African women are sometimes allowed to work. However, their earnings usually go to their husbands and families. Moreover, patriarchy leads to restrict women's right to inherit and own property. Land and wealth are usually inherited by men only in some African families leaving women, especially widows, at the mercy of dependent. As a result, African women have no chance to be economically independent or stable (Oyewumi 123).

As for political affairs, patriarchal practices extend to leadership within communities and government which have also traditionally been male domains. Even if women's wisdom and mediation skills are valued, it tends to be informal and unacknowledged. Some African societies grant women inferior political posts. Oyeronke Oyewumi states:

Colonial narratives and postcolonial scholarship have often assumed that African societies were inherently patriarchal, yet even in matrilineal and more balanced systems, women's roles and status were circumscribed by gender expectations that favored men. (122)

In this context, patriarchy is a common trait of some African societies that pushes women to the margins of the society. These oppressive patterns not only restrict women's autonomy but also define women's value primarily in relation to men—as wives and mothers—rather than as autonomous beings. Although women play central roles in holding families together, providing food, and raising children in these societies, their effort is downgraded. This imbalance creates a contradiction between women's observable contribution to society and their limited access to power and attention. (Oduyoye 22)

In addition to the established patriarchal oppression, European colonialism's arrival has served to reinforce such patriarchal structures

further. Under colonialism, the African woman has been exposed to colonial practices such as slavery, forced labor, sexual abuse, and low-paying jobs. Enslaved women have not only lost their freedom and land but also their cultural and familial connections. They have been forced into systems that objectified their bodies as reproducers and workers. They have been exposed to sexual violence, domestic work, house cleaning, or factory jobs and constant threat of separation from their families as some African women have been forced to emigrate from their homeland to work in Europe as a kind of cheap labor. (Muwhati and Mguni 33)

On the other hand, some African women choose to immigrate to Europe dreaming of better economic and educational opportunities and some freedom from colonial domination. However, they have faced new types of rejection and isolation that have made them feel out of place and unwanted. They have formed the so-called African diaspora. Diasporic African women have been treated as literally second-class citizens in the European society. (Sakho33). In this context, Angela Davis comments, “the Black woman cannot afford the luxury of fighting only sexism. She is Black in a White racist society. She is a woman in a sexist society. She must fight both simultaneously.” (42)

Furthermore, due to high cost of living in Europe, the African women have to work to support their families. What makes the matter worse is that they have faced patriarchy from their husbands who often leave them to handle all responsibilities—heavy labor, childcare, and housework—while they focus on their careers. If men failed, women are to be blamed, mistreated, and sometimes abused (LaRue 219). In fact, both “Slavery and colonialism uprooted African peoples, scattering them across the globe and creating a diaspora marked by alienation, loss, and resistance.” (Gilroy 21)

Accordingly, patriarchy, colonialism and diaspora interact with each other with the ultimate aim of oppressing and marginalizing the African women. In an attempt to find recognition of their social and racial suffering, African women have detected the incompleteness of the existing liberation movements such as Western Feminism and Alice walker’s Womanism in addressing the full scope of their experiences (Asante 37). Such factors indeed call for a theory that could deal with African women’s specific historical, cultural, and social conditions — a theory that could recognize

both their suffering and their strength amidst the greater struggles of the African people.

Western Feminism and Alice Walker's Womanism

Indeed, the theories of Western Feminism, Alice Walker's Womanism, and Clenora Hudson-Weems's Africana Womanism have emerged to fight for women and their rights. They all call for women's respect, equality with men, and freedom. However, they are different in their focus, direction, and cultural background. Western Feminism have started in Europe and America to focus first on women's legal and political rights, like voting and property, and later on social equality and freedom in work, education, and family. Nevertheless, it mostly speaks about the lives of white middle-class women forgetting the problems of women of color, poor women, and immigrant women. In this theory, men are usually seen as the main enemy because patriarchy is understood as male domination. (Morrison 63)

As a response to the limitations of Western Feminism, Alice Walker has introduced her theory Womanism. This theory stems from the need of a new concept to change the distorted image of black women in the American society. It is meant to motivate those women to act in an organized way in order to promote their status in the society. Walker has aimed to correct the image of the Black woman within feminist thought and the wider society focusing on her voice and experiences. (El-shennawy 385)

In her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, Alice Walker defines Womanism as "a term for a Black feminist or feminist of color who is deeply committed to the survival and wholeness of all people, both males and females, rather than a separate ideology" (11). In this sense, Walker has intended to include all women of color, especially Black women, because their voices were ignored in Western feminism.

While Walker's main focus is on African American women, she has also intended Womanism to embrace all women of color whose realities have been excluded. She hopes to make of this concept an inclusive movement for all the marginalized and oppressed people worldwide. For Walker, "the womanist idea is not limited to black women or women of color, even if it was developed, launched, articulated, and elaborated primarily by Black

women and other women of color" (Phillips 36). Womanism thus is a perspective open to all humanity from all nationalities.

In this sense, Womanism does not reject feminism completely but broadens it. Walker states, "Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender" (12). This metaphoric statement captures Walker's vision of Womanism as broader, deeper, and richer than mainstream Feminism. It also emphasizes that Womanism does not reject feminism outright but expands it to include the lived experiences of women of color, especially Black women, by addressing the intersections of race, gender, and class in shaping women's lives.

Africana Womanism

Unlike Alice Walker's Womanism, Africana Womanism does not seek to reform or expand feminism but instead rejects it completely. Hudson-Weems argues that feminism, whether Western or Black, is rooted in Eurocentric ideals and does not truly reflect the cultural values or historical struggles of Africana women. For her, Africana Womanism focuses on the unique experiences of African women and women of African descent, especially their suffering such as slavery, colonialism, racism, and oppression. Its central vision is to affirm Africana women's identity on their own terms highlighting characteristics such as family-centeredness, community, spirituality, and collective survival. Moreover, Hudson-Weems has sought to design a practical model and provide solutions for collective liberation, enabling Africana people to overcome historical trauma and move toward empowerment and self-determination. In her book *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, Weems clarifies:

Africana Womanism is neither an addendum nor a variant of feminism or Black feminism or even Alice Walker's Womanism. It is a distinct paradigm grounded in the unique culture, history, and priorities of Africana women, rejecting the confrontational stance toward men and individualism characteristic of Western feminism. (25)

Consequently, Africana Womanism has arisen not just because of patriarchy, colonialism, and diaspora but also through the intellectual understanding that the existing feminist and womanist theories were insufficient to represent the distinct experiences of Africana women.

Although other approaches such as Western Feminism and Alice Walker's Womanism are useful, they cannot manage to account for the unique cultural, social, and historical settings of Africana women's lives. (Davidson 247)

The formulation of Africana Womanism as a theoretical and practical model is attributed to the groundbreaking efforts of Clenora Hudson-Weems, who officially coined the term in the late 1980s and expounded it in her now seminal text *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves* (1993). As an African American literary critic and scholar, Hudson-Weems points out that Africana Womanism has emerged "because African women could not identify completely with the goals and ideals of either Western or Black feminism, both of which failed to center African culture and family in their analyses" (55)

Her search began while studying the novels of African American writer Richard Wright, in which she noticed the women characters were either misconceived or misrepresented when viewed through the Western feminist lens. This realization has motivated her to theorize a model based on African cultural values, history, and communal needs — one that placed family first, collective identity, and racial justice in tandem with gender equity. (Weems 33).

Africana Womanism is a philosophic stance rooted in the Africana woman's history, culture, and struggles. It emphasizes racial and cultural identity over gender conflict and sees Africana men not as racists but as comrades in the common fight against racism, colonialism, and oppression. Contrary to other woman-centered theories, it emphasizes family, cultural heritage, and racial allegiance and advocates values like male compatibility, family centrality, and spiritual grounding. (Davidson 244)

To clearly distinguish Africana Womanism from other gender ideologies, Hudson-Weems outlines eighteenth characteristics that define her view. These characteristics include self-naming, self-definition, family-centeredness, wholeness, role flexibility, adaptability, authenticity, genuine sisterhood, struggling with males against oppression, male compatibility, recognition, ambition, nurturing, strength, respect, respect for elders, mothering, and spirituality. In this respect, Clenora Hudson-Weems comments:

Therefore, I did not create the phenomenon in and of itself, but rather observed African women, documented our reality, and refined a paradigm relative to who we are, what we do, and what we believe in as a people. (449)

These principles are deeply rooted in the life experiences, cultural traditions, and historical struggles of Africana women. Together, they sum up the philosophy of Africana Womanism and its vision of empowerment, entity, and communal harmony for Africana women and their communities. Furthermore, through these eighteen defining principles, Hudson-Weems demonstrates how Africana women reclaim their authentic identity, agency, and cultural integrity by refusing externally imposed labels and affirming their own values and traditions. Such principles capture "the true realities, needs, and desires of Africana women" (Weems 42) and provide a roadmap for their self-reclamation and empowerment.

Central to Africana Womanism are the processes of self-naming and self-definition, which are Africana women's right to define themselves and their worlds in their own terms. Self-naming is to adopt an identity that reflects their cultural and historical realities in affirming identity, rejecting external labels like "feminist" from Eurocentric contexts. Self-definition refers to the capacity to describe their stories, struggles, and aspirations in terms that affirm their self-respect and power to act. Together, these attributes undo the erasure and distortion of Africana women's voices and enable them to regain control of their identity and narrative. Amadiume argues that "African women's struggles cannot be analyzed apart from the struggles of their communities; their liberation is inseparable from the liberation of their people." (7)

Africana Womanism is definitely based on the value of family and community. Family-Centrality is a major cornerstone of Africana Womanism, as the true Africana womanist is never concerned solely about herself. She must be resolute in placing the family at the center for ultimate human survival. Unlike Western feminist theory, which tends to treat the family as a location of feminine oppression, Africana Womanism treats it as a location of strength and survival. Family-Centeredness emphasizes the primacy of the family unit in the lives of Africana women, meaning that their empowerment is tied to the well-being of their families and communities.

Oduyoye argues that “to speak of liberation for the African woman is to speak of liberation for the African family.” (4).

Mothering and Nurturing also reaffirm Africana women's voluntary and traditional roles as nurturers of children, partners, and the community in general. These are not limitations but are, rather, profound articulations of love, power, and cultural continuity (Weems 29). Africana Womanism is also concerned with the need to be authentic to oneself and finding balance in life. Authenticity is the Africana women's call to remain true to their African roots rejecting the Eurocentric standards of beauty, behavior, and accomplishment.

Wholeness means finding wholeness and harmony in all things — emotional, spiritual, and communal. With these are role flexibility and adaptability which view Africana women as they can play several roles depending on the circumstances. Africana women, through history, have adapted to the burdens of slavery, colonialism, and racism by being caregivers and providers, leaders and supporters — a flexibility that has been necessary for survival and progress. Moreover, flexible role player demonstrates comfort in the homeplace with family, and the workplace with no sacrifice of either role in their quest for fulfillment. (Weems 44)

Africana Womanism lays strong emphasis on intrapersonal harmony, unity, and genuine sisterhood between two females who demonstrate a genuine caring for each other. They must stay faithful to this role by being there for one another during hard times. Sisterhood promotes mutual support and collaboration among Africana women recognizing their shared struggles and the unity of strength among them. At the same time, Africana Womanism values the union between men and women, avoiding the common fighting attitude in certain Western feminist movements. Males struggling against oppression understands that men and women in the Africana community have been oppressed by systemic racism and that both need to come together for freedom. (Davidson 252). Mandela confirms:

The future of our struggle depends on the unity of African women and men against our real enemy: racism and colonialism. (88)

Similarly, Male Compatibility also pronounces the state of harmony of the sexes and insists on partnership rather than competition. Clenora Hudson-Weems notes:

Feminism, as it evolved, could not fully encompass the cultural realities and priorities of Africana women. While feminism stresses equality and liberation in opposition to men, Africana Womanism seeks harmony with men and focuses on family and community survival as a primary concern [...] unlike feminism and Black feminism, which often alienate men or adopt adversarial positions, Africana Womanism embraces men as comrades and partners, because Africana women and men have suffered together and must heal together.” (27)

Likewise, Bell Hooks addresses African women saying that “we must recognize that our primary fight is not against Black men but against the racist structures that oppress all of us” (159).

Among the Africana Womanism necessary characteristics are recognition, ambition, strength, and respect for elders. All these speak of the Africana woman's commitment towards gaining recognition, striving for excellence, and maintaining her moral and cultural values. Recognition speaks of the placing of the value, accomplishment, and humanity of Africana women in the eyes of their communities, families, and society in general. Ambition reflects their determination to penetrate systemic barriers and achieve individual and collective objectives despite affording social and political hardships.

Strength expresses the great strength and determination Africana women display in managing troubles in the long term. (Stewart et al. 13) Clenora Hudson-Weems marks that “Africana Womanism, by its very nature, celebrates the strength and resilience of African women within their own cultural and historical context, free from the alien ideologies of Western feminism” (43). Finally, Spirituality recognizes the priority of faith, ancestral tradition, and sacred practices in Africana women's lives. Spirituality provides a source of strength, guiding their conduct and giving them hope and meaning in suffering. (Stewart et al. 15)

These characteristics form a comprehensive and culturally specific definition of Africana Womanism. They reflect the unique history, strength,

and communal orientation of African descended women and distinguish Africana Womanism from other feminist frameworks. In celebrating family centrality, cultural authenticity, solidarity with women and men, and spiritual groundedness, Africana Womanism provides both a critique of oppression and a celebration of Africana women's long-standing strength, dignity, and power. Thus, it opens up a space for empowerment that is founded upon African traditions and applicability to the lived realities of Africana women. (Mazama 389)

Africana Womanism indeed has established itself as a mirror for the suffering of African women both racially and socially. It starts from their birth into a patriarchal society, through their suffering as daughters, wives, and mothers, whether in their home countries or even when they emigrated to Europe where their suffering increases, to their continuous attempts to survive and preserve their existence and dreams. Nevertheless, Africana Womanism has never given up the African roots, perspectives, or identity. Clenora Hudson-Weems comments:

Africana Womanism enables us to reimagine and reclaim the agency of Africana women as indispensable actors in the liberation struggle, not as appendages but as central to the survival and flourishing of people. (44)

Conclusion

This study discusses Africana Womanism primarily as a theory that has been constructed in response to the distinct struggles of Africana women. It has examined the main reasons of its creation—i.e., patriarchy, colonialism, and the African diaspora. These factors mark the lives of Africana women and expose the limitations of other feminist and womanist theories to explain their realities. As opposed to these frameworks, Africana Womanism is a cultural and social framework that best represents the Africana woman's identity, history, and aspirations. This theory has eighteen guiding principles: self-naming, self-definition, family-centeredness, wholeness, role flexibility, adaptability, authenticity, sisterhood, struggling with males against oppression, male compatibility, recognition, ambition, nurturing, strength, respect for elders, mothering, and spirituality. Together, these principles define the essence of Africana Womanism and justify its function as a theoretical and practical framework for understanding and struggling for Africana women.

Works cited

- Amadiume, Ifi. *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in an African Society*. Zed Books, 1987.
- Aptheker, Bettina. "Strong Is What We Make Each Other: Unlearning Racism Within Women's Studies." *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 9, no. 4, Winter 1981, pp. 13-16.
- Asante, Molefi Kete. *Africana Womanist Literary Theory*. Africa World Press, 2004.
- Christian, Mark. "Africana Womanism." *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, by Clenora Hudson-Weems, 5th ed., Routledge, 2019, pp. 131-33.
- Cooper, Anna Julia. *A Voice from the South: By a Woman of the South*. Oxford UP, 1988.
- Cowser, Angela, and Sandra I. Barnes. "From Shack Dweller to Home Owner: The Power of the MBOP, Africana Womanism, and Self-Help Housing among the Shack Dwellers Federation of Namibia." *Journal of Namibian Studies*, no. 19, 2016, pp. 15-41.
- Davis, Angela Y. *Women, Race & Class*. Vintage Books, 1981.
- Davidson, Maria D. "Perspectives on Womanism, Black Feminism, and Africana Womanism." *African American Studies*, edited by Jeanette R. Davidson, Edinburgh University Press, 2010, pp. 239-59.
- Gilroy, Paul. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Harvard UP, 1993.
- Hare, Julia. "Africana Womanism: The Flip Side of a Coin." *Black Issues in Higher Education*, 10 June 1993. *The Free Library*, <https://www.thefreelibrary.com/Africana+Womanism%3A+the+flip+side+of+a+coin.->
- Harris, Robert L., Jr. "Endorsement." *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. Bedford, 1993, pp. 20-24.
- Hill, Patricia Liggins, et al., editors. *Call and Response: The Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition*. Houghton Mifflin, 1998.
- Hooks, bell. *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism*. South End Press, 1981.
- Hudson-Weems, Clenora. *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. Bedford Publishers, 1993.
- . "Africana Womanism and the Critical Need for Africana Theory and Thought." *The Western Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 21, no. 2, 1997, pp. 79-84.
- . "Self-Naming and Self-Definition: An Agenda for Survival." *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power: From Africa to the Diaspora*, edited by Obioma Nnaemeka, Africa World Press, 1998, pp. 449-52.
- . "Why Africana Womanism? Authenticity & Collectivity for Social Justice." *University of Zimbabwe International Conference on Women*, 2021, Harare. Conference presentation.
- LaFond, Daisy. "Endorsement." *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*. Bedford, 1993.
- LaRue, Linda. "The Black Movement & Women's Liberation." *Female Psychology: The Emerging Self*, edited by Sue Cox, SRA, 1976, pp. 216-25.
- Lorde, Audre. *Sister Outsider*. Crossing Press, 1984.
- Madondo, Gracious. "Why Africa Relate to Africana Womanism." *The Southern Times: The Newspaper for Southern Africa*, 19 July 2018.

- El-Shennawy, Marwa Mahmoud Mohamed. "Alice Walker's Womanism vs. Feminism." *CDELT Occasional Papers in the Development of English Education*, vol. 67, no. 1, 2019, pp. 374-96. <https://doi.org/10.21608/opde.2019.133842>.
- Mazama, Ama. "The Afrocentric Paradigm: Contours and Definition." *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 31, no. 4, 2001, pp. 387-405.
- Muwhati, Itia, and Zifikile Mguni. *Rediscoursing African Womanhood in the Search for Sustainable Renaissance: Africana Womanism in Multi-Disciplinary Approaches*. College Press, 2012.
- Ntiri, Daphne W. "Introduction." *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, 5th ed., Routledge, 2019.
- Oduyoye, Mercy Amba. *Daughters of Anowa: African Women and Patriarchy*. Orbis Books, 1995.
- Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo. *African Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*. University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Oyewumi, Oyeronke. *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- Ravell-Pinto, Thelma. "Buchi Emecheta at Spelman College." *Sage*, vol. 2, no. 1, 1985, pp. 50-51.
- Phillips, Layli. *The Womanist Reader: The First Quarter Century of Womanist Thought*. Routledge, 2006.
- Sakho, Jacqueline Roebuck. "Black Women Adult Educators — The Utterers of Black Leadership Preparation: Africana Womanism & the Afrocentric Praxis." *Africana Paradigms, Practices and Literary Texts: Evoking Social Justice*, edited by Clenora Hudson-Weems, Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2021, pp. 33-50.
- Stewart, James B., and Ama Mazama. "Foreword." *Africana Womanism: Reclaiming Ourselves*, 5th ed., Routledge, 2019, pp. 13-15.
- Walby, Sylvia. *Theorizing Patriarchy*. Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- Walker, Alice. *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983.
- Mandela, Winnie. *Part of My Soul Went with Him*, edited by Anne Benjamin, Norton, 1984.