

Self-Sense Feminism: the Poetics and Politics of an Undivided House

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Abstract: This paper introduces *Self-sense Feminism*, a novel homegrown African feminist praxis rooted in African indigenous knowledge system, culture, philosophies, worldview and values. *Self-sense feminism* foregrounds self-introspection; the deliberate engagement and examination of one's inner self, self-awareness, autonomous choice, strategic agency, assertion, equity, solidarity across gender, collective wellbeing and commitment to non-violence. It centers on the individual's inner consciousness as the foundation for meaningful feminist agency and social change. This means that unlike other feminist models which clamour for equality of the sexes, *Self-sense feminism* seeks equity. This is in recognition of the complementary roles and responsibilities of men and women in African society hinged on the African philosophy of Ubuntu and the Igbo *Ofor na Ogu, igwe bu ike* and *Onyeaghala nwanneya* philosophies. Building on established Afrocentric feminist traditions, this framework however integrates psychological and introspective dimensions often overlooked in existing feminist theories. *Self-sense feminism* affirms women's right to autonomous choice, including acceptance of independence, marriage and motherhood, while rejecting Chinweizu's notions of female power as manipulation in favor of conscious, ethical, and strategic action. It brings to prominence lived experiences, cultural and social values of African women while rejecting the victim complex or self-pity which ties her identity to colonial or patriarchal trauma. *Self-sense feminism* offers a context specific and holistic approach that reimagines African feminist praxis as a nuanced, inclusive and undivided space for African women's liberation and collective well-being while contributing to the ongoing discourse on African feminism, women and gender studies.

Key Words: *Self-sense feminism, African feminism, self-awareness, female agency, solidarity and equity.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The emergence and evolution of feminist thought in the West, even with its epistemic limitations of centering singular historical experiences prepared the ground for global discourse around gender justice. Early feminist movements in Europe and North America evolved as response to the legal, political, and economic marginalization of women, particularly white middle-class women. This first-wave feminism born out of enlightenment and rationalism focused on equality, education, suffrage, and property rights for women. Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) remains a seminal piece on the Western liberal feminist insistence on women's equality and capacity for self-determination.

Their emphasis on legal rights and equal opportunity, emphasized individual autonomy but often ignored the socio-cultural specificities that shape access and agency. However, the proponents of Radical feminism, focused on unveiling patriarchal violence and control over women's bodies and life without considering the diverse experience of women. This position oftentimes erases racial, cultural, and class differences among women. The positions of the later and more contemporary wave of feminism (Postmodernist feminisms) have blurred the binary line of identity. They have complicated the essentialist notions of 'woman' and emphasized the fluidity of identity; however, these ideas are still steeped in epistemic traditions that marginalize non-Western voices and women. While these Eurocentric frameworks made significant progress on feminist activism, they rarely accounted for the colonial and cultural peculiarities of the "Global South", non-white particularly African women, nor did they engage the relational, communitarian logics embedded in non-Western gender systems. This omission created the need for feminist discourses that emerge from, and speak to African worldview. It brings to the fore the need for more context-specific approaches that focus on non-Western voices, making room for other ways of resisting, challenging and advocating.

In response to these exclusions, African feminist scholars and activists have long resisted this dominant feminist narratives. They have instead engaged in counter-hegemonic and re-calibration of feminist polemics that centers African women's experiences. In challenging these Eurocentric perspectives or notions of feminism, African feminist thinkers like Oyèrónkè Oyèwùmí, Chikwenye Ogunyemi, Ifi Amadiume, Molaria Ogun-dipe-Leslie, Catherine Acholonu, Clenora Hudson-Weems, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo and others have paved the way for more nuanced approaches and context-based models. They emphasized cultural context, family, spiritual wholeness, and collaborative relationships with men.

It is in this light, that Self-sense feminism emerges as an authentic African feminist framework drawn from African philosophies, cultural context, worldview, indigenous knowledge system and values. As the name implies, Self-sense feminism centres the woman as the site of female empowerment rather than focusing on external influence or factor for female independent. It presents the woman as strong and well endowed. Self-sense feminism foregrounds self-introspection (*igu isi/ iguruisi*); the deliberate engagement and examination of one's inner self, self-awareness (*ima onwe*), autonomous choice (*ikpebiri onwe*), agency (*mbo/ ikike*) strategic negotiation (*igba izu*), assertion (*iguzo s'ike*) solidarity across gender (*igbako aka*), which will lead to collective wellbeing (*odinma madu dum*), equity (*ofor*), one of Igbo core values which embodies fairness, justice, inclusion and empowerment (*ofor* goes beyond justice, it entails bringing morality to justice, by implication giving everyone their peculiar 'fair' chance; giving each person/ gender what it takes to get to a level ground), and finally commitment to non-violence (*udo*).

This framework acknowledges Chinweizu's (1990) submission on female power in his *Anatomy of Female Power* however, it rejects his notions of female power as manipulation in favor of conscious, ethical, and strategic action. It is a response to Akachi Ezigbo's (2012, 40) call for "a redefinition of the African feminist dialectic". It seeks to re-align women "to liberate ...[them] from [self-imposed] ... structures that have marginalised them" (Ekpa 2003, 31), to shift their focus from other to self and change the women in favour of women and the society.

2. AFRICAN FEMINIST ENDEAVOUR

What is African feminism one may ask? I will start with what African feminism is not. Feminism in the African context or African feminism is not a striving between the sexes nor is it a fight for supremacy between men and women. It is not an idea put forward by deviant women who seek to become men or rule over men. African Feminism is not about who defeats who or which sex is inferior or superior to the other. It is women asking to be heard. It is women seeking to be recognized as persons capable of contributing strategically to collective good.

African feminism is therefore, "a rejection of inferiority and a striving for recognition. It seeks to give the woman a sense of self-worth" (Chukwuma 2003), effective and a valuable individual. Still on the concept of African feminism, Carole Davies (1994, 22) submits that it entails:

The recognition of a common struggle with the African men for the removal of colonial [and neo colonial] domination. It is not antagonistic to African men but challenging them towards an awareness of women's subjugation and [agency]. It examines African societies for institutions which are of value to women and in effect nullifies those which work against women. It does not simply import Western women's agenda; thus, it respects African woman's status as mother and sees utility in the positive aspects of the extended family and polygyny. It respects the African women's self-reliance and penchant for co-operative work and social organization but rejects the "muledom" that has been the lot of African women, accepts an international women's movement but rejects the European and American modules of feminism.

Davies position above resonates with African philosophy and worldview, although many scholars and feminist critics may disagree with her position on polygamy.

Alice Walker (1983) in a bid to differentiate black feminism from other variants of European feminism which did not cater for the realities of black women and other women of colour coined the word "womanism". Walker submission in her *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* on the female sexuality became a major contention for African feminist who maintained that lesbian love is alien to the African worldview and as such cannot cater for the realities of African women. In response to Walker's approval of lesbian love Mary Kolawole (1997, 15) asserts that, "to the majority of Africans, lesbianism is a non-existent issue because it is a mode of self-expression that is completely strange to their worldview". However, it is not strange nor totally alien in African culture that women marry wives. The difference

is that there is not sexual relationship between them, they younger women are usually 'brought' to ensure that a man name is not obliterated- the female husband selects or chooses which of her husband's kinsmen that will procreate for her usually dead husband.

Still on the search for authentic nomenclature and concept, Chikewnye Ogunyemi (1985) became the first African feminist critic to use the term "womanism". In her paper, "Womanism: Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel". Drawing from the findings of her work on selected African novels, Ogunyemi posits that "Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, ideas of black life, while giving a balanced representation of black womandom... its aim is the dynamism of wholeness and a self-healing" (1985,72). As good as this sounds, the scope of Ogunyemi's "womanism is still wide; inclusive of other cultures and did provide any road map for achieving the positive and integrative ending she read in the womanist novels.

A decade later, in her book *AfricanWo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*, (1996) she distinguishes her brand of African Womanism from Walker and Clenora Hudson-Weems brand with her Four Cs- conciliation, collaboration, consensus and complementarity. Thus, providing the needed roadmap for positive womanhood. Her African womanism brand draws from African communalism model-the working together of the man and woman, of mutual respect between men, women and children without losing sight of the role that patriarchy plays in keeping women down. This position she briefly summarizes thus, "...I have added husbands because they oppress women most...the play the disquieting role of the misogynist to highlight the fact that marriage is a problematic space" (1996, 119).

Clenora Hudson Weems (1994) rejects Walkers "womanism" and preferred the term "African womanism". She describes her slant of womanism as essentially African steep in African culture as such "focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of Africana women". For Hudsons-Weems Africana womanism addresses the differences and contentions between the many variants of feminism and womanism. She contests that "...to the extent of naming in particular, Africana womanism is different from African feminism" ("Africana Womanism"). Hudson-Weems goes on to list the tenets of Africana womanism which include: self- naming and self- defining, family centeredness, wholeness and authenticity, flexible gender role, complementarity with Africa men, mothering and nurturing and lots more. Although Hudson -Weems Africana womanism aligns with African values, it is for women of African descent and again African feminist movement cannot own it because of her/its origin as African American and scope covering all women of African descent not necessarily African women.

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie (1994) opted for a new name, even though she identifies as a feminist. In her reaction to the oppression faced be women globally, she pushes for Stiwanism which she hopes will replace feminism. She insists that Stiwanism will make the women agenda more acceptable to those who are avers to feminism, men and women alike. Ogundipe-Leslie's Stiwanism comes from Stiwa her acronym for Social Transformation including Women in Africa. She maintains that Stiwa advocates the inclusion of women in contemporary social and political transformation in Africa. In spite of the new name, the agenda and goals remain the same; advocating for more space and opportunities for women.

Catherine Acholonu (1995) takes a different path in her *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism* in which she argues for an African -based and conceived theory. Acholonu's Motherism pushes for the empowerment of "Africa women as mother". Stephaine Newell (2006, 178) in her submission maintains that Acholonu's Motherism "remythologize the maternal body, loading it with organic symbols and offering it as an expression of the African essence". Acholonu sees the rural woman as ideal motherists, unspoilt by the sophisticated urban life, pure and innocent as the last hope for reunification and link to mother earth (1995, 118-120). The lacuna in Acholonu's Motherism is her obvious exclusion of educated and urban women and her dependence on an aspect of the female cycle-motherhood. As though the woman sloe value is on her ability to become a mother; hinging the female identity and agency to motherhood. Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo's Snail- sense feminism, which she calls an indigenous Nigerian feminist model as the name implies is built on the snail's ability to adopt and negotiate obstacles on her path. Ezigbo (2012, 27) submits that, the theory derives from the habit of the snail which most nigerian women

Adopt in their relationship with men... [Like the snail woman is expected] to carry its house on its back without feeling the strain. It goes wherever it wishes and arrives at its destination intact. If danger loom,

it withdraws into its shell and is safe. This is what women do in our society to survive in Nigeria's harsh patriarchal culture...this tendency to accommodate or tolerate the male and work with the men that...I call Snail-sense feminism. Ezeigbo contends that like the snail, women are wise, sensitive, resilient and dogged. She maintains that these virtues must not be considered as weakness. Ezeigbo's theory calls for a gradual approach, emphasizing adaptability, patience, negotiation and subtle resistance in navigating complex socio-cultural landscapes. By prioritizing resilience, tact and long-term strategies over swift or confrontational methods, snail-sense feminism offers a sustainable model that aligns with indigenous wisdom and values. She also noted that education is one of the keys that opens doors of opportunities for women (2012, 29). However, women adapting to and adopting the strategy of the snail to navigate the 'thorn-full' and rocky patriarchal terrain and retreat when she senses danger may become inimical to female independence. With the slow pace of the snail, and constant retreating women's voices, the women may never be heard nor will they be able to stand 'determined' when the opportunity eventually comes.

Two other theorists and feminist theories I will like to examine are Chioma Opara's (1999) "Femalism" and Obioma Nnaemeka (2004) "Nego-Feminism". Opara's Femalism is a response to Western feminism and other African feminist frameworks such as Stiwanism and Motherism. It centres on the female body and experience as site for knowledge and resistance. It can be read as a formalization (drawn from formalism) of female body, for her the body becomes a metaphoric text. In her own words, "Femalism is a theory that locates the woman's body at the centre of feminist discourse in Africa; it is both an aesthetic and ideology that celebrates the woman's corporeality, her sexuality and agency" (1999, 13). It is a "...softer tone than liberal feminism...Femalism is essentially African and accentuates the body" (1999, 18). Opara's insistence on the body may be likened to a two-edged sword, while it centres the body as a metaphoric text, it can also lead to the commodification and objectification of the female body.

Obioma Nnaemeka's Nego-Feminism which she interprets as feminism negotiation and no ego feminism is built on the African woman's readiness and willingness to cooperate and work with men even in difficult times (2004, 380). Nnaemeka, disagrees with Acholonu's position that feminism is hinged on an interpretive error. She however, maintains that in African society it is gender rather than economic power that determines one's social status. Nnaemeka continues that, "African feminism is not reactive, it is proactive. It has a life of its own that is rooted in the African environment. Its uniqueness emanates from the cultural and philosophical specificity of its provenance" (1998, 9). She calls for feminist theories built on the indigenous for the interpretation and criticism of literatures produced within the continent (2004, 377). This study shares Nnaemeka's position on the need for specificity and an African based feminist praxis. On the need for feminist theories that are rooted in African epistemologies, indigenous knowledge and African values and culture. It is this call to action that has planted the urge while my interaction with literatures produced by African writers both male and female especially Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Zaynab Alkali, Ngugi A'Thiongo, Chinweizu, Akachi Adimora Ezeigbo, Vincent Egbuson, Razinat Mohammed, Ruby Yayra Goka, Ukamaka Olsakwe, Akwaeke Emezi and a host of others have provided a fertile ground for the emergence of this novel indigenous feminist praxis which I call Self-sense Feminism.

3. SELF-SENSE FEMINISM: AN INDIGENOUS AFRICAN FEMINIST PRAXIS

The seed for this feminist model was sown almost two decades ago during my Masters degree programme. I needed a feminist theory that will provide a nuanced framework for interrogating Zaynab Alkali's vision of life in her novels. The framework foregrounded choice, agency and education as tools and sometimes weapons for female independence. However, for obvious reasons "AfriSoc feminism-African Sociological feminism did not see the light of day. I took an eclectic approach and a more general approach for the research which I termed "African Positivist Feminism".

This position as well as my views on African feminism have undergone some ideological transformation from my interaction with other feminist positions and more literatures especially women writing (feminist oriented male writers inclusive) from Nigeria and other parts of Africa. This metamorphosis also owes a great deal to a more balanced understanding of the Nigeria/African indigenous knowledge system, epistemologies, history, oral tradition and my creative works which has in turn sharpened my position and vision of African women and women generally.

With the litany of feminist theories highlighted in the preceding review, one may be tempted to ask; what remains to be said? Is there need for more African feminist theories? Is feminism still relevant to the emancipation of women in Africa? Finally, how relevant or what new idea will these emerging

models bring to the table of African feminist discourse? These are valid questions. Feminist theorists will continue to theorize, so long as gender inequality persists; so long as male child preference is still upheld and social status and recognition based on gender instead of agency. Feminist theories will continue to emerge to interrogate these anomalies. This paper therefore introduces “Self-sense Feminism”: a new homegrown African feminist framework.

What is Self-sense feminism all about? Self-sense Feminism is a novel African feminist framework based on African indigenous knowledge system, oral tradition, beliefs, values, cultural realities and lived experiences. It is a socially grounded, ethically conscious, and culturally resonant praxis that centre ‘the female mind’ as a critical site of feminist liberation and agency. It calls for a holistic and introspective reconfiguration of femalehood; one that is dynamic, encourages self-discovery and growth. Self-sense feminism intersects personal consciousness and transformation from the point of view of victimhood to that of a knowledge of self and clarity of purpose as a strategic player, agency and collaborative engagement. It challenges externally imposed perception of the woman, by asserting that liberation begins from within. It begins in the woman’s awareness of who she is, a deep sense of her worth, the choices she makes or refuses to make and her perceived purpose in the society.

Self-sense feminism does not down play existing socially imposed structural inequalities nor does it negate the historical and culturally embedded systems of gender oppression. Instead, it maintains that feminist agency must be first cultivated inside through an introspection of self and there after asserted outwardly. It integrates self-knowledge and agency with social responsibility. Self-sense feminism is both a poetics and politics of becoming that challenges and resists externally imposed labels, expectations, limitations and definitions by foregrounding feminist consciousness in self-introspection, self-awareness, assertion, equity, autonomous choice, agency, and solidarity across sexes.

Unlike frameworks that are oppositional in nature, Self-sense feminism strives for an undivided house; a house of many colours, ideas, strengths and perceived weaknesses bond together by the one goal - female independence. It also means a symbolic and literal home in which women and men co-labor in equity and mutual respect for a collective well-being. As the name implies, Self-introspection is the first pillar and point of divergence between Self-sense feminism and other slants of African feminism. It foregrounds a feminist praxis that begins with ‘a looking inward’- *igu isi* or *inyo cha onwe*, an examination of self and an understanding of the female power. By implication it means interrogating inherited beliefs, the position of the self, internalized oppression, agency, and suppressed desires. In a world where African women are often scripted into silence or sacrifice, self-introspection is a radical act of reclaiming one’s truth and one’s worth as the Igbo would say, *imara onwe*. It requires a return to one’s spiritual, cultural, and psychological roots as co-creator and nurturer not for romanticization but for revaluation.

Building on self-introspection, self-awareness refers to a clear and conscious understanding of one’s identity, worth, capabilities, and limitations. It involves knowing where one stands as an individual, in the community and why. Self-awareness disrupts narratives of inferiority and paves the way for intentional action. It shifts the feminist gaze from victimhood to self-definition. A position of strength and ‘female power’ as Chinweizu (1990) submits. Self-awareness fuels the conscious realization and awakening to one’s value, voice, and vision. When these three Vs are well interrogated, they cultivate inner clarity, without which no authentic agency can emerge.

An awareness of self, encourages assertion; the woman’s ability to name oneself, to speak one’s truths, and to act with self-conviction. Self-sense Feminism upholds that every woman is an active member of the society, capable of contributing to meaningful development. Once a woman comes to the realization of who she is, she exercises agency know that she is so wired. Agency in this context goes beyond the freedom to choose, but the courage to confront, negotiate, renegotiate, reshape and contributes to the society. She does so even when doing so requires navigating patriarchal, cultural and spiritual complexities.

Self-sense feminism holds that African women must speak and act from a place of truth, not victimhood, borrowed robe nor rhetoric. Women can change the world, because they birth, nurture and groom the world. Women can reconfigure patriarchy and other socio-historical and political limitations. For this self-sense feminism, assertion is not aggression; it is the strategic and dignified insistence on one’s right to exist fully as an individual and then freely as a female. Furthermore, agency entails resourcefulness, proactivity, and objectivity: it is the ability to make choices, define terms, adapt to changes and act purposefully in the face of structural and cultural constraints.

This view resonates, critically, with Chinweizu's thought provoking thesis in *The Anatomy of Female Power*. Chinweizu argues that women wield significant, though often hidden cultural power particularly through reproductive roles, emotional influence and sexual capital. However, while his analysis underscores the subtle power dynamics in male-female relations, it reduces female agency to manipulation and control through covert means (1990, 12–35). Self-sense Feminism, in contrast, does not advocate cunning manipulation or coercion, but conscious, strategic thinking and action rooted in dignity, mutual respect, and ethical accountability. It seeks power-with, not power-over.

At the heart of Self-sense feminism is the unwavering affirmation of autonomous choice. It simply means, that for the woman to assert herself and exercise agency, she must deliberately choose to do so, consciously and strategically. African women must decide to choose their names, paths whether in education, career, marriage, spirituality, or sexuality without fear, coercion, or cultural condemnation. Feminist identity is not tied to rejecting tradition, but to reinterpreting and reinventing it with agency. Thus, a woman who chooses marriage and motherhood is no less feminist nor feminine than one who chooses celibacy or singlehood. However, what matters is that the choice is made, conscious and unforced.

Another core and differentiating tenet of Self-sense Feminism is its preference for equity in place of equality. It aligns with the Igbo belief in *ofor*, which embodies justice based on morality and what is right, a fair distribution of value, opportunity, and recognition based on contextual realities not necessarily gender over the often-abstract ideal of equality.

It recognizes differences without hierarchy, and power without domination. Equity respects the unique burdens and gifts of each individual while striving for justice that meets people where they are. This position is summarized by the Igbo proverb, *emenyere nwa Ogwugwu, emenyere nwa Anosike, emenyere nwa Adanne no n'ulo*. In spite of their diverse role and position, this proverb advocates for a fair share for all three. Aware of long entrenched gender disparities which came as a result of colonial legacies, cultural norms, and socio-economic barriers; Self-sense feminism advocates equity as essential for bridging the gap between the ideals of equality and the lived socio-economic and political realities of African women. The choice of equity is to advocate fairness and moral justice not necessarily equality. The women need fairness steeped in morality and based context specific need to bring them a par with the men not just equal treatment which at the long run continues to leave the women at a disadvantaged position.

Self-sense feminism believes that female independence and gender justice cannot be achieved in isolation. It calls for solidarity between men and women, of 'patriarchy' and 'matriarchy'. Self-sense Feminism is committed to non-violence, not just in physical terms, but in tone, method, and intention. It upholds ethical persuasion, patient dialogue, strategic planning and resistance over confrontation and violence. Self-sense feminism seeks a reconciliatory ethic that promotes shared responsibility, emotional literacy, and co-leadership. It is the "undivided house", a metaphor and a vision for a society in which gender complementarity is cultivated not through hierarchy or submission, but through dialogue, interdependence, and mutual transformation. Self-sense Feminism rejects the structures that puts men against women as enemies. It rejects the struggle for supremacy between the women, patriarchy and the system.

The use of 'poetics' in the title signals Self-sense feminism as an epistemological paradigm shift. A move away from rigid categories into the realm of the mind, intuition, and symbolic agency. While 'politics' foregrounds Self-sense feminism as a total framework. It echoes the broader feminist framework which foregrounds agency, introspection, and the will to belong without erasure. It situates Self-sense feminism in the landscape of power dynamics, envisioning how self-awareness, agency and equity can translate to reformation, resocialization, transformation and a shift in African gender power trajectory. It foretells a futuristic African feminism which does not only converge but one of shared intentional thoughts and living. It resonates with African *Ubuntu* spirit and Igbo philosophy of *'ihe kwuru, ihe kwudobe ya, igwe bu ike* and *aka nri kwo ak'ekpe ak'ekpe akwo aka nri* which encourages complementarity in place of the diverse fractured dualities. Self-sense feminism draws from African oral traditions, knowledge systems, realities and even spirituality to articulate feminist agency not only as theory or politics, but as aesthetic and metaphysical experience.

Self-sense Feminism as Poetics and Politics of the Undivided House offers a decolonial model that repositions African feminism as both introspective and transformative. It situates female independence in introspective agency, self-knowledge, autonomous choice, equity, strategic and ethical collaboration.

It maintains that the woman's journey to liberation starts from within, with a conscious dialogue with 'the self' and the recognition of the enormous power and balance with the female self.

The Undivided House thus becomes a metaphor, an image for an envisioned Africa beyond the assigned binaries of male and female. It represents a reimagined moral and cultural space where everyone works for the collective without hierarchy but together as humans.

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