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Re-Reading Mid-Twentieth Century Women's Poetry

By

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Cambridge Scholars Publishing

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This book first published 2021

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-6209-3
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-6209-7

To
The unheard voices
Of myriads of women
Who
Traverse the jeopardy
Silently.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

A critical work of art begins like a jig-saw puzzle of innumerable ideas that initially dance within the mind of its creator, who then has the responsibility of nurturing and maturing them into a unified and meaningful whole. Much like delivering and nurturing children! Most often, some input for the task comes from without. I would therefore like to acknowledge those who have in one way or another made an input into the writing of this book.

I am first of all indebted to my sister in-law, Julie Southey who, in 1994, gave me the first Anthology of women's poetry and thereby kindled in me an ever-growing and keen interest in women and women's literature.

I am equally indebted to the University of Bayreuth in Germany, which hosted me after I was awarded a DAAD Scholarship and whose very rich library was the perfect nursery for the germination of the initial ideas that have formed the bulk of this book.

Profound gratitude goes similarly, to the Stern Foundation of Dickinson College, Carlisle, Pennsylvania, in the United States of America for granting me a Global Education Fellowship. This exposed me then, not only to rich academic resources but also, and more importantly, to the wealth of a very friendly administrative and academic staff. Dean Brian Whalen and Professor Mara Donaldson deserve special thanks here for their geniality and help.

The Professorial corps of the English Department of the University of Yaoundé 1 has been a great stimulus and I would like to thank especially my academic advisor, Professor

Edward Oben Ako, and colleagues of the Frontiers Research Group of the University, for a very fruitful solidarity.

I am finally very grateful to my husband, Babila, and our children, Kehwalla, Nasima, Dayebga and Samuel Stern for their sense of understanding which gave me the liberty to spend long hours on my computer without feeling guilty.

INTRODUCTION

Feminism is the terminology for the phenomenon of women's oppression on the basis of their biological sex and/or gender. This phenomenon can be traced to an age-old tendency for women to be classified as the "other" of the male, who is considered the norm. There are many kinds of feminisms. However, feminism in general, can be defined as the struggle to portray the oppression of women in patriarchal societies, offset the patriarchal domination of women, navigate women out of positions of subjugation, and put in place a process by which they can share power in particular, and all other rights in general, with men. It aims at empowering women so they can assert themselves and build a concept of self and identity, whether individually or collectively, which enables them to participate in all social, cultural, intellectual, and political activities. It is more a protest against the systems, conditions, and conventions that relegate women to inferior and powerless statuses than one against men, even if men are principally responsible for putting the oppressive structures in place.

Twentieth-century theoretical debates on feminism show a marked lack of consensus between women scholars whose varied political and sociocultural environments necessitate different worldviews and perspectives of appreciating reality. However, a study of the work of women poets who take up the pen in their various societies points to vast similarities in themes and aesthetic preoccupations among them. This study examines and analyses the feminist issues in mid-twentieth-century British, American, and sub-Saharan African women's poetry with the aim of prospecting for feminist monolithism. The study is inspired by the observation that, despite the

divergences in the theoretical formulations of feminist scholars, coalition building among women is desirable and possible, given that women's poetry from different sociocultural backgrounds shows a remarkable consistency of themes and stylistic concerns. The work thus demonstrates that these similarities in widely differing poetries pose a basis on which to prospect for feminist monolithism. It upholds the view that the poetry of women in Britain, America, and Sub-Saharan Africa of the mid-twentieth-century presents an uncanny commonality in the issues treated. Women's experience of, and their responses to gender oppression and the limitations imposed on them by patriarchal male institutions can thus be described as monolithic. This description espouses the need and possibility of coalition building among women scholars concerned with women's liberation.

The twentieth century, more than any other period, gave voice to a proliferation of variegated kinds of feminisms. It was an eventful period marked by the occurrence of two devastating wars, whose scars remain indelible on all fields of life following it. Women's consciousness about the essential matters of their being grew expansively and metamorphosed many times throughout the century. The struggle to extricate women's identities and talents from an age-old debilitating patriarchal oppression juggled with the ironies of racial identities to give the women's struggle, in the British and American scenes, the special spice of a multihued but strong movement. In the continental African scene, the colonial education from Europe and America which formed the basic ingredient of nineteenth-century colonialism set the pace for a shift in the understanding of women's roles, and this greatly affected the identities sociologically attributed to African women in the twentieth century.

The above tumultuous mutations in the socio-political, cultural, and literary spheres of life in the twentieth century

crowded the period with a variety of issues and voices about feminism. The different feminisms which arose generally show the impossibility of bringing women together under a single umbrella due to the cultural, ethnic, sexual, racial, and class differences between them. However, it is also for this reason that the period is best suited for an investigation into feminist monolithism.

The occurrence of two world wars, from 1914-1918 and from 1939-1945 respectively, affected life in the twentieth century in tremendous ways. In America, consciousness-raising groups about women's rights, gender issues, and the rights of minorities sprung up sporadically, consequent upon the major changes in the political and sociocultural domains. And, in no other period like the first half of the twentieth century did women poets have greater success and influence. Previously, the American Civil war and the nineteenth-century founding of co-educational institutions and women's colleges, had garnered support for women's financial and legal independence. By the twentieth century, many American poets had become voices to be reckoned with. Among many others, Harriet Monroe, Gertrude Stein, H. D., Marianne Moore, Amy Lowell, Edna St Vincent Millay, Mina Loy, Georgia Douglas, Lorine Niedecker, Muriel Rukeyser, Gwendolyn Brooks, Elisabeth Bishop, and Adrienne Rich, individually and cumulatively, had a powerful impact on the directions of poetry in the twentieth century. Our concern in this work will be with mid-twentieth-century poets like Adrienne Rich, Gwendolyn Brooks, H. D., and Audre Lorde in American poetry

In Britain, the years dominated by the two world wars saw real advances towards equal citizenship and legal rights, and a growing sense of the impact of "modernity" on women. But values inherited from the Victorians were still reflected in the class hierarchy, the politicizing of sexuality, and the male bread winner family. In the British women's poetic tradition in the

first half of the twentieth century women were faced with a scarcity of female models, partly because British women poets experienced what can be termed an uncertain relation with English poetic history. This is why Louise Bernikow writes in her introduction to *The World Split Open: Women's Poetry 1552–1950* that, "The Woman Poet constantly pits herself against cultural expectations of 'womanhood' and women's writing" (1974, iv). By mid-century, however, British poets like Sylvia Plath, Alison Fell, Geraldine Monk, Carol Ann Duffy, Grace Nichols, Jeni Couzyn, Stevie Smith, Denise Riley, and Wendy Mulford had developed and written poetry which showed their psychological, sexual, literary, and economic independence from the male establishment. In this work, our focus, in British poetry, will be on the poetry of mid-century poets like Sylvia Plath, Ann Duffy, and Alison Fell, for want of adequate scope.

The effects of the two world wars were also devastating for Africans, especially south of the Sahara, who, after the wars, saw their territorial boundaries arbitrarily redrawn by the League of Nations and afterwards by the United Nations. Countries which had been previously ruled under the German protectorate were turned over to the British and the French, with the attendant obligation on the inhabitants to learn the new colonial cultures and, to some extent, adapt to the lifestyle of the colonialists. By the mid-twentieth century, fights for independence in African nations had actually culminated in the granting of independence to many former colonies whose worldviews consequently became coloured with postcolonial perspectives. This post-colonial perspective affected not only gender sensitivity in Africa, but the way African women will view themselves in relation to men and other women of the world. This will be read in the poetry of mid-century Sub-Saharan African poets like Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Noémia de Sousa, Susan Kiguli, and Gcina Mhlope.

What became obvious by the mid-twentieth century was the perception that feminism was sometimes advocating the right to be equal, and sometimes the right to be different and unique. In this respect, two perspectives emerge. First, there is the argument that a feminist politics based on the premise of equality – that is, equal treatment, equal rights, and equal work and pay – will assimilate women to men, erase gender difference, and create a gender-neutral society. Whether or not this is real equality in the terms in which feminists want it, is still a point of debate. Second, the question of whether or not a practice of feminism based on the ideal of difference, in which women are not just subjects to male-defined values and institutions but specific individuals who have a lot to offer just like men, will exacerbate the notion of women's "otherness" also remains an issue. Whatever the case, role attributions remain gendered, as can be seen in the mid-twentieth-century women's poetry studied. This creates differences between men as a category and women as another, which therefore constitute a clear starting point and look forward to equality as a natural objective. The equality advocated in this poetry by presenting the need to overcome oppressive female gender roles can be considered a goal to be achieved, just as real as the need to resist this oppression and share power with men. But there is also the issue of the differences between women of different socio-political and cultural milieus, and the question remains whether women as a category can form a unanimous whole which can stand against men. If the answer is in the affirmative, the next question that arises is whether there are differences between women which are so strong that another term is needed apart from "woman" to describe this non-male human? In other words, if equality and difference are considered as mutually exclusive and dichotomous terms, what other relationships can

be found within and between women that can pave the way for feminist monolithism?

Feminism as an ideology is a product of, and must be understood within, the specificities of history and geography. Nonetheless, there is still need for a welding together of the dominant feminist discourse with the minority non-Western feminist discourse. This is especially necessary because the conflict is caused by the global unjust patriarchal dictatorship and the institutionalization of oppression and discrimination against women the world over. It is a fact that the ideas which historians identify as feminist in any given time and place are usually contingent on the discourses that construct women at that time and in those places. But more so, the discourses of resistance that women produce in response to their specific oppression form the other side of what can be termed feminist. The question thus remains whether there can be a world monolithic feminism. The chief impetus for this book has been to investigate this question by examining the cross-cutting trends perceived in reading British, American, and Sub-Saharan African women's poetry. It focuses on the points of similarity and the cross-cutting currents that might give pointers to linkages between various kinds of feminism.

The groups of women's work, as outlined above, have been chosen because in the Western (British and American) and African feminist traditions can be found a more varied and wide-ranging definition of feminism. It seeks to explore whether the major markers of feminism such as oppression, resistance, and power can be traced in all women's poetry and in all feminist strands across the board. It also looks at the unanimous presence, in all these poetries, of other factors like the propensity and impetus to expose, critique, and seek to improve the disadvantaged position of women in relation to men in different cultures. It examines the various strategies and mechanisms employed to generate a dynamics of awareness

and consciousness raising and fight against and deconstruct oppressive strictures against women. In all, the work seeks to answer such questions as: Is it meaningful to conceptualize rights for women as universal in nature? What is the nature of oppression for different women and how is it expressed in their poetry? To what extent are strategies for fighting oppression against women limited or enhanced by cultural differences? And what is the mutual impact of women's participation in a global, transatlantic feminism? Analysing the ubiquity of patriarchy becomes one of the bases against which to view feminist oppression as monolithic, given that, in various cultures, feminism actually begins as a reaction against patriarchal culture's subordination and oppression of women.

Views on the subject of feminist monolithism are diametrically opposed. In "Strategic Sisterhood or Sisters in Solidarity? Questions of Communitarianism and Citizenship in Asia," Aihwa Ong is highly critical of the proposals set forth by the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995. She criticizes the concept of strategic sisterhood that she sees developing among Western/Northern feminists, and argues that the concept of strategic sisterhood that emerged from the Beijing Conference is based on individualistic ideas of transnational feminine citizenship which ignore historical and cultural differences between women from the first and third worlds.

On the contrary, Fedwa Matti-Douglas questions the utility of a dichotomy between Western and non-Western feminisms in "As the World (Or Dare I Say as The Globe) Turns: Feminism and Transnationalism." She asks a fundamental question: What does it mean that someone is a Western Feminist? She says she doesn't see the validity of the question, for, as she notes, the discourses on women and gender, at least in the Middle East and North Africa, are not so unidirectional. She finds similarities in the kinds of problems faced by women

in the Middle East and North Africa, though their discourses are moderated "by a religious discourse which cannot be escaped" (1996, 6). She therefore goes on to call for a transnational discourse, one which is nuanced and complex enough to take into account the many different contexts in which feminist issues and problems present themselves. Fedwa Matti-Douglas is therefore in favour of feminist monolithism, if it is made to be complex enough that it does not gloss over difference, but rather presents it meaningfully. Nonetheless, it is evident that the concept of feminist monolithism has remained a subject of controversy for many decades, given that the social processes involving economic, legal, political, and cultural circumstances usually differ from culture to culture, and from one geographical space to another.

Sylvia Walby posits the problematic through another perspective. Theorizing the differences in race, ethnicity, and class, and how these categories impact the concept of patriarchy, she writes thus concerning the monolithism of feminism:

> This question of whether there is a unity among women and an essential difference between them and men, is part of a wider debate on essentialism in feminist theory … On the one hand, many feminists have assumed that it is legitimate to write of "women" as a social category and have discussed the collective interest of women as opposed to that of "men." On the other hand, post structuralists and post modernists together with some Marxists feminists and some black feminists argue that concepts such as "patriarchy" which presume some coherence and stability over time and culture suffer from essentialism. (1990, 14–15)

Postmodernists must surely have made some valuable contributions to the caution that should gird any abstract generalizations of gender inequalities among women, but have also failed to envision the possibility of monolithism in sites in

which it has been observed. This can be very limiting. Regarding this thought, Walby cautions that:

> while gender relations could potentially take an infinite number of forms, in actuality, there are some widely repeated features. In addition, the signifiers of "woman" and "man" have sufficient historical and cross-cultural continuity, despite some variations to warrant using such terms. (1990, 16)

Concordant with the drive of finding the continuity among women concerning the signifiers of academic and movement feminism, *Feminist Monolithism: Prospects and Impediments* intends to look for these in the poetry written by women in the mid-twentieth century in various cultures. It argues that the practice of feminism, whether as activism or as literature, may be the appropriate site in which to look for markers of monolithic feminism. Walby concedes this thought, and further opines that:

> It is a contingent question as to whether gender relations do have sufficient continuity of patterning to make generalizations about a century or two and about a continent or so useful. While I agree that the answer to this cannot be at a theoretical level … in practice it is possible. (1990, 16)

Walby is herein positing a recognized opinion about the differences inherent in theoretical feminism as opposed to the similitudes in its practice.

Clare Hemmings takes up the issue of the divergences in theoretical feminism in *Why Stories Matter: the Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, by asking the essential question: "What might be at stake in feminist story telling?" (2011, 1). She then carefully examines academic feminist narratives over the past decade and demonstrates how they are always partial and motivated, and then postulates that feminist stories (approaches/theories) seek to "displace one another as the

primary account of what has happened in the feminist theories' recent past, as well as what needs to happen next" (2011, 132). Hemmings shows the progress that feminist theory has made in the past by pointing to its achievement in terms of how feminism has overcome the essentialist, racist, and homophobic theories, and how it has proliferated new conceptual terrain like poststructuralism, which recognizes the complexity and contingency of gender. But she also shows that feminism has incurred significant losses, perhaps because of the emphasis on multiplicity which could actually bring about feminism's demise (2011, 65). By decrying feminism's dependency on multiplicity and the multiple theories upholding differences, which have become the hallmark of recent feminism, Hemmings locates the future of feminism in its past, arguing that the present is "occupied by a pretender" (2011, 65). She finds that the present of feminism is fragmented, too academic, too theoretical, and too depoliticized to constitute an authentic feminism. She shows queer theory as being antithetical to feminism and representing the worst excesses of abstract postmodernism and poststructuralism.

It is in concordance with Hemmings that *Feminist Monolithism: Prospects and Impediments* seeks to locate its scope in twentieth-century feminism by examining the mid-century women's poetry. Even though located in the past, the book seeks to bring out findings that could be relevant to future perspectives on feminism. It thus proposes that the new dynamics in feminism should be a re-envisioning of the prospect of monolithism. In a 1986 paper titled "Under Western Eyes," Mohanty Talpade similarly proposes a common feminist political project in which she clearly points out the benefits of a vision of feminist solidarity. In this, she stresses that cross-cultural feminist work is important, even though it must pay attention to the micro-politics of context, subjectivity, and struggle, as well as the macro-politics of global economic

and political systems and processes. While "Under Western Eyes" is motivated by the need for solidarity across borders, the present work insists on showing that between the micro and the macro there are already existent commonalities and cross-cutting trends that could be exploited in spite of their complexities to conceptualize monolithism in feminism. Mohanty makes a similar point in a recent essay in which she revisits "Under Western Eyes":

> I did not write "Under Western Eyes" as a testament to the impossibility of egalitarian and non-colonizing cross-cultural scholarship nor did I define "Western" and "Third World" feminism in such oppositional ways that there would be no possibility of solidarity between "Western" and "Third World feminists." (2003, 502)

Feminist Monolithism: Prospects and Impediments is inscribed within a feminist critique of women's poetry as it tries to examine feminist issues and the possibility of monolithism only in women's poetry. The importance of this feminist critique, especially of literature, can never be over-emphasized. It challenges many things in human life, including laws and policy, cultural productions, ethics, and even historical knowledge. Feminist critique analytically dissects the customs and assumptions concerning gender, including those enshrined in literature. Such a critique is primordial in the interpretation of poetry and gives this work its *raison d'être* because it is within the framework of feminist critique that the categories of the woman poet and women's poetry have been constructed. The category of the woman poet has been inscribed in literary analysis because aesthetics are governed by the climate in which they take shape. The authentic clarity of thoughts and the range of coverage of issues written about by women could never have been better written about by men, given that the manner in which both sexes experience the world differs vastly.

The category of the woman poet is therefore neither based on a political statement in the poetry nor established on the grounds of a uniformity of style and content in women's poetry. The scope of coverage, the socio-political climate, and the personal life experiences of different women and feminist poets always set them apart.

When poetry is described as "women's poetry" there is a tendency for it to be read as essentialized and relegated to the category of "other" and "lesser." This tendency can reduce very good writing to a sort of substandard, and so it is very important to illuminate the usage of the term in the title of this book as meaning "the poetry written by poets who are women." The woman poet writes poetry that explores a particular ethos, without being essentially substandard to the male norm. It is poetry concerned with themes of mothers, daughters, female characters, and women's lives and stories. It is poetry written by women about women and their experiences with births, babies, marriage, nurturance, and all the truths about how women feel while experiencing all the above. The woman poets' mission is to highlight and give merit to women's stories and experiences that have been missing from the world's cultural history or misguidedly told by men. Even when women poets write about universal experiences, these are appreciated from the perspective of a woman.

The selection of the corpus for this study was thus motivated by the consciousness of the existence of such a category as the poetry of the woman poet and the aim, was to listen to as many different women as possible. Therefore, both women poets who have never featured in poetry anthologies as well as some very popular names have been chosen in the same geographical spaces. Similarly, poetry from many different geographical locations, many different classes of society, and varying historical époques has been placed side by side. Ten women poets have thus been selected as follows: Sylvia Plath, Alison

Fell, and Carol Ann Duffy in British women's poetry; Adrienne Rich, Hilda Doolittle, Gwendolyn Brooks, and Audre Lorde in American women's poetry; and Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, Susan Kiguli, Noémia de Sousa, and Gcina Mhlope in African women's poetry. This choice from a wide range of geographical, sociocultural, class, sexual, and political environments has been motivated by the desire to listen to women poets from as many cultural milieus as possible, in order to be able to make deductions that can be, to some extent, generally applicable. Individual poets have not been treated in whole chapters. Rather, issues have been discussed relating to monolithism and substantiating evidence has been drawn from the poetry of the poets chosen for each chapter. So, many of the poets recur in the various chapters. The analysis of the poetry of these ten poets will therefore be a listening to the various voices in the societies they represent. Another motivation for a selection of such a bewildering variety and dissimilar traditions is the desire to bring to the fore poets suffering from canonical invisibility. In fact, Maura Dooley, in her introduction to *Making for Planet Alice: New Women Poets*, recognizes that women are published, read, and listened to, but their work is not discussed, and, until their work is considered and written about consistently, seriously, and without differentiation, their poetry will not have a future as part of the main canon of English literature (1997, 2).

The above selection also endeavours to cover the various ethnic diversities in which issues of women's oppression have been forcefully voiced in the geographical spaces under study. This is the reason for writing on four American poets instead of three, as in British poetry, given that both American and African American women's literatures make an invaluable contribution to feminism. In Sub-Saharan African women's poetry, four poets have also been chosen because of the widely disparate cultural, political, and ethnic issues in Africa. Poetry

from Apartheid South African women poets will certainly be quite different from that of Nigerian poets, for instance. It is also the reason for selecting one poet each from Southern Africa (Noémia de Sousa), South Africa (Gcina Mhlope), West Africa (Molara Ogundipe-Leslie) and East Africa (Susan Kiguli).

But even with a choice as select as the above, not all of the selected poets can be adequately and extensively dealt with in this study. The selection therefore is further narrowed down to poems which seek to explore patriarchal bias and the oppression of women, resist the relegation of women to inferior statuses, or seek to redress such situations. The choice of the ten poets above is thus further linked to their potential to be representative of feminist and womanist issues as well as their merit as poets, because a "genuine" poem is not simply one that acquiesces in conventional forms and themes. It must also be one that is read within its intended context, bolstered and nourished by an open, sympathetic environment which is keen to learn how it asks to be read. Even if all of the works of the above poets are not consecrated in issues of feminism, the configuration of emphases to which they are constantly returning gives them the merit for use in a work dealing with feminist issues. As a case in point, poets like Sylvia Plath and Hilda Doolittle were never considered feminists during their lifetimes, but by choosing them the work intends to show the vast similarities inherent in women's poetries separated by time as well as space.

The work is divided into six chapters. Chapter one explores the idea of differences between women, especially as far as the definitions of feminism are concerned, and juxtaposes this idea of difference with the possibility of monolithism. The chapter asks whether it is possible to discuss monolithism in a context in which women are differentiated by race, culture, creed, ethnicity, and sexuality, and answers that it is, because, in each

of these categories of differences, there is a consistent patterning: women are oppressed, then they resist the oppression, and finally they seek to accede to realms of power. Chapter two analyses the mid-century theories of feminism showing that twentieth-century theoretical debates on feminism and womanism show a marked lack of consensus between women scholars because of the varied political and sociocultural environments from which they come. The chapter concludes by endorsing Helen Carr's viewpoint that "theories are fictions" (1997, 203). Chapter three reconsiders the ubiquity of patriarchy through time and space as a valid framework on which any discussions of monolithism can repose. Its prevalence in each and every culture, its role in women's oppression, and the fact that it sometimes transcends the private sphere and prevails in institutions, governments, and polities make it worthwhile in discussions of monolithism in feminism. In fact, an analysis of the different poetries studied in this book creates the possibility of envisioning all the other factors of oppression, such as race and class, as a creation of patriarchy, therefore bridging the differences between the various women. Chapter four kick starts the in-depth analysis of the poetry under study to show that in the continents represented in this work the poets make a point of stating that women are all oppressed in spite of their races, classes, creed, sexuality, or ethnicity. This part of the work, beginning with chapter four, shows the cross-cultural similarities and the cross-cutting trends in the entirety of the women's poetry under study. These include the issues of women's lives in wifehood, motherhood, and mothering discussed in chapter four, and women's poetry and resistance to oppression addressed in chapter five. Lastly, women's mechanisms of accession to power are examined in chapter six and seven.

CHAPTER ONE

FEMINISM, DIFFERENCE, AND THE IDEA OF MONOLITHISM IN FEMINISM

Difference pervades feminist theorizing and practice, but globally, feminism has been defined by Pearl Cleage as "the belief that women are full human beings capable of participation and leadership in the full range of human activities" (1993, 28). To bell hooks, it is simply "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation and oppression" (2000, 1). Rosalind Delmar contextualizes feminism in *What is Feminism* by defining a feminist as:

> Someone who holds that women suffer discrimination because of their sex, that they have specific needs which remain negated and unsatisfied, and that the satisfaction of these needs would require a radical change (some would say a revolution even) in the social, economic and political order. (Cott et al. 1986, 8)

Some scholars have sought and traced the roots of feminism to ancient Greece with Sappho (d. ca. 570 BC). Others trace it to the medieval period with Hildegarde of Bingen (d. 1179), whilst others cite Christine de Pisan (d. 1434). But of course, other foremothers of the modern women's movement include Olympe de Gouge (d. 1791), Mary Wollstonecraft (d. 1797), and Jane Austen (Rampton 2015). In Sub-Saharan Africa, the efforts of matriarchs like Yaa Asantewa of Ghana show the prowess with which women are endowed. All these artistic and political personalities advocated for consciousness raising about women's intelligence, potential, and dignity through

works of art, literature, and activism. However, according to Rampton (2015), it was not until the late nineteenth century that efforts for women's equal rights blossomed into a series of clearly definable movements.

In the twentieth century, feminism set out to redefine just about everything in the woman's sphere of influence, coming just after the major wars of the century. It concerned itself with demonstrating that the personal is political, and in fact, that the woman's individual experiences have political, social, and economic significance and are therefore important on the world socioeconomic scale. Feminism can be regarded globally as a combination of social theories and political practices that criticize past and present relations within the society and are primarily motivated and informed by the experiences of women in different societies. It is a fight against the assumption that women's biological, physiological, and genetic structure makes them inferior to men as well as a recognition that the ascribed inferiority is sociologically constructed. In its belief that society is disadvantageous to women, feminism questions such issues as sex, gender, sexuality, and power in social, political, and economic relationships. Feminists' awareness that there are unequal power structures between genders in the society is anchored on their determination to effect a change of the status quo. As Susan Arndt describes it, feminism constitutes:

> a world view and a way of life of women and men who, as individuals, in groups and/or organizations, actively oppose social structures responsible for the discrimination against, and the oppression of women on the grounds of their biological and social gender. (1998, 324)

Arndt's definition gives credence to the fact that even men can be considered as feminists when they show concern about those mechanisms of oppression which characterize the situation of

women in different societies. However, for the purpose of this study, a feminist is considered as a woman scholar or poet who exposes as well as challenges the mechanisms and dynamics of women's oppression on the basis of their biological and social gender, and may or may not write about the scenario. Feminism is therefore built on a gender theory which essentially looks at masculinity and femininity as sets of mutually created characteristics shaping the lives of men and women. It challenges ideas of masculinity and femininity and of men and women as operating in history according to fixed biological determinants. For some, the idea of "gender history" is just another term for women's history, but for others it transforms the ways in which writing and teaching about both men and women are approached. To some, the major change brought about by gender theory is that it complicates the study of men and women, making them gendered historical subjects who are constructed socio-culturally. By the mid-twentieth century it had become a movement that recognized a multiplicity of movements, agendas, and actions.

Womanism is another form of feminism, and like feminism it deals with the mechanisms of women's oppression. The term was first developed by two different women scholars simultaneously: the African American Alice Walker and the African (Nigerian) Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, as an alternative terminology for a more inclusive description of (especially African) women's oppression. To Walker, womanism shares a common framework with feminism, the only difference being in the dimensions of coverage and the intricacies necessitated by the differences in the layers of oppression between white American and African American women. To her, "womanist is to feminist as purple to lavenda" (1983, xii). This indicates that womanism is more vivid and by association more broadly designed. In fact, as she says, a womanist is "committed to survival and wholeness of entire

people male and female" (1983, xi). Thus, a womanist is concerned with overcoming the oppression that derives from not only sexist discrimination but also the entire ethnic and sociocultural setup of a people, race, or gender.

Ogunyemi describes womanism as a "black outgrowth from feminism" (1985, 65). In her article "Women and Nigerian Literature" she further emphasizes the similarities between feminism and womanism when she writes that "womanism believes in the freedom and interdependence of women like feminism" (1985, 65). In its broadest conceptualization, therefore, womanism can be used to refer to the activism of an African American or African woman scholar or poet who endeavours to address the dynamics of women's oppression in her society.[1] Walker makes this idea clearer by defining a womanist as a "black feminist or feminist of color" (1983, xi).

Though theories and definitions may vary, it is intriguing to note that various women poets react in similar ways in their writings (born of various cultures), as in the poetry analysed in this work, to the experience of oppression in their various societies. If culture[2] is regarded as the determining element of literary art because it informs and influences the literature of different societies, the major question that arises in this study is this: Why are there vast differences in the theoretical formulations of different women scholars, and at the same time vast similarities in the poetical productions of women poets of these same varied sociocultural environments? The investigation of this question interrogates the validity of theories and in the process endorses Helen Carr's assertion that "theories are fictions, metaphors, sometimes enabling and sometimes imprisoning" (1997, 203). There are many different feminisms and these will be explored in chapter two of this book, but perhaps an appraisal of the issue of "difference" would throw some light on why we use "feminisms" and not "feminism" in this chapter.

In "The Power of Division" in Meese Elizabeth and Alice Parker's *Crossing the Double Cross*, Culler posits difference as a celebration of the heterogeneity that seems ultimately to appeal to individual views and grounds itself in an ideology of individualism. To him, "there are differences because we are different and no one's difference should be compromised or suppressed by discourse or institutions" (1986, 150). But Culler also believes that the division that arises from difference serves the male establishment's interest, for as long as women remain divided they can never form a strong front against segregation and oppression. Culler's view is important because it lays emphasis on the necessity for women to form a united front against segregation, and therefore also on the importance of feminist coalition building, a thought which opens the floor for prospecting on monolithism.

Emphasizing the same idea that differences in feminism are caused by individualistic idiosyncrasies, Teresa de Lauretis addresses the different theories of feminism by giving them a cultural contextualization: "the differences among women may be better understood as differences within women. For … it is the case that the female subject is en-gendered across multiple representations of class, race, language, and social relations …" (1986, 14).

One of the most relevant critical comments concerning the differences in feminism is Rosemarie Tong's recognition in *Feminist Thought* that there is "a major challenge to contemporary feminism to reconcile the pressures of diversity and difference with those for integration and communality" (1989, 7). This is a pertinent issue in feminism, and necessitates as much attention as the interest that critics manifest with regards to the issue of the (im)possibility of a feminist monolith, since women's oppression is the overriding issue in various cultures. In fact, the debate on whether there can be a world monolithic feminism is unending due to the multiple