Why Feminist Autonomy Right Now?

By Patricia McFadden

Writing about Autonomy

Sometimes when I set out to write about the things that concern me most, matters that often keep me pre-occupied for nights on end even as they nurture and sustain my political soul, it seems to take forever to find that specific entry point; that intellectual "soft spot" that is at once so elusive and yet so vital to the rhythm and essence of written ideas and dreams. Every writer knows when she has found "it"—that turn-key phrase; that sensation she feels in a space between her heart and her navel—and the realisation that the idea is ready to be set free.

Often it takes many nights and days of "dreaming" about the words, the sensations and sensibilities that I need to gather into one little mound, each one slipping and sliding, playfully coming in and out of my mind whenever it feels like it - and never knowing when a part of an idea will tap on my consciousness in the early hours of the morning, demanding that I lift it up gently and add it to my "treasure trove" of intellectual resources. It's a truly fascinating experience once one stops to watch it unfold: every moment creates its resources, its own lexicon. Each moment provides the means through which those who dare, can speak, and speak clearly and unequivocally to the realities that confront them.

Once one begins to think about Autonomy - to probe its inner depths, one soon realises how easily it can slip away from a thoughtful space. Somehow, the notion ebbs and flows, defying the ease with which so

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many other feminist notions or terms can be retrieved. Even when one tries to peg it down—with the weight of a lived political experience, for example, the notion seems to defy easy definition—invariably demanding that one look more deeply into oneself, and open up to emotions that are both challenging and saturated with promise.

It is the ambivalence that characterises the use of this notion, its immeasurable potency, (a potency which remains largely unexplored, even suspect among many), that has drawn me to journey into its meanings at a personal and political level. The joy is in journeying to that place, where the words, feelings and inspiration come together for a precious yet limited moment, clarifying both the political challenges which the notion poses, and relishing the sense of freedom and openness that its embrace encourages in the writer. This is what makes a journey into its wonder-lands not only desirable but also imperative for any feminist worth her salt.

The fascinating possibilities of unbounded liberation that "Autonomy" suggests are linked to being a writer able to speak and dream through the written word. And the written word allows one to make magic every time one enters forbidden domains. I'm anticipating this magical moment in the next few pages in the hope that they will share with the reader both the pleasure and courage of what it means to be a thinking, imagining, passionate Autonomous woman.

Somehow I also had to write on Feminist Autonomy for myself—for the pleasure and the pain of thinking things through, over many weeks; collecting the "nuts and bolts" of what I was feeling at first; then imagining the contours and textures of the notion, its possibilities and energies, as it seemed more and more possible to say something about a critical issue that is receiving too little attention in African feminist writing and discourse, even though it has become even more pivotal to the character of feminist consciousness, especially in these darkening days of easy compromise and collusion.

New Challenges for Feminist Autonomy

Recently, as they struggle to respond to the challenges posed by neo-imperialism and militarism across their worlds, there has been a renewed interest in issues of Feminist Autonomy among radical feminists in Europe, Latin America, Asia and the Caribbean. At a general level, the African continent is faced with a multitude of threats—both old and new—and the need for a new, principled, and honest leadership at the level of the state cannot be overstated. How Africa can become "autonomous" in the face of a renewed, voraciously neo-imperialist agenda is truly the challenge of the century. I will not pretend to consider the enormity of that quest. But for feminists on the continent, the question is both urgent and unavoidable. Given the "spill-over" of nationalist ideological influences and rhetoric into the spaces we have come to regard as the "African women's Movement", I am convinced that an interrogation of the relevance of Autonomy for individual feminists is not only unavoidable, but essential to our continued existence and the viability of our political praxis.

A feminist notion of Autonomy must respond to the upsurge in rightwing reactionary tendencies both within the broader African political, social and cultural context, as well as within the African women's Movement as a gendered space. In both instances, Autonomy can derive only from rejecting archaic notions of identity and belonging (what it means to be "authentically" or "traditionally" African), and actively resisting the conservative proclamations of "gender activists" that have thus far served to dull the political edge of the women's Movement (by accepting gradual and token changes to the extent of forsaking radical feminist agendas). Both the valorising of an essentialised African authenticity and tradition, and the trend towards piece-meal "gender transformation" stifle the political agency of women and redirect the orientation of the women's Movement towards a more accommodative stance with the national and global status quo and with the men who control and exploit women.

Feminist Autonomy is therefore connected to our consciousness as politically engaged women who critically read the political maps of our societies—in general terms as well as in terms of the special spaces that we ourselves have crafted and in which we have invested our energies: the places we call "home". Feminist Autonomy allows us to discover the ideological gaps, the inadequacies, the machinations

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and the lies that are sapping the strength of our movement, and pushing us back into the grip of a beleaguered patriarchal system that gasps for breath as our demands storm its musty corridors of power and repression.

Feminist Backlash

Through courage, insolence and resistance, African women, from the colonial period, began to break down the walls of the fortress that kept us chained to backward practices and systems of exploitation and degradation. As individuals and collectivities of women and girls, we used language and political agency to change our worlds, to make them a more habitable for ourselves and for those we love and work with/for. We became fearless warriors, as Audre Lorde would have insisted, and made the world look different. The past half century was a time of great momentum and transformation—through liberation struggles as well as national, local and personal struggles across the continent.

But the changes that we initiated have been met increasingly with resistance and cunning, and our enemies are re-strategising and re-assessing their hold on power. And now, what seemed to be an inevitable march towards un-bounded freedom and rights is being sabotaged by the state and its allies. Through religion, culture, violation and the policing of identity, our enemies are seeking to reinforce ancient traditions of patriarchal dominance.

In April 2003, the DAWN collective had this to say about the resurgence of neo-conservativism at a global level:

> Contrary to the relatively open environment for such advances that existed during the 1990's, the first decade of the 21st century confronts us with the extreme conservatism, aggressive unilateralism, and support for militarism of the Bush administration, and the worsening of fundamentalist trends elsewhere as well. In such a context, it is very important to protect the gains made for women's human rights through careful and considered action. (2003)

In our current environment of recession, authoritarianism and conservatism are thriving, and there has been a resurgence of traditional claims of security in familiarity, and re-invention of the dangers of newness and political openness.

As the continent battles with a plethora of crises—from the devastation associated with war and primitive accumulation by black ruling classes jockeying among themselves for greater chunks of the national cake, to HIV infection and the death of millions of mainly poor Africans—the right-wing swing of the social and political pendulum is growing increasingly obvious. When people are faced with crisis and death; with deepening poverty and unimaginable deprivations; and with the seemingly unavoidable failure of states all around them, they tend to lean towards the familiar systems of past lore. Somehow it seems as though the past was better, less harsh and more accommodating.

We therefore notice the re-emergence of archaic feudal cults in countries like Kenya, Zimbabwe, Namibia and Mozambique, and we hear the call for a return to the "old African ways" by so-called

intellectuals in the anthropology and sociology departments of many universities on the continent. Conservatism is rearing its head in ominous ways, and as is always the case, the enemies of freedoms come wearing the garb of sanctity (in fundamentalist religions); authenticity (in nativist cults and practices); security (in appeals to women's feminine decency) and rationality (in claims that women have "enough rights" already).

Impact on Women and Feminism

Women are again repeating the old mantras of patriarchal submissiveness and domination, re-learning how to be "seen and not heard" This is especially pronounced in relation to the fear that the HIV/AIDS pandemic has unleashed within heterosexual relationships. The ancient socialisation practices that kept women enslaved have resurfaced, side by side with the unfettered misogynistic violence and denigration of the bodies of women and girls across the continent, and the task of freeing ourselves from patriarchal bondage once again looms monumentally before us.

The tyranny of conformity is baring its fangs with impunity in the lives of women globally. In a lecture on the future of feminism delivered in 1997, Andrea Dworkin presciently noted this trend among women in North America and this is what she had to say:

> Women are indeed taught to be seen and not heard. But I am talking about a deep silence: a silence that goes to the heart of tyranny, its nature. There is a tyranny that preordains not only who can say what but what women especially can say. There is a tyranny that determines who cannot say anything, a tyranny in which people are kept from being able to say the most important things about what life is like for them. That is the tyranny I mean. (1997)

The rightwing patriarchal project's coercion of silence encompasses what has become casually known as "gender mainstreaming". This has basically two ideological objectives: to make gender equality manageable (through small concessions to women and girls by tinkering with key patriarchal institutions), and by taking the anger and the fire out of feminist politics (by representing feminists as extremist, unreasonable and frustrated individuals who will never be satisfied until the society is "destroyed").

The manipulation of women's fears and hesitancies in the face of political power is beginning to have the desired impact on the pace and content of the African women's Movement. The appeal to women's "reasonableness" is actually very seductive. Women have been well-schooled to feel that their interests should come last, that they exist only to serve others, and struggling for personal freedoms in a situation where everything is already so dire is both personally and intellectually taxing.

Feminist activism has few immediate benefits. It requires an endless process of re-visioning and re-membering of the goals of women's imaginary worlds. It should therefore come as no surprise that many among us, many who once proclaimed themselves "feminists" and "radicals", are quietly slipping away to focus on lucrative careers as "gender consultants" instead of taking up positions at the front-line of the battle against patriarchy. Some of the most strident and sinister attacks on "rash feminist behaviour" come from the "consultancy divas", who are also often quick to warn against the threats that radical feminism poses to the so-called gains made by women. It is also among many doyens of the African women's Movement that we discover deep-seated and pervasive conservativism: women who have used the Movement as a stepping stone to fancy jobs in the UN system or to other sites in the international capitalist system. It is these individuals who function as gatekeepers of deeply reactionary politics, and it is within their ranks that the new challenges facing the African women's Movement must be identified.

Our staid matrons (the continent's "experts" on gender training and mainstreaming) also serve as the link between the women's Movement and the state in almost every country on the continent. They control the flow of resources between the state and donor communities. The latter are of course only too relieved to hand funds over to a politically compliant female middle class which supports the impression that donor funds are "empowering" African women. They carefully tread the thin lines drawn by Northern donors on issues of reproductive health and sexuality; cautiously referring to difficult issues like abortion

and sexual orientation only in moderate tones, and rarely, if ever, rocking the national or international boat. Ultimately, they are no different from the male nationalists who occupy the neo-colonial state, tip-toeing around critical issues, always looking behind their shoulders, and never, never breaking free of the "ideological reservation" which the conservatives in the donor community and the international agencies like the World Bank and the IMF have constructed in their minds and ideas.

Occasionally, these ideological *askaris* are joined by newly arrived divas who proclaim their "feminism" with great fanfare—even as they frantically scramble up the ladder of social mobility, trampling with total disregard any feminist attempts to create truly innovative and radical feminist spaces. Selectively using the rhetoric of feminist activism, they are driven mainly by unscrupulous greed for public recognition and acceptance by males in the state, as well as by the need to reassure the males with whom they live that they are acceptably "feminine", and not the "dangerous" women that feminists have been constructed to be. They silence any emerging voices that might cast them in dis-favour with the state and donor agencies, while insisting that they understand issues of feminism and "gender activism" best. In fact, the network of rear-guard "gender activists" stifle any idea that appears to shift new ground, to present a radical challenge to the accommodated status quo by creating a climate of intimidation, and invoking patriarchal ideas about, for example, the "ownership of projects", or "control over resources", or "authority in organisations". In many cases, then, young feminists may be terrified and alienated by the display of repressive power and blatant anti-feminism within the women's Movement.

Asking the Difficult Questions

Reactionary behaviour is not new within the African women's Movement. In fact, it is as old as the nationalism that informs its backward, reactionary politics. Throughout the four decades of neo-colonial independence, as little cliques of black women have been able to mobilise financial and social resources and deploy these in terms of their upward social mobility, they have also exercised tighter control over the character of politics within the African women's Movement. And like the black male nationalists in the state, they have proclaimed their dedication to the eradication of collective oppression as the *raison d'etre* for their need to control power in the women's Movement. These reactionary elements have closely patrolled the borders of the women's Movement, always alert for any new ideas or expressions of feminist politics that might endanger their dominance over the political field.

For a long time, they have gone about their opportunistic business without any real critique from feminists in the women's Movement. So let me pose a few difficult but necessary questions. Why have we been so courageous in challenging patriarchy in the public and private arenas, yet allowed the very forces that sap our radical energies to define the political and ideological spaces that we have worked so hard to craft? Why have we allowed the fact of a female body to blind us to the reactionary politics of a clique that we would certainly have taken to task in no uncertain terms had they had male bodies? Why do we suffer the reactionary politics of a group of women who have done well on the backs of our political struggles, who are obviously in the Movement only for social and financial gains, and who are selling our political agenda down the river? Why have we allowed

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them to shut us up, to intimidate and control our political instincts and to make us afraid of the accusation that criticism is tantamount to "disloyalty"? These are the very stratagems that the black male ruling classes have wielded against us for more than half a century now—wagging the finger of state violence and repression if we dared to challenge the manner in which they define our identities as Africans; if we demand accountability in the use and abuse of national resources; if we dared to critique their notions of citizenship and inclusion and the processes through which information and knowledge is processed and channeled in our societies.

Yet we have allowed a group of petty bourgeois women to define our politics in relation to the neo-colonial state; to decide what intellectual tools we use in understanding inequality and injustice; we are even allowing them to re-define the language we have struggled so hard and long to find that speaks most deeply to the social and bodily violations that confront us. Everywhere these days we see evidence of the toned down language of "gender awareness" that reduces radical feminist politics to neat, manageable and unthreatening "issues" on the "development agenda". For instance, I have not seen any counter-campaign against the re-definition of Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) as the supposedly neutral expression "female genital cutting". One white North American feminist, supposedly an expert on the African women's Movement, retorted when I asked her why she was de-politicising our language: "Because there are many people in Africa who are more at ease with the term 'cutting'", and claimed that it was not up to her to insist upon the word 'mutilation' because she was a Westerner. Such expression of cultural relativism not only reflect the pathetic state of much feminism in the West, but also its influences on the content and orientation of African women's political stances.

We should also ask why the women's Movement seems to be tacitly countenancing the use of the term "rape" to describe men's experiences of sexual violation—after all the years of struggle to use the term in relation to a violent expression of misogynist hatred and men's coercive occupancy of women's bodies in patriarchal society? What is it that makes us so timid and unsure of our political language and stances when it comes to the issue of securing and occupying our feminist spaces in the face of heterosexist demands that we "let men in"? Why do we feel so inadequate in the face of such blatant manipulation? Is it possibly because we have not considered the impact of un-critiqued heterosexuality on our sense of autonomy as feminists and as women?

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Challenges for the African Women's Movement

I think Andrea Dworkin had her finger on the pulse of the recent rightwing tendency when she posed the following questions to her Canadian audience in 1997:

> What would freedom be for us? What principles are necessary for our well-being... What actions must be taken? What will it cost us and why are we too afraid to pay, and are the women who have gotten a little from the women's movement afraid that resistance or rebellion or even political inquiry will cost them the little that they have gotten? Why are we still making deals with men one by one instead of collectively demanding what we need? (1997)

These are the kinds of questions that a closer look at the notion of Feminist Autonomy raises. They are difficult, discomforting questions that require a deeper reflection on the core principles of the Movement and the ways in which individuals who name themselves feminist live their public and private lives. bell hooks defines this challenge when she says: "As a radical standpoint, perspective position, 'the politics of location' necessarily calls those of us who would

participate in the formation of counter-hegemonic cultural practice to identify the spaces where we begin the process of revision" (1990).

This is where the notion of Feminist Autonomy becomes critical in making the shift from what has become "women's politics" to "radical feminist praxis", an activism fed by a consistently critical and reflexive political consciousness; one that questions every twist and turn of daily life, ever-vigilant about the opportunistic class interests of those who hide their nationalist agendas under the guise of feminist proclamations. As Gigi Franscisco, a Philippina feminist insists: "...feminists must be very clear on why we are engaging, what are relative strength is, and what we will do after strategic alliances have been built" (2003).

Though a diversity of political views and stances in the African women's Movement are unavoidable, we also have to realise that nationalist ideology has become the dominant ideological influence of those who control the Movement, and that being part of it should not imply an unquestioning acceptance of rightwing agendas and political definition. In fact, re-occupancy of the African women's Movement as a radical, vibrant and politically active space must become a feminist imperative, and feminists across the continent must resolve to transform it into the cutting edge that it was meant to be. At their recent *Encuentro*, Caribbean and Latin American feminists tried to face up to the complexity of crafting an open, safe, engaging and mutually respectful feminist space through a process that interrogates issues of political diversity, race, sexual orientation and identity in its many forms. They acknowledged that it is a long, difficult yet politically necessary task:

> The *Encuentros*, like feminisms themselves, are arenas of solidarity and expansion but also of conflict and exclusion, negotiations and renegotiations. These dynamics do not take shape in a vacuum but are always informed by the changing political and economic contexts in which feminism unfold... These contextual shifts in turn have reshaped the choices different feminists have made to interact with actors and institutions outside of the feminist movement... These interactions have been informed by changing and continually contested meanings of autonomy, which, in turn, have generated shifting criteria of inclusion and exclusion in the imagine regional feminist community. (Alvarez, 2003)

Herstorically, what we call the African women's Movement is largely an outcome of the feminist energies and courage in which we have invested these past decades. We have sought to set ourselves apart from the status quo, and formed what aspired to be an autonomous movement—a movement that refused to act on behalf of the state in undertaking surveillance over women's sexuality and other life choices. It was in the desire to be autonomous in relation to the machinations of male-inspired agendas and narrow nationalist interests that African feminists built a movement whose epistemic foundations are grounded in the anti-authoritarian struggles of women of all classes, ages and social locations. How we lost the ownership of our Movement to a clique of rightwing divas whose collusion with the neocolonial state has pushed our Movement into a cul-de-sac, is the fundamental reason why we have to revisit the notion of Autonomy—and reclaim a political space and process that rightfully belongs to us as feminists across the continent and the world.

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