"It was Phyllis Keneven who made me a Feminist Philosopher, rather than just a Philosopher..." (Tom Digby, 1998).

The above quote, from Digby's collection of essays by men sympathetic to the goals and ideals of feminism, shows how easy it is for us to be so comfortable with our perceptions of philosophy, unless we are made aware of other alternative positions, thus removing our own narrow outlook. As Cole notes, Feminist Philosophy, like the Euro-American Women's Movement in general, has been justly accused of racism; Western philosophers have tended to think and write as if people of colour simply do not exist (Cole 1993). It is my contention, that this narrow outlook of Western Feminist Philosophy depicts its ignorance and negligence (whether deliberate or innocent), thus rendering it incomplete. Western Feminist Philosophy's main shortcoming is its preoccupation with discourses that alienate other feminist philosophies, such as Black Feminist Philosophy or any other philosophies outside of its domain.

A study of alternative feminist philosophical thought is therefore needed, in order to make that which is invisible, visible and that which is unknown, known. Philosophers easily fall into the habit of speaking for all mankind, thereby universalizing. Feminist philosophers are guilty of the same in that they do not take into consideration the concept of "sameness in difference." All women, (and they are, indeed, the subjects of feminism), are the same in all parts of the world, in so far as they share common physical characteristics such as belonging to the same biologically determined group. However, their experiences, their ways of perceiving reality through reflection, and their emotions are all governed by their cultural setups. This is one major point that many feminist philosophers ignore in their discourses and so they end up being obscure and incomplete in their world views, yet they claim to be all embracing and universal. It is therefore necessary to shed light on the otherwise dark side of feminist philosophy, that is the exclusion of other alternative feminist philosophies, in their framework.

Focus of the Paper

A study of all alternative feminist philosophies previously unknown or unaddressed by Western feminist philosophers, though enriching and enlightening, would be beyond the scope and limit of this platform, and so I shall only introduce and develop the idea of African Feminist Philosophy as an area of study for African philosophy scholars, with the aim of bridging the gap that currently exists between African and Western feminist philosophers.

Since such an undertaking is a relatively new approach to philosophy, I intend to show that it is possible because others have done it outside of Africa (and a few are doing it, in Africa) and that we in Africa and outside can use the Black Feminist Philosophy paradigm as a model to shape
the intended African Feminist Philosophy. African women in Africa, like their counterparts in Europe and America have been particularly distanced from participating in the generation of knowledge, the activity of reflection, the doing of philosophy, for various reasons. Most of these reasons are embedded in the cultures in which these women find themselves in, and the lack of political will by policy makers to address these reasons fully for the benefit of the women. Some of these reasons are very similar to those that spurred Western feminist philosophers to address the problems of women in philosophy. But there is difference in this similarity or “sameness,” because of the unique cultural backgrounds that these women are from.

In this paper, I argue that African feminist thought, like Black feminist thought, cannot be approached from the perspectives of the dominant philosophical ideals of white, Anglo-Western culture; it must be sought out not only on the shelves of libraries and within the covers of standard academic journals, but also in the novels, poetry, philosophical literature and social activism of African feminists. It is here that the world views of the African women are seen, their conditions of living known, their epistemologies, their limitations to the generation of knowledge and activities of reflection. Once this literature survey is done, the body of knowledge or theory generated will be the spring board to putting structures in place that can alter the status of these women positively. It is then that theory becomes practice.

**Organisation of the Paper**

The paper is divided into two parts. Part one is a brief discussion of the origin and nature of Feminist Philosophy, as is perceived in the West. Part two focuses on the need for Black feminisms as areas of study within Feminist Philosophy. Finally, a conclusion is made at the end of the paper. The paper serves as a basis for future research that will investigate all possible alternative approaches to Feminist Philosophy. The future research will particularly focus on the status of woman in philosophical literature in literally works, poems, stories and even songs, and how these impact on the activity of participating in the generation of knowledge.

The paper provides a few solutions, recommendations and suggestions on how these setbacks to the generation of knowledge can be addressed. To this extent the paper is part of the preparation for a study of African women in philosophy, the theme being “Educate a Woman in Philosophy and Critical Thinking and You Produce by Extension, a Whole Nation of Quality Citizens.” If philosophy and critical thinking are indeed valuable variables for the production of quality citizens, then since women are the very first care-givers, shaping posterity in behaviour and thinking processes, world view formations, then only good can come out of that society where everybody is a creative and critical thinker. Thought here, becomes practice. Especially now. Africa needs creative and critical thinkers rather than stereotypes who ape the problems they have inherited from their predecessors, doubling the problems be-deviling the continent.

**Feminist Philosophy - A Western Perspective**

Feminist Philosophy grew out of the need to address the way women had been portrayed by the Western traditional philosophical record, which was predominantly male.
Feminist historians of philosophy have argued that the historical record is incomplete, because it omits women philosophers, and it is biased because it devalues any women philosophers it forgot to omit. They have argued that the philosophical tradition is conceptually flawed, because of the way its fundamental norms like reason and objectivity are gendered male. (Witt, 1998)

Feminist philosophers accuse Western male philosophers such as Homer, Hesiod, Aristotle, Plato and others of portraying women negatively. Feminism as a movement arose as an effort by women in the West to emancipate or free themselves from the oppressive restrictions imposed by their societies because of their sex. An interesting point to note here is that it was male philosophers such as J.S. Mill (who wrote the first “Feminist Bible”), Montesquieu, Diderot, and Kant who were sympathetic to women’s claims that especially influenced feminist thinking. The philosophy of enlightenment for example influenced feminist thinking, in that, “Truth could be achieved through free and reasoned inquiry and the view that revelation from God was the source of all knowledge was rejected.” This set the ball rolling for an era of demands for feminist equality (Evans, 1979). The male philosophers then become the objects of feminist philosophy.

Feminist thinking grew and developed, such that the diversity within feminism is now well established. It has a multiplicity of approaches, positions and strategies. Current forms of feminism grew out of the women’s movements and consciousness-raising groups of the 1960s i.e. second wave feminisms. (Kemp, 1997).

Feminist philosophers, need not be female, they can be male (since women are the subjects of feminism). However the question that arises is, “Can men, and more so African men, be the subjects of feminist thought? Can men be not just objects but subjects of feminist thought?” (Harding, 1998). The answer to this question must be yes, so long as there are men who are sympathetic to the goals and ideals of feminism vis-à-vis the concept of woman in their respective cultures. On the other hand, another question that arises is, “Is every woman doing philosophy, a feminist philosopher?” While women are the subjects of feminism, some women may not be interested in feminist philosophy but in other philosophical pursuits, perhaps within the traditional areas of philosophy.

The Concept of Woman in Western Thought

The statements made by ancient Greek philosophers and those philosophers after Plato portray Western women negatively. and so feminist philosophers accuse them of being sexist, racist and ethnocentric. These statements incense feminist philosophers to the extent that exposing and criticizing such statements, become, the subject matter of Feminist Philosophy. An example of ancient Greek philosophy’s portrayal of western woman is Hesiod, who says, “Zeus created woman, in order to make man miserable. From her (Pandora, the first woman), comes all the race of womankind, the deadly female race and
tribes of wives who live with mortal men and bring them harm. No help to them in dreadful poverty, but ready enough to share with them in wealth.” After a catalogue of ills that women bring to men Hesiod concludes: “Women are bad for men, and they conspire.” (Digby, 1998).

Another project for Western feminist philosophers is, to show that women philosophers existed but were omitted from the philosophical record. They cite in their works women philosophers who have contributed to philosophy beginning with Hypatia, the Egyptian philosopher, mathematician and astronomer, and including Simone de Beauvoir, an existentalist philosopher, Mary Wollstonecraft the Ethicist, and so on (Warnock, 1996).

There are also feminist philosophers who generate knowledge from the traditional areas of philosophy i.e. metaphysics, ethics, logic, and epistemology. They include Harding, Cole, Tong, Kemp, Bordo, Daldotti, Barkty, and Griffiths, to name a few. However, Western woman is the subject of western feminist philosophy, and therefore such a philosophy cannot be said to speak for all the rest.

Towards an African Feminist Philosophy

According to Mirza (1997), Black feminism is a platform from which ethnic minorities can feel at home — “A place where our presence in a world where black women have for so long been denied the privilege to speak, to have a valid identity of their own, a space to name themselves”. You can have difference (polyvocality) within a conscious construction of sameness (i.e. Black feminism). As long as there is exclusion, both in academic discourse and materiality, there will be a Black feminism. It is in this sense contingent. As long as such exclusion is produced spatially there will be a Black British feminism. A critical Black feminist theory is grounded in relation to practice. “Praxis is central to our survival.”

Mirza accuses Western feminism of being racist, calling it “a white woman's project” because it ignores totally the fact that there are other non-white women whose ways of knowing are totally different from their white counterparts. She says of feminism, that as a term and as a movement, it is not static, it is not impervious to change. If feminism changes to embrace differences rather than to be pre-occupied with difference, then its meaning will change and strengthen Black and White feminist activism, through a unified cohesive and strategic identity. The white women’s cultural experiences are not global, and valorizing the white cultural perspective must stop. It is impossible to theorize inclusive acts by excluded groups. In order to evolve a Black Feminist Philosophy therefore, black women need to re-define and re-discover themselves. The dominant culture achieves a hegemony precisely by its capacity to convert and re-code for the authoritative other.

African Feminist Philosophy needs to follow the path of Black feminism, in order to find its space in feminist philosophical discourse. Although this may be difficult in the beginning because for the African woman in Africa, “Anatomy is destiny,” there is hope in African feminism. The majority of African women in Africa were found to be rural, illiterate, poor, isolated, passive, submissive, parochial, afraid and lonely, more than a decade ago, following the United Nations Decade for Women, 1975 - 1985. Most African women in Africa are still tied to the hoe and their endeavours are hardly recognized. They collect firewood, collect water, process
food, clean, care for young children, men, the sick and elderly, plant, weed, harvest and store food. A number of women are heading households, they rarely eat comfortably and when feeding their children they feed their male children first and then the girls. They educate their male children first and then the girls. The latter are already disadvantaged from the very beginning such that when they too become women the vicious cycle continues. In societies where they undergo the initiation ceremony of female circumcision, they never go back to school, feeling that they have “arrived.” Such an atmosphere for the African woman in Africa leaves very little room or even time to engage in activities of self-reflection and generation of knowledge, as their destinies and their lives are already determined. However, when, the historical conditions are right and African women in Africa have both the social space and the social experience on which to ground their new understanding, feminist consciousness develops. Historically this takes place in distinct stages:

1. The awareness of a wrong.  
2. The development of a sense of sisterhood.  
3. The autonomous definition by women of their goals and strategies for changing their conditions.  
4. The development of an alternative vision for the future. 

The recognition of a wrong becomes political when women realize that it is shared with other women. In order to remedy this collective wrong women organize themselves in political and social life. The movement they organize however inevitably runs into resistance which forces the women to draw on their own resources and strength. In the process, they develop a sense of sisterhood. This process also leads to new forms of women’s culture forced upon women by the resistance they encounter, such as sex-segregated or separatist institutions or modes of living.

Based on such experiences, women begin to define their own demands and to develop theory. In the field of scholarship women’s studies seek to find a new framework of interpretation from within women’s historical culture, leading to their emancipation. It is only through the discovery and acknowledgment of the roots, their past, and their history that women like other groups become enabled to project an alternative future.

The new vision of women demands that women be placed at the centre not only of events but of the thinking of the world. Women are demanding as men did during the renaissance, the right to define, the right to decide.

**Conclusion: The Way Forward**

In conclusion this paper advocates for African Feminist Philosophy as an avenue through which women in Africa can define themselves. African Feminist Philosophy has a significant and wide area of study, and so it needs to be given the attention it deserves. This paper thus serves as a challenge to African philosophy scholars to “blaze the trail,” as it were, for the purposes of converting theory into practice.

We need structures in place that enable us to study Black feminisms with a view to drawing on knowledge and ideas from the experiences of others, for the benefit of African women in Africa. But first, the conditions must be right. There is need for recognition of African Feminist Philosophy at three levels:

1. The level of Western Feminist Philosophy.  
2. The government and NGO level.  
3. The Social level.
Beginning with Western Feminist Philosophy, there is need for feminist scholars to create space in their field for others such as African Feminist Philosophy because African sisters are after all their sisters. There should be “unity in diversity” in so far as all women are concerned, and this must be the theme of any definition of Feminist Philosophy. It is only then that we can talk of an all embracing universal Feminist Philosophy. Western feminist philosophers should invite their African sisters to their clubs, societies and conferences in the spirit of togetherness in sharing of knowledge.

At the government level, governments in Africa need to re-define their strategies in their commitments (if any) to uplifting the status of woman in Africa. Governments must be at the forefront of gender sensitivity, before expecting its citizens to be. As such, governments must be ready to work with African Feminist Philosophy researchers so as to first of all evolve a theory from empirical studies, and then bring this forward to governments for policy making. For example, a government cannot make maternal role modeling policy, but making all mothers literate can become policy. In this respect, Feminist Philosophy scholars must publish their findings in simple readable form as well as extend a warm hand of friendship to rural women in their meetings, and then use these experiences to evolve thought that can become policy for the benefit of their rural sisters.

Research, however, must be relevant to African culture. Governments must be ready to invest in literacy programmes for women as well as projects to encourage girls to stay in schools until the highest level of learning. Governments must also invest in the teaching of philosophy in schools, colleges, as well as other institutions of learning (see my paper on “The Teaching of Philosophy in Schools, Colleges and Other Learning Institutions”), for the benefit of both boys and girls as well as men and women.

At the social level researchers must adopt a multi-disciplinary approach to African feminism. They should be ready to draw out knowledge from disciplines such as sociology, politics, history, anthropology, psychology etc., so as to alter the negative attitudes towards women in African societies, for the benefit of uplifting the status of African woman.

Finally, the ball is in the court of African philosophy scholars to take the challenge of pursuing African Feminist Philosophy. They can choose to heed the call to pay serious attention to studies in this field so as to make theory become practice, or sit back and watch, as the continent continues to suffer because of a lack of recognition of the significance of the other half of its inhabitants, who play important and multiple roles in their societies.
Notes and References


