

## **Edwige Dro : Feminisms instead**

That little word that ruffles feathers and brings out strong reactions.

*A white people's thing!*

*Not African!*

*Only bitter women are feminists!*

*Are our mothers in markets feminists? Yet, they work hard!*

There are even people who justify their lack of decency, courtesy and politeness vis-à-vis other people because the latter identify as feminists. In short, reactions that do not allow for any breathing space. And that is only that word “feminism”; now imagine when an S is added to a word that is always written in the singular. Feminisms instead of feminism. Here in Côte d'Ivoire, we will say, “But what is that again?”

It is what you see.

My name is Edwige Renée Dro. Writer, literary translator, voracious reader, friend, feminist, sister, daughter, employee... All those things and many other things that I am but on that word “feminist”, people get stuck. They want to know why. They ask for explanations.

At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic but after the panic had died down, African academics, artists and activists from Côte d'Ivoire, Burkina Faso, DR Congo, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Ghana, South Africa, Uganda, Kenya and Rwanda met via Zoom at the invitation of the Goethe-Institut to think feminisms. *Learning Feminisms* is the theme that gathered us.

Before I get into the substance of my thoughts, I have to say that the closed format of these half-days of meetings were a godsend. To think, to hear ourselves and listen to others, to understand our points of convergences and of divergences, to educate ourselves, to support each other, to strengthen one another. Because I worry what it would have been had these exchanges been public? The adherents to the “What is this again?” doctrine would have invaded the room, cocked their heads aside, they would have worn on their faces a mixture of pity and compassion coupled with a smidgen of the desire to educate us and would have justified themselves in the following words:

*Their own thing, they don't have one understanding for it!*

*Women!*

*Can a woman be in agreement with her own woman friend?*

As if there has ever been one understanding of anything. And let's not even mention the fact that I'm always sad when I hear my countrypeople ask themselves whether two women can agree on anything. Don't they see like I do that for 27 years, our country has been living through an instability that does not speak its name because three MEN, to whom a fourth has added himself, do not agree with each other? No woman has risen up and spoken about a deal made for power to be passed on to her.

But that's by the bye. So then the closed format of these meetings were a breath of fresh air over those three half days.

None of us who took part in these meetings were born feminists. If for some of us, we chose to identify as feminist in our teenage years, because we wanted more for ourselves – a wonderful career when our parents and our immediate environment saw us wedded at 14 – others came to feminism much later. When they wanted to be lorry-drivers or taxi-drivers and men laughed at them, telling them in the process that these were men's work. These women who'd always thought of themselves as

human-beings, first and before anything else. And then the wake-up call: women who cannot inherit land in some of our countries; my own mother who had to ask my father's permission to travel to England in 2012 when I was living there. In 2012!!! The shock wasn't mine alone; it was my father's too. Wake-up call then. It wasn't about saying that the same 10 fingers that a man has are the same 10 fingers that a woman has, to justify the fact that feminism is a non-debate. As if to say that if women work as hard as men, we won't need feminism. My father used to always say with pride that his wife earned more than him, sometimes in a day what he earned in a month. So if feminism depended on just having 10 fingers and working hard, my mother, women before her and women after her have swept that point aside as moot. These women and we who took part in *Learning Feminisms* know that we have the same 10 fingers as a man, so then why are we reduced to our vaginas?

The word "feminism" exists in the same way that the words "tribalism", "colonialism" or "racism" exist. Every country, race and tribe are equally equal to the other but see, some decided that they were superior than the others; cue, words in "ism". Words that too provoke strong reactions, but do not seem to be accompanied by the disdain that so often follows the word "feminism" that is itself followed by the eternal:

*It is not African*

*It is not what women in villages need.*

What? They want to be dispossessed of their land? Be forced to submit to the practice of levirate?

As for this "It is not African", what does it mean? Africans don't give a damn about equality? Cut these clitorises that shouldn't be? Our daughters will never become presidents of our Republics? Our mothers are all prostitutes? Women who spend their lives stretching out their hands for handouts?

What does it mean? Feminism is not African.

With their backs to the wall, a new tactic is formulated. It is asked of us feminists to say what feminism is in our languages. What is “feminism” in Yacouba, Twi, Malinké, etc.?

Toni Morrison said:

Somebody says you have no language and so you spend 20 years proving that you do. Somebody says your head isn't shaped properly so you have scientists working on the fact that it is. Somebody says that you have no art so you dredge that up. Somebody says that you have no kingdoms and so you dredge that up. None of that is necessary.

Toni Morrison said these words to explain the distraction of racism but I can think that they can also be applied to all the distractions thrown in the path of feminism. On the second day of our meeting, as the day session was coming to a close, this question raised its ugly head. We did think about it; it nearly made us go off course; we even talked about it in our WhatsApp group but the next day, we moved on to something else. To how we were going to work together as feminists; to how we were going to learn from one another; to also challenge ourselves.

I don't think that we need to say “feminism” in our languages; in any case, do we know what “colonialism” or “racism” is in our languages? Does that mean that racism does not exist? As for me, I know that if I was to go in my region to talk about feminism, I would say kôdô - we are equal - and I would say that when you choose to send your boy children to school but don't do it for your girl children, you are not putting in practice kôdô. Now, if in my region, they respond that despite us being dô - equal - women and men cannot be dô, then we will talk about it. Because it is

important and of utmost need that we speak plainly, away from terms like “patriarchy”, “second wave”, “womanism”, etc.

I for instance do not give much energy to those words. I wouldn't be able to define the second wave from the third wave and I do wonder even if these waves are applicable to my country. I only came across Sylvia Tamale, the Ugandan feminist as I was preparing for this meeting. I have heard names like bell hooks or Audre Lorde but I have not read any book by these feminists. My feminists are my mother, Marie Sery Koré, the Nana Benz, Paulette Nardal, Suzanne Césaire, the Amazons of Benin, Andrée Blouin; women who in some feminist circles would not even be called feminists because they wouldn't have sufficiently denounced patriarchy. Maybe? But as we say, each to their own. Because, breaking news, in this matter of feminism, there will always be points of divergences. There are 7.7 billion human-beings and 49.6% of this population are women and we don't all think in a homogeneous manner because we come from different backgrounds. But there are converging points and on these converging points, let's work.

The mistake we oftentimes make as feminists, that all activists finally make, is to be so passionate about our causes that we think that everybody has reached our level of thinking or that even the rest of the world is passionate about what we are passionate by. No! Let's learn instead from each other and develop strategies. What are the appropriate ways in which we can reach the communities we want to reach? What message do we want to share? Should it even be a message? Could we have a conversation? Chats?

I became quite fascinated at one point in the discussions as we were chatting about strategies. As we were talking about plays, poetry, fashion even, it felt like the conversation was only taking place between the artists. One political activist even said that art wasn't her area of speciality and as such, didn't have much to contribute. And yet! We need to unite, to think about the challenges in our different

countries, define the most important challenges and together, go out in battle. Together! We cannot put activism in its little box, art in its own little box, academia in its own little box; no, everything is interconnected.

And so when 12:30 sounded on that 03<sup>rd</sup>, June and we said goodbye to each other via the Zoom platform, the discussions but most importantly how to bring to life all these things we chatted about, continued. And as I write these words, I also write: Watch this space! Because it ain't over.