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When women have eached the end of their politics:

Nakedness as Resistance

Introduction

“First impressions last”, “Seeing is believing”- some popular English/Western sayings that allude to the importance placed on visual information. Historically, the idea that one’s biology, and thus their physical body, denotes their destiny is one which has continued to persist in Western thought (Oyěwùmí, 1997). The body in its physical form (i.e. what we are able to see) informs how the body is ‘read’, and what value is attached to that which is ‘read’ informs social order (Oyěwùmí, 1997). Another element of importance is who reads the body and the importance placed on this particular gaze. Oyěwùmí (1997) makes the assertion that the West/Western society, prioritizes sight, and that the gaze which is privileged is a particularly gendered one. Here, the gaze is often directed at the woman, positioning women as the object of the male gaze. This is a gaze which is immediately sexual, and objectifies women, producing problematic ideals of what the female body should look like and defining when and how this body should be seen. Importantly, this weight placed on what can be seen is not universal.

Against this backdrop, it becomes easier to then see how the body, particularly the naked female body can become falsely constructed as immediately and inherently sexual, as per the prioritization placed on what can be seen. The sexualisation of the naked female body is an idea that has been deliberately constructed; just as gender has been socially constructed. The construction of the naked body will form part of the main argument of this essay. The central argument of this paper is two-fold. Firstly, it will be argued that through the Western frame, the female naked body has been constructed to be sexualized, however in the African context, this is not the case. The work of Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, and Ifi Amadiume will provide the conceptual understanding of this. Secondly, Tamale (2016) will be used to compliment the work of Agamben and Foucault on unruly politics, to argue that in Africa, the naked female body has historically been used as a tool for political resistance and emancipation. This will help us to understand the nature of naked protests, and the utility in their use to demonstrate the disruption of heteronormative organisations of resistance.

Importantly, the aim of this paper is not to analyse the utility of these kinds of protests as per tangible results, because this would limit us to a one-dimensional frame in our desire to see changes in legislature etc., thus falling into the binary of the traditional elements of resistance. Rather, the aim is to understand the nature of these protests and their ability to disrupt preconceived notions about the female body and its place in the political realm- thus affecting positive change in the consciousness of many. To do this, the Green Belt Movement in Kenya, the Women for Liberia Mass Action for Peace movement, as well as the Naked Protest at Rhodes University will be used as case studies to demonstrate the ways in which nakedness has been used in Africa as a form of unruly politics, albeit in differing contexts and at different times in history.

Conceptualising the Naked Female Body in Africa

As previously mentioned, the way in which we have constructed the female body, and the way in which we 'read' the female body has been framed in accordance to a Western frame. The issue with this is that African societies are then misrepresented without having even presented their positions in the first place (Oyěwùmí, 1997). There is the need to first understand how this Western frame came about, and how it came to be that the female body, particularly the black African female body, came to be viewed first and foremost as sexual.

It is important to understand that the framing of our questions and our understanding of them, is based and ordered by the frame of the West; the frame which has been most dominant, and the frame which non-Western or non-European thought and knowledge has accepted as universal or normal (Oyěwùmí, 1997). It is important therefore, to move away from this, and to question outside of this frame. It is crucial to remain faithful to the specificities of local cultural experience and social structure, in order to remove the normalized Western knowledge and thought which we have internalized as universally applicable. Cheikh Anta Diop in Amadiume (1997), urges us to persist with the idea of an Afrocentrism which is not directed as a response to Eurocentrism, but is ultimately about our own self-definition, and self-determination, particularly as black Africans. It is in this vein that the conceptual framework of this paper will be based; ordering our framing after work by scholars such as Oyěwùmí, Amadiume and Bakare-Yusuf.

Oyěwùmí and Amadiume lay the foundation for understanding the construction of gender, and consequently, of nakedness. The idea of gender as a social construct may be traced back to colonialism, and how that system of oppression was justified. Amadiume (1997) explains that anatomical differences, were made to correspond to hierarchical differences in the way in which people are treated and in their degree of humanization. These differences pertain to aspects such as sex, skin colour, and body shape etc., (Oyěwùmí, 1997). Being black, female, and curvaceous meant that you were at the bottom of this hierarchy. Biological differences are a testament to the way in which the body was given a logic of its own. In the Western society, because the entire social order is dependent on the body, it then follows that the body becomes something to be read and therefore becomes the object of a gaze- a gaze which in turn, constructs the body's movements into certain meanings within a social system (Oyěwùmí, 1997).

It is particularly interesting that within European thought, only women were embodied and men were thought to be the thinkers, the walking minds (Oyěwùmí, 1997). This created a particular idea of maleness and femaleness, one which reduced the credibility of the female body and gave credibility to the male body. Here, it is important to note that this then ultimately created a certain idea of women for centuries to come- the idea that women's bodies are mainly for the purposes of being the subject of a man's gaze, and that men have the power to ascribe meanings to women's bodies. Noticeably, there is a trend of women's agency to define their own femaleness, to define their own bodies- this speaks to the credibility that the male voice has in society, and the power to ultimately take ownership of women's bodies.

As a result of Western imperialism, the idea of the body being read as the blueprint for society's social order, was universalized. However, the important vantage point is that in societies where the visual sense of the body is not privileged in the same way that it is in the West (i.e. African societies), the invocations of biology do not carry much weight. This is why, as posited in Bakare-Yusuf (2000) and Oyěwùmí (1997), there are problematic implications in introducing gendered perspectives for the construction of knowledge in African societies. If we agree that gender is socially constructed, and that it has been constructed in a particular way by the West, it follows that gender is constructed to consider certain historical and cultural contexts and so, as Oyěwùmí (1997) states; it cannot be constructed in the same way or it cannot behave in the same way across time and space.

Both Oyěwùmí (1997, 2000) and Amadiume (1997) use the examples of matriarchal African societies, to display the way in which gender (although indeed is a social construct) is constructed differently in the West, than it is in African societies. Oyěwùmí (1997, 2000) uses the example of the Yoruba people where social hierarchy is not constructed according to gender, and where gender roles are in fact extremely fluid. Amadiume (1997) explains the African state model, which stems from the periods of the sixteenth century, whereby the social system at the time (i.e. the matriarchy and the privileges given to certain people because of their positions within this matriarchy), was based on consensus and was accepted by the people because the social system was not created as a means to deliberately subjugate certain people or to impose foreign hierarchical systems, but was based on internal and national consumption which was far less abrupt than imperial imposition.

European colonialism was based on this notion of a 'civilizing mission', constructing African people as inferior or inhuman (Amadiume, 1997). This civilizing mission included the introduction of a Victorian-style manner of dressing which was imposed on African people who had previously worn minimal clothing (clothing made out of animal skin, bird feathers, grass or plant fiber) that served the purpose of covering the genitals because of the extremely warm temperatures in many parts of Africa (Tamale, 2016).

Important here, is the assertion that nakedness is nothing bizarre, innately sexual, nor is it anything new to African societies, and it is certainly not 'uncivilised'- it was constructed to be this way. Therefore, moving forward, it is important to bear all of this in mind, as we understand how nakedness has been used in society as a tool of political resistance.

The history of the 'Naked Protest' in Africa

It has already been established that the idea of the physical body being read, and being subject to the scrutiny of societal hierarchies, speaks to the way in which the female body has been embodied, and the male body has been said to be the rational mind. The passivity inherent in the reading of the female body is incredibly problematic, implying an inherent sexualisation of the female body, as per the Western lens. This section will make use of three case studies where nakedness has been used as a tool of resistance in Africa. These case studies include the Liberian Women's Peace Action Movement, the Kenyan women activists in the Green Belt Movement, as well as the naked protest in #RURReferenceList at the University currently known as Rhodes.

Although these protests occurred in different time periods and spaces, these will be used to demonstrate the progression of how nakedness has been constructed for the purposes of resistance in African societies. The aim is to demonstrate the way in which the body has wrongfully been constructed as 'passive'; as something to merely be read by those who have the power to do so, and how in African societies, the body of a woman becomes a tool to speak; to convey a message, and to ultimately resist oppressive systems. Indeed, the meaning ascribed to nakedness varies according to time, place, and culture (Sutton, 2007). However, what I aim to demonstrate here is that although it is acceptable to turn naked bodies into sexual commodities, as per Western hegemony, naked bodies of resistance can lead to social outrage and even violent punishment (Sutton, 2007).

Kenya's Green Belt Movement

The Green Belt Movement was founded by feminist, environmentalist, and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Wangari Maathai in the late 80s. The movement was initially aimed at fighting deforestation which ultimately mainly affected Kenyan women. Maathai found that women had been at a disadvantage as a result of deforestation, because it was women who would spend hours looking for fire wood in order to cook and go about general household duties (Hunt, 2014). However, the most interesting aspect of Kenyan society is the way in which the farming of land, i.e. the ability to gain subsistence from the land is dependent on the women (Hunt, 2014). Therefore, when there are issues of deforestation, the ones who feel it first and who feel it the strongest, are the women. These women were mainly mothers- the people who are traditionally expected to be natural nurturers and home makers.

The mode of resistance for this movement, was not automatically a naked protest. The choice for the women to strip naked in 1992 in downtown Nairobi (Barbash and Wax, 2004), was a

culmination of a number things. The decision to strip was motivated by the ever increasing deforestation sanctioned by the corrupt government (Hunt, 2014). The fruits of the land were going to those who held power in society, i.e. multinational corporations and those who held positions of power in government. The women who are dependent on the fruits of the land for them and their family's daily sustenance were not considered, by the very same government who was meant to ensure their wellbeing and livelihoods. The decision to strip however, according to Barbash and Wax (2004), was also motivated by the point of desperation, facing immediate danger from police torture. The women had been demonstrating on the day, and the police exercised excessive force in order to get the women to disperse- essentially stifling the voices of the women.

This act of resorting to nakedness, discards the idea of the black female body as passive and the subject of a man's sexual consumption, and it holds symbolic meaning. It speaks to the traditional ideas held by African people regarding nakedness. Traditionally, in African societies, a woman stripping naked in public, particularly a mother (not necessarily in the biological sense) or an elderly woman, is meant to bring shame and a curse upon the person who has brought all of this suffering upon her (Guyson, 2016). Guyson (2016) goes on to highlight the aspect of motherhood; in that women give life, and to have the most private symbol of motherhood (i.e. the female naked body) displayed in public, is to negate this life and to essentially convey the message that those in power are dead to society. The fact that women were able to recognize these traditionally held beliefs and ideas and use them in their favour, prove the political agency that women have, demonstrated by the ability to use selected collective actions to disrupt the heteronormative organization of resistance and protests and what these should look like (Minai, 2010).

Women for Liberia Mass Action for Peace:

The Women for Liberia Mass Action for Peace is a prime example of the use of selected collective actions by women to disrupt the heteronormative organization of resistance and protests. Traditionally, the nature of resistance is extremely gendered (masculine), whereby the military and security in terms of an immediate threat is prioritized over a sustainable peace. Leymah Gbowee was one of the leaders who helped to initiate this movement, and ultimately helped it to gain the legitimacy that it now has through history, even becoming a Nobel Peace Prize Laureate in 2011 for her work in bringing an end to the Second Liberian Civil War in 2003 (Nobel Women's Initiative, 2018).

Leading up to the Accra negotiations in 2003, Gbowee mobilized masses of women in calling for the delegates who were present at the negotiations to take them (the negotiations and the women who

had been outside the negotiations staging sit-ins) more seriously, by attending meetings regularly and by signing the peace agreement as soon as possible (Gbowee, 2009). Harcourt (2012) explains that part of the women's political action that they undertook, was to threaten to strip naked in front of the official delegates present at the peace talks.

The women literally compelled the delegates to reach an agreement at the peace negotiations (Harcourt, 2012). The threat of seeing ones mother strip naked in public was enough to instil fear in the (largely male) delegation. As a result of the way in which traditional African societies have constructed nakedness, the idea of using nakedness to bring shame and a curse upon the person/people who are oppressing you, worked in favour of the women as a tool of resistance. One may then wonder about the performative aspect of this form of protest, for political ends. However, looking at it in this way, is looking at it through a Western frame which became normalized in our societies- this is a frame which looks at the female body as being for male consumption, a subject which is merely passively read and owned by everyone else except for the woman. The important aspect here, is the understanding that the female body (the personal, and intimate) does indeed form part of the political. It (the female body in its naked form) being present is an act of political agency, and is indicative of the regaining of the ownership of the female body, and shifting the narrative from one of sexualisation, to one of political agency.

In our society today, the personal has always been separated from the political. Minai (2010) argues that these have been separated because of the heteronormative organization of resistance. The gendered nature of resistance, has always been evident in its embedded binaries, in that the personal is the feminine- this is what is the physical and what is embodied, i.e. the immediately sexual bodies. Whereas the political sphere is masculine; of disembodied reason, the intellectual mind and rationality, and the ownership of agency (Minai, 2010). Minai (2010) also makes the important point that inherent in the formation of this binary, are contradictions, and one of them being sexual violence (an issue which has traditionally only been considered to take place in the intimate, personal space). However, through looking at the reasons that the Liberian women embarked on a peace movement, we see that sexual violence does indeed take place in situations classified as war, and moreover, rape and sexual violence are used as weapons of war (Gbowee, 2009). It is important to then understand that the personal cannot be separated from the political.

The public bearing of the naked female body, demonstrates the very intersection of the personal and the political, that Western scholars throughout history have tried to negate. The binary of resistance works to systematically erase the role of women in times of resistance and protest. The

protests undertaken by Leymah Gbowee and other activists in Liberia, as well as the activists in Kenya, speak to the weight that motherhood and women hold in society, and the need to problematize how the only sphere for these identities to exist is said to be the personal and private sphere. The existence of a binary in defining resistance then determines what may be considered as valid resistance, but the use of nakedness as a form of protest, disrupts this binary and stands as a rejection of the heteronormative marking of women's bodies as passive and other-owned (Minai, 2010).

Naked Protests at Rhodes University- #RURferenceList

Chengeta (2017), a former Rhodes University student at the time of the Reference List protest, provides a brief background of the events leading up to the naked protest. In April of 2016, a campaign called Chapter 2.12, a poster campaign, was initiated to draw the university's attention (particularly those who form part of management) to the rape culture that the institution continues to perpetuate in its responses to cases of sexual assault and rape, as well as its inadequate policies on sexual assault (Chengeta, 2017). These posters were subsequently removed by the university's Campus Protection Unit. One may then surmise that the Reference List, which was a list of 11 men's names who were alleged perpetrators of rape, posted on a Queer Facebook Confessions page (Chengeta, 2017), was a response to the continuous and perpetual silencing of victims and survivors of sexual assault, and the institutions willingness to, in essence, turn a blind eye to the systemic rape culture prevalent in the institution. This list served as a catalyst for the events to come.

Disruption of the academic project, for the purposes of holding discussions based on engaging one another (students) on rape culture took place, and the university proceeded to issue an interdict to stop these disruptions (Chengeta, 2017). This served to demobilize and silence victims of sexual assault and the student body as a whole, who had been making efforts to engage and educate one another on rape culture and the perpetuation thereof. Additionally, the interdict came with increased police presence on campus- a space which was previously a safe haven (in relative terms) became a militarized zone. On the third day of protests, owing to a growing dissatisfaction from the inadequate responses from Rhodes management coupled with the arrests of 5 students, a group of women students began to take off their clothes, resorting to an ancient form of resistance which had been used in Africa for centuries (Thamm, 2016). The female body which has consistently been the scene of the crime- the passive body, was being made visible and was conveying an audible message.

The society in which we live, is not 'normal' (Thamm, 2016). It cannot be normal for women to be expected to live in fear in every space that they occupy, be it in private and intimate spaces or in public ones such as institutions of higher learning. If the conditions that women are forced to live under in society are not normal, it then follows that the forms of resistance and actions used against these abnormal conditions, will also not be normal. Following the 'normal' and formal channels of action such as reporting cases of rape and sexual assault to the authorities has proven to be inadequate in addressing rape culture in our society and has only succeeded in silencing victims of sexual assault (Thamm, 2016). Tamale (2016) explains that when women resort to naked protests as a form of resistance, it signals a form of politics beyond 'formal' politics. Beyond the confines of the traditional heteronormative binary of what resistance should look like.

Sutton (2007) suggest an interesting nuance when she questions whether the meaning and context of nakedness is interpreted differently by society when disrobing is enacted by different kinds of people. This, however, has been the argument throughout this paper in that connotations associated with nakedness are gendered and are dependent on particular historical and social contexts. A question of interest is whether or not male naked bodies are equally destabilizing or equally as threatening as the female body has historically been perceived? (Sutton, 2007). In the naked protest in #RURReferenceList, although the majority of the participants were women, there were also a few men who took part as well. However, the general public seems to ignore or negate this- not because the number of men taking part was too minimal to consider (which is valid), but because once women decide to reclaim the ownership of their bodies for the purposes of resistance- through nakedness, society suddenly feels threatened by this display of resistance, and this ultimately has a destabilizing effect.

Another element to possibly consider, are the contexts of age and the environment in which the naked protest took place. Minai (2010) as well as Tamale (2016) explain the factor of age being of importance in the way in which the naked female body is viewed in society, particularly in traditional African societies. In that the public display of a woman who is married or is a mother, is understood as being shameful to the person who has caused great anger and oppression to the woman who is stripping naked (Tamale, 2016), and this was evident in the case studies of Liberia and Kenya. The naked protest at Rhodes, took place in a different context- one in which the students were primarily young women, and at a 'previously' white institution.

One would argue that perhaps the naked protest was met with the response that it was met with in the media, particularly on social media platforms- because of the way in which institutions such as

Rhodes University have historically been perceived. Institutions such as Rhodes have often been seen as spaces of privilege (spaces in which students of colour should be thankful to enter), spaces which are meant to be safe, and welcoming. It then follows that under this rhetoric, it would be bizarre to believe that sexual assault would take place within the university campus- particularly, when the perpetrators of this violence are students as well. When this in and of itself is seen as far-fetched, it then becomes even more bizarre to consider the idea of a naked protest stemming from genuine concerns, rather than seeking attention- which were some of the opinions on social media platforms such as Twitter (these ultimately made visible the problematic masculinities inherent in rape culture) (Bashonga and Khuzwayo, 2017).

Nakedness as resistance: An unruly politics?

In all three cases, it can be seen that the oppression of women- albeit different (depending on the context of the time as well as the environment), continues to be a constant throughout our society. All three cases are demonstrative of how there are aspects inherent within our societies which bring women to the end of their politics. There are aspects of our societies which leave women no choice but to exercise a form of politics which falls outside of 'formal' politics (Tamale, 2016).

It has previously been mentioned that the context in which we live in today is one which does not allow for the continuance of the separation of the personal and the political. There is indeed a need to begin to look at these spheres as inextricably linked. Influential political philosophers Giorgio Agamben and Michael Foucault in Lazzarato (2002), make the assertion that in the concept of bio politics, the distinction between *zoë* (man as a living being, and the sphere of influence being limited to the home- i.e. the personal) and *bios* (man as a political subject, whose sphere of influence is the polis) is nonsensical, and is becoming a thing of the past. The introduction of the *zoë* into the *bios*, is a decisive event of modernity and marks a radical transformation of political and philosophical classical thought (Lazzarato, 2002).

If one agrees that the use of nakedness as a form of political resistance, is indeed an introduction of the *zoë* into the *bios* and is a decisive event of modernity, it then follows that viewing naked protests as uncivilized, sexual, and illegitimate, stems from the Western frame of looking at the female body- particularly the black female naked body. Here, there is evidence of a cultural patriarchy and a particular framework of Western development which excludes the colonised. Therefore, the prominence of naked protests throughout history in African societies is not

'backward', void of political depth, or irrational- but is rather, a demonstration of a move towards a different kind of politics- a politics which extends beyond (and disrupts) the confines of the heteronormative binary of resistance- an unruly politics.

Khanna et al (2013) describes unruly politics as a reconfiguration of political spaces- political action taken by citizens which do not fall within the traditional 'formal' channels of the political. One may then make the claim that because women's bodies had never been considered as part of the political, that there is then a need to reconfigure political spaces in order to account for the modalities of political action which are otherwise considered to be unconventional or illegitimate. The lens of unruly politics helps us to do this.

Naked protests qualify as unruly politics because they disrupt the heteronormative binary of resistance, and give political agency to bodies which are traditionally read as passive and sexualised in the Western society. Unruly politics such as nakedness used for the purposes of resistance, is not a form of politics which is inferior or irrational, compared to the traditionally 'masculine' form of politics- it is a different kind of politics altogether, which does not need to be compared to the traditional paradigm of politics and resistance. As evident in naked protests, it does not seek to conform to societal conventions (Khanna et al, 2013), but seeks to disrupt these and provide an alternative which takes seriously the experiences of marginalized people in society- particularly women.

Conclusion

Nakedness as a form of resistance is nothing new in African societies- it is in fact a form of resistance which dates back centuries (Thamm, 2016). The way in which we view nakedness is largely informed by the way that nakedness and the female body has been constructed in society, and this is dependent on the socio-historical context (Sutton, 2007). When one looks at nakedness through the normalized Western frame of questioning, then it is possible to view nakedness as inherently sexual and for the consumption of men. The central argument of this paper was that indeed nakedness is not inherently sexual, but that it had been constructed to be this way through the primacy given to what can be visualised (i.e. the physical body) in the West (Oyěwùmí, 1997). Additionally, the argument was that nakedness is not only constructed to be sexual, but may also be constructed and used for the purposes of resistance.

This was shown to a great extent with the use of the three case studies employed throughout the paper. These case studies demonstrated how even in differing contexts and at times, for differing aims- nakedness is a legitimate form of resistance, as illustrated through the work of Tamale (2016). In the cases of the women activists in Kenya and Liberia, the aspect of motherhood, age, and the 'curse of nakedness' played a major role. These women capitalized on an age old belief within the cultural context, and used it as a mode to demonstrate their political agency-denouncing the idea that the physical body has no place in the political realm. Further reiterating the introduction of the zoë into the bios. In the case of Rhodes University, nakedness was also used to demonstrate the way in which women had reached the end of their politics, and the extent to which society had normalized Western standards of what the female body should look like, when this body should be displayed, and under what conditions, as could be seen through some of the reactions on social media.

Nakedness as a form of resistance is not the only way for women to assert themselves into the political, but it is a direct rejection of the notion that the female body is passive, powerless, a sexual object for male consumption, an object owned by society- and not a political weapon owned by the woman herself. The use of the naked female body as a tool of political resistance is not only a form of unruly politics, but a true personification of the assertion that the 'personal is political'.

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