

***Fashioning Postfeminism: Spectacular Femininity and Transnational Culture* by Simidele Dosekun. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2020.**

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Feminism has come a long way. But how far has it really come? Patriarchal structures still exist and are yet to be completely vanquished. However, there may have been some victories achieved in the last few decades that warrant debates around the vexed post-feminist agenda.

Simidele Dosekun cleverly utilises beauty politics as a direct organising principle of thought on the navigations, negotiations, and cultivations of versions of feminism that women in Nigeria engage to traverse patriarchal and deeply-rooted cultural norms. The author describes the fashioning of the study participants as being “spectacularly feminine” (1), which is characterised by long expensive hair extensions, exaggerated makeup, false lashes, manicured nails, designer clothes, and accessories. Further, the author shows how post-feminist discourse is transnationalised and that women in the Global South are active partakers.

The book delves into the lives of 18 women of privilege and class to reveal how women of Nigeria, particularly in Lagos, view themselves as feminists using transnational fashion style to demonstrate the mindset and situation of post-femininity in Nigeria. The central question advanced by the author is to ascertain what kinds of women are made from these performative acts of hyperfeminine artifice and how the women in turn perceive themselves. Through her interviews, she explores the disparity between external perceptions of these women and their internal self-perceptions and delves into profound notions of post-feminist self-presentation and subjectivity within diverse cultural and socioeconomic contexts. Post-feminism can be understood from Dosekun’s conceptualisation as a prevailing cultural phenomenon and sensibility that centres around the perceived notion of feminism’s pastness, rather than being conceived

as a discrete historical era or a definitive state following feminism. It should not be seen as an epistemological shift within the realm of feminism either. Post-feminism remains a contentious subject.

The author is quick to point out that these are “claims” and “cheery fiction” (2) where post-feminism promises women rationalities and the narrative that they are empowered, have choices and personal responsibility as well as personal failures. This promise is, however, not extended to all women in the Global South, but to just a privileged few who have class and means. The hyperstylised habit is an expensive venture as admitted by the women in book. Dosekun argues further that the wider post-feminist discourse has negated the voices of women in the Global South as if they are not partakers in the liberation it offers.

In *Fashioning Postfeminism*, she demonstrates that privileged women from the Global South are using a new feminine style to show, in their own way, that they are part of the post-feminist movement. As discerning global consumers and informed media participants, these women assert their independence from the necessity of cultural critique or active involvement in feminism's collective political endeavour. Dosekun adeptly uncovers compelling intricacies concerning the practical obstacles in attaining their unique expression.

The book opens with an introduction to the epistemological and ontological underpinnings of Dosekun's discourse on the subject matter. She demonstrates how it is important to let the voices of the participants come through. In the first chapter, the author provides a contextual background to the choice of Lagos, Nigeria as her study area. “Eko for show” (35) best captures how Lagos is renowned for being cosmopolitan and why it is at the forefront of the creative industry as well as a burgeoning film industry in Africa. Lagos is a vibrant state and represents a prominent cultural and commercial hub of Nigeria. It is also notable for being the centre for fashion and, likely, the first portal to trends and fads in Nigeria. Thus, situating her work within this space as against other states in Nigeria makes sense for Dosekun's research.

Her research is qualitative in nature and her main tool used for data collection is in-depth interview and non-participant observation. Her writing style is wonderfully clear and vividly descriptive, making it easier to imagine the extravagantly dressed women in the mind's eye. Through a comprehensive

review of the literature, the author surveys and discusses representations of “African looks” (27) and the performative culture that results in this custom. She further elucidates a historical framework for understanding women in Nigeria, explaining the multifarious structures that act as barriers to women’s equality and citizenship. Nonetheless, Dosekun recognises that the study participants are empowered and above the problems of feminism.

In Chapter Two, Dosekun details how the spectacularly feminine style emerges as a necessary choice for the participants. They demonstrate how they are choosing the pleasures of looking spectacular, and the self-confidence they gain through that choice. But they also note that the confidence comes at a somewhat painful cost. Beauty matters even if it comes at a price and ends up as a crutch. For these women, hair weaves offer a form of fabulousness, a luxurious garbed transformation to feeling beautiful, empowered, and feminised. The weaves, in addition to the makeup, pencil heels, false lashes, and nail extensions, are happy technologies of beauty to them. Such performative tools are essential to make them feel more elegant and classier. They appear to have longer legs and are able to catwalk. These so-called happy technologies not only enhance nature, but accentuate and compliment it for them as well. The women declare that being spectacularly feminine allows them not only to feel feminine but also beautiful and empowered. By extension, they feel more like themselves – independent beautiful women.

The following chapter highlights the rational thinking that goes into executing their spectacular femininity and the reader is left with the idea that nothing is done randomly, right down to the shape of their manicured nails. Chapter Three allows the reader to understand how the women participants justify their spectacular femininity. It is important to the women in the study to present themselves as skilled at shopping and using products for their beauty technologies. They exhibit what the author terms as an “aesthetic vigilance” (72).

By asking some uncomfortable questions, Dosekun reveals how the women navigate around the costs, benefits, and risks to their body organisation. They are armed with the knowledge and skills that are required to traverse the process not only of looking spectacularly feminine but appearing natural as well. The women in the book are always on top of their style game. This may require a daily morning makeup routine that takes one hour and a half, a process the author

conceptualises as being aesthetically vigilant. The idea of aesthetic vigilance requires aesthetic rest and is rationalised as making “me time” (73), which the participants consider more as investments in themselves for themselves.

These participants pride themselves in their ability to organise, coordinate, and execute their consumption of beauty entrepreneurship. It is popularly said that looking good is good business and indeed, feminine consumer culture does come with a hefty price tag. However, the study participants are quick to indicate how financially independent they are. A good example is Funke who indicates, “I’m working you know” (78), from which the author cleverly carves out the title of the chapter. By stating their financial independence, and not wanting to be bandied along with the negative tropes of women depending on men financially, these women do not want to be seen as gold diggers. Their justification and rationalisation extend to retail therapy to feel better about themselves. For them, post-feminism provides guilt-free consumerism. This constant process of negotiations, rationalisations, and justifications gives the participants what Dosekun terms “entitled femininity,” which is simply a woman doing it for herself.

In Chapter Four, Dosekun examines the politicisation of Black hair, arguing that hair is not just hair. Some of the participants demonstrate their vast knowledge on artificial hairs, their countries of origin, and worth. They allude to the fact that hair is an “economistic investment” (68) and rationalise the exorbitant cost of the hair weaves by viewing them as necessary tools to enhance their looks and appear spectacularly feminine.

Readers can easily comprehend how the private becomes political even in matters as seemingly mundane as how one chooses to wear their hair, natural or bought. In fashioning themselves, however, participants are not preoccupied by racial politics on hair and fashion, but rather aligned with representations of Black beauty globally. For them, wearing hair weaves does not mean they want to be White or not themselves. The artificial hair weaves help beat aesthetic boredom and allow them to have fun with how they look. The women are quick to reiterate that their choice of hair is in no way political, and Dosekun surmises that Black beauty is multiple and fluid. Additionally, the women express how, despite their being domiciled in Nigeria, fashioning themselves spectacularly helps them reconcile their localness as being from “Naija” (90) with their ability

to exhibit transnational forms of post-feminism. They feel that they can fit in easily abroad due to their cosmopolitan sense of style.

Chapter Five confronts the reader with the duality that participants maintain of exhibiting hyperfemininity on the one hand, and ensuring that their character, intelligence, and professionalism are clearly defined on the other. In a highly patriarchal society like Nigeria, appearing as hyperfeminine is equated with being exceedingly domesticated. However, the study participants are quick to distance themselves from any such domestic goddess indexing. In fact, they insist that “they are not that kinda girl” as Chapter Five is titled. Hyperfemininity presents the appearance of women in the study as this double entendre which participant Bisi refers to as “an almost magical balance” (126).

My personal reflection is that fashion in the book is represented in the self, the others, the performative, the message, the trend, the psychology, and the sociology. It shows how powerful a mechanism it is for communication. Through her study, the author is able to untangle the patriarchy woven into the fabric of the everyday lives of the study participants. The women engage spectacular femininity to craft a way to feel empowered. As a reader, one is struck by three key themes that run through the book: the navigations, negotiations, and cultivations of different types of feminism. The women in the study are constantly negotiating their power base and their happiness. They indicate that they have to appear fashionable, expensive, and intelligent all at once. In addition, they also have to look global but maintain a certain level of Africanness or African femininity. This requires them to negotiate how they want to be perceived by others as being successful careerwise and maintaining a happy home without looking like the typical domestic goddess. This way they can straddle both worlds of being African while looking global.

Another key issue of reflection is the way the study participants navigate the patriarchal structures that exist in their society and are thus able to nurture their own version of empowerment. They navigate the corridors of patriarchy within the private and political spaces as the private is political. They embody the womanliness- the hyperfemininity, when it is called upon and necessary to perform. They also navigate the costs, time, benefits, and risks of hyperfemininity to their body organisation by rationalising and justifying their aesthetic vigilance.

The final idea is that of the possibility of different feminisms. The power of feminism to negotiate, the feminist willpower to navigate, and the one to embody are all tools to challenge oppressive structures and institutions. There is never one way to win a war. Feminism cannot always be hard or ugly or sad or angry. It can be soft, like how Dosekun's study participants deploy it to dress spectacularly or how they employ it to exhibit both fashion and intellect when necessary. Feminism can be used to empower oneself to overcome cheating partners or perform a "magical balance". The book is thought-provoking and well-argued, making for an interesting read in understanding post-feminist discussions in a relatable manner from a Global South perspective.