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special issue on African Feminisms

Editorial note: Because of the special nature of this issue, *QUEST*'s standard rubrics '*QUEST* laboratory' and 'Reviews sections' do not appear in the present volume XX. In volumes XXI and XXII, however, these rubrics will be amply represented again.



QUEST

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special issue on

African feminisms

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Table of Contents

Articles

INTRODUCTION: AFRICAN FEMINISMS, by Sanya Osha	5
THEORIZING AFRICAN FEMINISM(S): the 'Colonial' Question, by Pinkie Mekgwe	11
IS GENDER YET ANOTHER COLONIAL PROJECT? A critique of Oyeronke Oyewumi's proposal, by Agnes Atia Apusigah.....	23

Table of contents

‘CRAFTING EPICENTRES OF AGENCY’: Sarah Bartmann and African feminist literary imaginings, by Pumla Dineo Gqola.....	45
DISCURSIVE CHALLENGES FOR AFRICAN FEMINISMS, by Desiree Lewis	77
AFRICAN FEMINISM: RESISTANCE OR RESENTMENT?, by Chielozona Eze	97
THE STATE OF KNOWLEDGE ON SEXUALITY IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA: A Synthesis of Literature, by Chi-Chi Undie and Kabwe Benaya	119
PHILOSOPHY AND FIGURES OF THE AFRICAN FEMALE, by Sanya Osha	155
Notes on contributors	205

Introduction: African Feminisms

by Sanya Osha

Abstract. Introduction: African Feminisms. This volume is underpinned by the aim of reviewing the various debates, tendencies and discourses that have marked the trajectories of the area of specialization (and also the domain of activity) now known as African feminisms. Most of the contributors to the volume are still relatively young but have nonetheless distinguished themselves in this particular area of discourse. In addition, a significant number of them are literary theorists but the sheer nature and diversity of the field necessitate a multidisciplinary orientation.

Key words: Africa, feminism, gender, philosophy, post-colonial

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The field is one that requires different networks of interdisciplinary conversation since a common goal unites all scholars and activists of feminism, namely, the *condition* of the female sex. As such, the disciplinary approaches employed in the essays in this volume draw liberally from both the social sciences and the humanities. In philosophical terms, questions concerning freedom and agency are addressed by many of the authors in different ways. Psychological insights are also provided for injuries caused by multiple forms of violence and trauma. Indeed these readings of gender politics span a variety of situations which the contributors address: sexuality, widowhood, infertility, polygamy etc.

In a significant way, the volume unravels a considerable part of the silence concerning the ways in which female sexuality and sexuality/ies in Africa in general can be re-thought. In particular, one has in mind the contribution of Chi-Chi Undiwe and Kabwe Benaya which seeks to address a crucial question Molarra Ogundipe-Leslie posed concerning African female sexualities. Ogundipe-Leslie in *Re-creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations* (1994) had decried the absence of discourse on sexualities. Another way the present volume seeks to move beyond the critical impasse that afflicts much of the discourse on African feminisms is to applaud the manner in which Desiree Lewis reframes the question of African feminisms within the context of contemporary globalization; this in turn forces us to re-consider the effects of new levels and dynamics of institutionalization and also the new structures of power that emanate from them.

Chielozona Eze incorporates many of the concerns just mentioned using eastern Nigeria as a primary site of reference. He explores the configuration of gender politics in the works of a new generation of Nigerian female authors such as Lola Shoneyin, Seffi Atta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie all of whom reside and work in the west. In particular, she explores the feeling of *ressentiment*- in its Nietzschean connotation- in African forms of discourse and also the somewhat problematic status of African feminism(s). In other words, the discursive shifts in which African feminisms travel as a subject of discourse from colonial moorings into contemporary times. In many ways, Eze's essay rehearses and critiques at the same time, the clichés of victimhood, feminization, de-womanization and the politics of indigeneity. As part of its conceptual anchor, the essay foregrounds the work of two prominent Nigerian scholars of feminist discourse: Oyeronke Oyewumi and Nkiru Nzeogwu. It also suggests that African forms of feminism have some grave shortcomings. It is averred that the practice of female genital mutilation, polygamy, infertility and popular prejudices against female sexual pleasure erode the basis of female agency by being tied to obviously *anti*-modern notions of collective responsibility. In other words, the scope for the exercise of individuality by the female subject in these matters is quite

limited. Pinkie Mekgwe also examines the issue of agency and autonomy together with the possible conceptual flexibilities inherent in African feminisms. Furthermore, literary theory serves as the disciplinary grounds from which she conducts her explorations.

The paper by Chi-Chi Undiwe and Kabwe Benaya is quite fascinating because of its uncommon subject matter within the African context. They do quite well in reviewing the existing literature on African sexualities and on that score conclude that the available viewpoints on the subject are undergirded by a colonial paradigm. They also point out that the renewed interest in the question of African sexualities is informed by the usual considerations of Malthusian population growth and of course the HIV/Aids epidemic. It is clear, as they rightly observe, that scientific research in this particular domain of study is still quite scanty. In addition, the literature that exists does not demonstrate sufficient concern for issues of eroticism and sexual pleasure. In attempting to fill this vacuum, the authors bestow attention on the form of the female body, the dilemmas of female sexual pleasure and the rare instances in which the female genitalia is placed in a position of prominence in cultural terms in some African societies. In several ways, Undiwe and Benaya attempt to deconstruct the prevailing sexual orthodoxies by suggesting other analytical methods in which this grey region of inquiry can be approached.

On more familiar grounds, Agnes Apusigah makes a case against the culturalization of gender, the fetishization of ethnicity and in short, generalized essentialization via a re-reading of Oyeronke Oyewumi's famous text, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997).

Pumla Gqola's contribution revisits - if only in an oblique way- the coloniality present in the discourse of sexuality by interrogating the various figures of Sarah Bartmann, the unfortunate woman who was carried off to Europe to be displayed naked during the period of brute imperialism. Employing history and different sites of textuality, Gqola demonstrates how the struggles for representation are waged around the figure(s) of Bartmann, the dilemmas of otherness, the violence of colonialism and the ambiguities of silence involved in the various processes of

subject (de)construction. Gqola's piece suggests that we have not heard the last of Bartmann as we can expect to be involved in a fresh phase of a politics of representation within a context of ever growing scientific activity and technologization. Sanya Osha's contribution also addresses the colonial implications of constructions of the black subject; the dynamics of representation surrounding the black subject in both anthropological and philosophical discourses. A recurrent question in this regard is how is the female subject constituted in African forms of textuality? Or rather what is the fate of the female presence within a largely male-constituted archive?

Of all the contributions, Desree Lewis's essay addresses most directly the neo-liberal co-optation of feminist demands. In this way, her deliberations assume the broadest global dimensions. She tracks the shifts in emphasis in the meanings of patriarchy and feminism together with other related concepts within the African context which are in turn assailed by powerful global economic and institutional forces. Lewis's insights on how to re-read African feminisms against the wave of contemporary globalization are most instructive. Indeed the concerns of a post-feminist North are usually markedly different from those of the regions in the South. Finally, the professionalization of knowledge in the domain of women's studies in the North and the transformation of the cultural capital derived from them under a postmodern rhetoric are quite glaring just as new forms of global injustice that continue to proliferate.

Quite a number of the essays in this volume approach the discourse of African feminisms rather directly, that is, as it has been conventionally approached. However, there are a few noteworthy points of departure. For instance, in addition to engaging the ever-present spectre of colonialism, Gqola's essay unveils several complicities between textuality, the collective memory and the politics of representation. Bartmann's figure is not simply one that is frozen within a lost colonial past. This is borne out by the fact that her remains were recently brought back from Europe to South Africa for re-burial. The journey back isn't one which is strictly physical, it is indeed far more telling than the movement suggests. It involves a re-constitution of history, a contestation between different

forms and contexts of textuality and finally, a re-ordering of collective memory. In other words, it represents many conceptual shifts from a hazy colonial past into more palpable textual forms as well as forms of popular consciousness where the struggles for representation have a more immediate impact.

Theorizing African Feminism(s)

the 'Colonial' Question

by Pinkie Mekgwe

Abstract. Theorizing African Feminism(s): the 'Colonial' Question. This paper has arisen from a recognition that while the development of African Literature over the past four decades presents itself as an overt exercise in decolonization, adopting as it does an anti-colonial, anti-'father' stance, the development of African feminism becomes propelled towards being anti-Western feminism. This is manifested in an approach that while it seeks difference from the West, is anti-'difference'; while anti-gender-separatism and pro-male, yet seeks female agency and autonomy. It is this fluid character of African feminism that this paper seeks to explore. The paper sets out to demonstrate the impact that 'Africanity' and the decolonisation project has had in shaping debates on African feminism firstly, by highlighting the intricate relationship enjoyed by postcolonialism and feminism in African literature. I then link this relationship to the paradoxical, often ambivalent stance that theories of African feminism have adopted over time, resulting in an apparent stasis in theorizing African Feminism. Such stasis, as I shall argue, emanates from the 'double bind' lent to the meaning of 'Africa' as tied to the colonial experience.

Key words: Africa, feminism, gender, philosophy, post-colonial

*Colonialism returns at the moment of its disappearance.*¹

Introduction

This paper has arisen from a recognition that while the development of African Literature over the past four decades presents itself as an overt

¹ Anne McClintock, 'The Angel of Progress', in: Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, eds. *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory* (New York and London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) p. 293.

exercise in decolonization, adopting as it does an anti-colonial, anti-'father' stance, the development of African feminism becomes propelled towards being anti-Western feminism. This is manifested in an approach that while it seeks difference from the West, is anti-'difference'; while anti-gender-separatism and pro-male, yet seeks female agency and autonomy. It is this fluid character of African feminism that this paper seeks to explore.

The paper sets out to demonstrate the impact that 'Africanity' and the decolonisation project has had in shaping debates on African feminism firstly, by highlighting the intricate relationship enjoyed by post-colonialism and feminism in African literature. I then link this relationship to the paradoxical, often ambivalent stance that theories of African feminism have adopted over time, resulting in an apparent stasis in theorizing African Feminism. Such stasis, as I shall argue, emanates from the 'double bind' lent to the meaning of 'Africa' as tied to the colonial experience.

Postcolonializing

Debates on theorizing 'the postcolonial' have been and continue to be vigorous. Deriving from these are different espousals of what post-colonialism is and/or seeks to do. Such theorizing has lent itself to different formulations such as 'post-colonialism', 'the post-colonial condition', 'the post-colonial scene', 'the post-colonial intellectual', 'the emerging disciplinary space of postcolonialism', 'postcolonializing' (McClintock, 1993: 293; Quayson, 2000: 156). These formulations attest to the varied directions subsumed under 'postcolonial studies' and the associated problematic of defining and mapping out succinct 'postcolonial borders'. Each formulation also denotes 'multiplicity' which, as I argue after McClintock, inscribes history as the single issue in postcolonial enquiry.²

² *Ibid.*

Emphasizing the centrality of history for postcolonial literature, the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* state that postcolonial literature expresses ‘the rationale of the grouping in a common past’. Further, the authors note that ‘feminist and post-colonial discourses both seek to reinstate the marginalized in the face of the dominant.’³ Such assertions underline the colonial past and its derivatives in the present as a defining point for the espousal of postcolonial theories with the result that ‘colonialism’ remains, as denoted in the epigraph to this paper, an enduring force as a perpetual reference point even as ‘postcolonializing’ seeks to subvert it. In the different developments pertaining to the theorizing of African feminism(s), we are presented with a case in point.

African Feminism(s)

African women’s writing when it emerged in the 1970s mainly set out to dispel mal-representations of African womanhood that proliferated African literature at the time. Feminist practitioners, in writing and in activism, sought to demonstrate that they were relevant to the African context and in particular, that they did not simply seek to emulate their western feminist counterparts.

Feminism, both as an activist movement and as a body of ideas that underline the need for a positive transformation of society such that women are not marginalized but are treated as full citizens in all spheres of life, has received extensive theoretical treatment. It is beyond the scope of this paper to offer a comprehensive survey of these debates, but I will focus on those that are most pertinent to my project. In the past three decades, seeking to define feminism has proven to be anything but simple. In a recent enquiry into the character of contemporary western feminism, Chris Beasley notes that:

The notion of ‘defining’ feminism is controversial. In addition to problems as-

³ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds., *The Empire Writes Back. Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (London and New York: Routledge, 1989).

sociated with a complex, shifting and sometimes inaccessible field, defining feminism also involves considering whether it is in any sense distinguishable from 'other' forms of thought. [...] the issue of feminism's 'borders' is a matter of debate.⁴

The issue of borders that pertain to the definition of feminism goes beyond distinguishing feminism from 'other forms of thought'. The border problem is discernible *within* the general body of feminist thought. Whereas contemporary western feminism broadly divides into such categories as Liberal, Radical, Marxist and Socialist Feminism, there is a general tendency amongst theorists to speak of feminism and western feminism in particular, as though it were monolithic. The past three decades have also been characterized by a marked presence of those 'feminisms' that are widely regarded as addressing the needs of those who have for a long time been marginalized and unrepresented by mainstream feminism. Such 'feminisms' have tended to be theorized against what is loosely termed western feminism.

*Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*⁵ is the seminal work of editors Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres which engages with the issue of defining 'other', 'emerging' feminisms against the canonized feminism of the 'first' world. The body of essays delineates the problematic not only of defining terms, but also of defining the constituency and context that are posed by cross-cultural studies. In her essay, Mohanty questions the application of western feminist theories onto the writings of 'the Third world' woman. She argues that such theories, which are *authored* in the West and therefore bear the authority of the West, perpetuate the self/other divide whereby discourses of developing nations are considered 'politically immature' and 'underdeveloped'.⁶ Mohanty observes that western feminist theory presents

⁴ Chris Beasley, *What Is Feminism?* (London: SAGE, 1999) p. xi.

⁵ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres, eds., *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991).

⁶ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, 'Under Western Eyes' in Mohanty, Russo and Torres, *op. cit.*, pp. 53 and 57.

itself as a universal phenomenon in ways which disguise its profoundly western concerns and biases.

The issue of the problematic of ‘universalizing’ feminist experience is also the focus of a recent essay by Oyeronke Oyewumi.⁷ Echoing earlier concerns about the globalization of sisterhood,⁸ Oyewumi interrogates the adoption of the term ‘sisterhood’ as a model for feminist relations and posits that:

‘Sisterhood’, just like the term ‘feminism’ demands theorization because, although its origins are very much tied to a specific culture, its intended application is ultimately transglobal. What meaning does it carry as it crosses boundaries, if indeed it ever does cross boundaries? Should it carry the same meaning? Can it carry the same meaning, given that words are informed by specific cultural assumptions and histories? What exactly are the implications of the cross-cultural use of ‘sisterhood’, given that the meaning shifts depending on a host of factors. [...] It is also pertinent to question whether the desired relationship apparent in the use of ‘sisterhood’ by white women is matched by the desire of other women to relate to them and others in that way.⁹

In Oyewumi’s view, the notion of ‘sisterhood’ which she ascribes to ‘white culture’ is alien to ‘other’ cultures, notably Chicano, African and African-American cultures which, following Patricia Collins,¹⁰ she identifies as emphasizing mothering over sisterhood. Collins’s view of feminism is that it is predominantly a white westernized experience that too often sidelines issues of racial difference, hence the imperative in her work to develop a Black feminist perspective which would more accurately reflect the realities and culture of Black women. In my view, Collins and Oyewumi too easily assign distinct cultural difference to the racial categories ‘black’ and ‘white’. While both critics’ discourses are

⁷ Oyeronke Oyewumi, ‘Ties that (Un)Bind: Feminism, Sisterhood and Other Foreign Relations’ in *Jenda: A Journal of Culture and African Women Studies*, 1, 1 2001.

⁸ These were particularly debated following the publication of Robin Morgan’s volume, See: Robin Morgan, ed., *Sisterhood is Global*, New York: Doubleday, 1984.

⁹ Oyewumi, op. cit., p. 3.

¹⁰ Patricia Hill Collins discusses the tradition of ‘Other Mothers’ amongst African Americans in her work, *Black Feminist Thought. Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1991).

engaging and offer an insight into 'other' feminisms, they tend to simplify constructs that are otherwise rather complex. Oyewumi's view that 'sisterhood' is a marker of the white nuclear family and that 'mothering' is essentially an African concept, for instance, is questionable. In Southern Africa, the notion of sisterhood amongst women is of such importance that it is carried across the extended family. It is also understood as an important marker of friendship ties.

The issues discussed above relating to racial difference, power dimensions between the west and 'others', with Africa subsumed under the latter category, as well as the crucial issue of 'redefining' feminism to ensure its relevance to the African context were and still are crucial to theorizing African feminism. This is reflected in the different directions feminist debates in Africa have taken.

In her much cited work, Filomina Chioma Steady¹¹ defines African feminism as emphasizing female autonomy and co-operation; nature over culture; the centrality of children, multiple mothering and kinship.¹² African feminist literature, she posits, concerns itself with the liberty of all African people. Although indebted to the global feminist movement, African feminist discourse takes care to delineate those concerns that are peculiar to the African situation. It also questions features of traditional African cultures without denigrating them, understanding that these might be viewed differently by the different classes of woman. One sphere that has increasingly held the attention of theorists like Steady has been the question of the involvement of men. The rationale is that, if African feminism is to succeed as a humane reformation project, it cannot accept separatism from the opposite sex. Eschewing male exclusion then, becomes one defining feature of African feminism that differentiates it from feminism as it is conceptualized in the west.

Following on Steady's work, Boyce Davies and Graves posit that African feminism

¹¹ Filomina Chioma Steady, *The Black Woman Cross-Culturally* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Schenkman Publishing Co., 1981).

¹² Filomina Chioma Steady, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

'recognizes a common struggle with African men for the removal of the yokes of foreign domination and European/American exploitation'.¹³

African feminism is not antagonistic to men but challenges them to be aware of those aspects of women's subjugation which differ from the generalized oppression of all African people.

Although agreeing with the politics of feminism, most women writers in Africa have rejected the feminist label while others have vacillated between endorsing the label and refuting it. On being asked why she does not want to be called a feminist, acclaimed Nigerian London-based writer Buchi Emecheta has asserted:

I did not start as a feminist. I do not think I am one now. Most of my readers would take this to be the statement of a coward. But it is not. I thought before that I would like to be one but after my recent visit to the United States, when I talked to real 'Feminists' with a capital 'F', I think we women of African background still have a very very long way to go before we can really rub shoulders with such women... So my sisters in America, I am not shunning your advanced help, in fact I still think women of Africa need your contribution, and at the same time we need our men.¹⁴

And also:

I will not be called feminist here, because it is European. It is as simple as that. I just resent that... I don't like being defined by them... It is just that it comes from outside and I don't like people dictating to me. I do believe in the African type of feminism. They call it womanism, because, you see, you Europeans don't worry about water, you don't worry about schooling, you are so well off. Now, I buy land, and I say, 'Okay, I can't build on it, I have no money, so I give it to some women to start planting.' That is my brand of feminism.¹⁵

Emecheta's answers capture the difficulties both of 'naming' and contextual relevance that 'feminists' from/in Africa are faced with. She particularly emphasizes the importance of activism for the African woman

¹³ Carole Boyce Davies and Anne Graves, eds., *Ngambika. Studies of Women in African Literature* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1986), p. 8.

¹⁴ Buchi Emecheta, 'A Nigerian Writer Living in London.' In *Kunapipi* 4 (1), 1982. pp. 116-117.

¹⁵ Buchi Emecheta in a 1989 interview. Cited in Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi, *Gender In African Women's Writing. Identity, Sexuality and Difference* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1997) p. 7.

whose problems are still largely concerned with access to the basic amenities of life. Organisations such as WIN (Women in Nigeria), WAND (Women's Association for National Development) (Sierra Leone), African National Congress Women's League (South Africa) among others, have been established by women in various African countries to address the problems of the African woman's social inequality in these varied contexts.

Outlining the need for African feminists to be self-defined, African feminist and critic Omolara Ogundipe Leslie makes the assertion that the African woman needs to be conscious not only of the fact that she is a woman but that she is both an African and a third world person.¹⁶ As an African, the woman needs to be conscious of the context in which her feminist stance is made. This means that she should, while pointing out the flaws of her culture, be careful not to be seen to be aspiring to westernisation at the expense of her own African customs. Ogundipe Leslie offers STIWANISM¹⁷ (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa) as a viable alternative to western feminism, placing as it does emphasis on social equality with men in Africa. The model offered by Ogundipe Leslie is particularly attractive as an effort to redress current economic inequality between men and women in Africa. It also moves away from the problem posed by the term 'feminism'.

Whereas Emecheta is strongly against 'being named from outside', particularly by her 'Americans sisters', she nevertheless endorses the term 'womanism'. Womanism is a term coined by African American writer and feminist activist Alice Walker to denote: A black feminist or feminist of color... who loves other women, sexually and/or nonsexually.

Appreciates and prefers women's culture... sometimes loves individual men, sexually and/or nonsexually. Committed to survival and wholeness of entire

¹⁶ See Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, 'The Female Writer and her Commitment' In Jones, E.D., Palmer, E. and Jones, M., *Women in African Literature Today* 15, London and New York: James Currey, 1987.

¹⁷ See Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, *Re-Creating Ourselves. African Women and Critical Transformations*, Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994.

people, male and female... Womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender.¹⁸

Womanism has been adopted by other 'African feminists' like Ogunyemi¹⁹ in order

'to avoid the distractions attendant with [the term feminism].'²⁰

It is the preferable term, in Ogunyemi's opinion, because it addresses the otherwise separatist nature of feminism by recognizing men as partners rather than foes.

The inclusive nature of womanism appears to be most relevant for feminists in Africa such as Ama Ata Aidoo who has posited that:

When people ask me rather bluntly every now and then whether I am a feminist, I not only answer yes, but I go on to insist that every woman and every man should be a feminist – especially if they believe that Africans should take charge of African land, African wealth, African lives and the burden of African development.²¹

Aidoo's stance, however, differs from that of African-American critic and espouser of 'Africana womanism' Clenora Hudson-Weems.²² In Hudson-Weems's view, 'terminology is critical to definition' and so there is a need to identify and 'refine an African-centered paradigm for women of African descent' as society, she argues, has 'chosen to name and define Africana women within the constructs of a Eurocentric perspective – feminism – indeed, a reality outside of Africana women's historical and

¹⁸ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens: Womanist Prose*, (San Diego: Harcourt, 1983) p. xii.

¹⁹ Ogunyemi discusses the implications of womanism in her essay, 'Womanism: The Dynamics of black Female Writing in English' (1985).

²⁰ C. O. Ogunyemi, *Africa Wo/man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women*, (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) p. 116.

²¹ Ama Ata Aidoo, 'The African Woman Today' in Obioma Nnaemeka, ed., *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power. From Africa to the Diaspora*, (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998) p. 47.

²² Clenora Hudson-Weems, Self-Naming and Self-Definition: An Agenda for Survival, in Obioma Nnaemeka, *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power*, op. cit., pp. 449-450.

cultural context.’²³ ‘Africanans’ are identified as ‘Continental Africans and Africans in the diaspora’²⁴. The terms Black Feminism and African Feminism, fail to address Africanans’ plight because, in her view, they are aligned with ‘feminism’, which she identifies as rooted in western history. At the same time, womanism fails to make a clear distinction between a ‘womanist’ and a ‘feminist’. Africana womanism, Hudson-Weems suggests, corrects the anomalies of Black Feminism, African Womanism and African Feminism in that:

Africana womanism is an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is grounded in African culture and, therefore, it necessarily focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs, and the conflict between the mainstream feminist, the black feminist, the African feminist, and the Africana womanist. The conclusion is that Africana womanism and its agenda are unique and separate from both white feminism and Black feminism; moreover to the extent of naming in particular, Africana womanism differs from African feminism.²⁵ [Emphasis in the original].

For Aidoo, whose belief is that feminism has been practised by African women for a long time ‘as part of our heritage’, any attempt to assign feminism to the west is defeatist: ‘*It is not new and I really refuse to be told I am learning feminism from abroad*’²⁶ (emphasis in the original), she asserts. Whilst Anne McClintock, unlike Ifi Amadiume²⁷, believes that African women have always been subject to forms of inequality with men in so far as ascendancy to power is concerned, McClintock nevertheless concurs with Aidoo on the notion that feminism is not alien to the

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Clenora Hudson-Weems, ‘Africana Womanism’, in Obioma Nnaemeka, ed., *Sisterhood, Feminisms and Power. From Africa to the Diaspora*, op. cit., p. 149.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 154-155.

²⁶ Ama Ata Aidoo, quoted in Nfah-Abbenyi, op. cit., p. 10.

²⁷ See Ifi Amadiume, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands. Gender and Sex in an African Society* (London and New Jersey: Zed Books, 1987). Amadiume’s work is based on an anthropological study of the Nnobi of Nigeria. One of her main findings is that pre-colonial Nnobi society accorded men and women equal power opportunities and the gender construct was flexible, allowing for the possibility of having ‘male daughters’ and ‘female husbands’.

African context. The importance of acknowledging this point, in her view, is that ‘denouncing all feminisms as imperialist ... erases from memory the long histories of women’s resistance to local and imperialist patriarchies. ... Many women’s mutinies around the world predated Western feminism or occurred without any contact with Western feminists.’²⁸

Post Africa(n) Feminism?

The importance of the discussion of the varied view points with regard to the origin, character and naming of African feminism(s), I suggest, lies in the recognition of various and varied ‘femininities’ where women do not easily fall into neat categories such as ‘the oppressed’ as against ‘empowered men’; ‘marginalized third world women as against imperialist western women.’ The crucial point this raises for theorizing African feminism is the need to espouse a theoretical model that is able to contain the varied positions; a model that will be fluid without being so pluralistic as to defy definition. In my view, for as long as theories of African feminism remain ‘reactionary’ and definable ‘against’ Western feminism, they are not likely to go beyond ‘hinting the vision of a more liberated future’²⁹ because they are primarily tied to an elusive notion of a common history of colonialism for definition. Further, what many theorists of African feminism have failed to identify as paradoxically both definer and obstacle is the term ‘Africa(n)’ itself. An interrogation of this term as it has been used in feminist discourse and activism pertaining to the African woman is salient for developing feminist theory that is neither stagnant nor parochial but crucially, relevant, not to an Africa denoted by prepositional time (postcolonial), but to present-day Africa. While Africa still defines

²⁸ Anne McClintock, ‘Dismantling the Master’s House’ in *Imperial Leather*, op. cit., p. 384.

²⁹ This is one of the points made by the authors of *The Empire Writes Back* in the defense for the adoption of the term post-colonial literature. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin, eds., op. cit., p. 24.

herself *against* the West in much the same way as the West has, since the colonial era, constructed Africa as an ‘other’, Africa is still enmeshed in a ‘colonial trap’ and has not yet reached self-definition and, by implication, total independence.

Conclusion

I have sought to demonstrate that theory pertaining to the espousal and development of an African Feminist model has tended to focus predominantly on the politics of naming associated with the term ‘feminism’. In the process, the term Africa(n) has received very little interrogation and has been readily adopted on the basis of geography and/or historicity. Such adoption, I argue, is intrinsically linked to and centralizes colonialism as the basis of ongoing polarities, Western/African; Aggressor/Victim, such that colonialism keeps ‘returning’ at the very point ‘of its departure.’

I suggest that the development of a relevant theoretical model that will complement and enhance activist efforts in Africa is much more challenging. It requires that we move beyond the (post) colonial, but also beyond (post) Africa as normatively inscribed in the debates surveyed here. It requires that we certainly move beyond the notion of African victimhood within the colonial process, to recognize Africa as ‘participant’ in the different phases/faces of ‘colonialism’ and not simply as recipient.

Is gender yet another colonial project?

A critique of Oyeronke Oyewumi's proposal

by Agnes Atia Apusigah

Abstract: **Is gender yet another colonial project? A critique of Oyeronke Oyewumi's proposal.** This paper questions Oyeronke Oyewumi's (1997) claim in her thought-provoking work, 'The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourse,' that gender in African societies is a colonial project. It interrogates Oyewumi's project of contesting meanings that lack understandings and appreciation of history and culture. Using conceptual analysis and desk reviews interlaced with anecdotal snippets, the paper attempts a re-reading of Oyewumi interrogations of social relationships, linguistic differences and modes of knowing as well as their implications for meaning making and impact on conceptual creations in the West and in Africa. Drawing from the works of critics such as Said (1997/79), McFadden (1994), Dei (1994) and Scott (1992), the paper corroborates Oyewumi's assertion that historical and cultural differences impinge on and shape meanings. It however cautions against an essentialized relativist position for its potential dangers. These dangers include the premature foreclosure of discourse, culturalization of gender, caricaturization of opposed views, romanticization of ethnic culture and the simplification of difference. It argues that the threat of colonialism is real and that historically taking an essentialist position can deny benefits of cultural crossings and fertilization. Hence, it concludes with McFadden (1994) that writing must be responsible.

Key words: Africa, feminism, gender, philosophy, post-colonial, meaning

Introduction

The politics of identity forms a critical part of postcolonial discourse. After decades of struggle, questions of identity remain central to post-colonial interrogations. In this era of growing new right thinking and counter resistance to liberatory praxis, postcolonialists are challenged to strengthen their politics and re/invent their analytical tools in ways that

can facilitate the effective contestation of the threats posed by anti-liberatory forces. This is especially so in the face of growing backlash and resistance to women's empowerment programs and gender initiatives. It is against this backdrop that I find Oyeronke Oyewumi's (1997) thought-provoking work, *The invention of women: Making an African sense of Western gender discourse*, very challenging.

The main thrust of Oyewumi's thesis is that Western discourses are colonizing in the ways that they unduly generalize across cultures, especially African cultures. This, she argues, results in the misrepresentation of African cultures, whose histories are significantly different from that of the West. In this paper, I examine Oyewumi's proposal with the view to investigating the plausibility of her arguments and the problematic in her claims.

As an African woman and a gender worker, I find Oyewumi's thesis very challenging in many ways since her proposal unsettles uncritical scholarship on and about African societies and opens avenues for challenging colonizing endeavors. Her interrogations of feminist alliances, especially, pose challenges that compel the re/thinking of questions about space and voice. On the one hand, Oyewumi provides tools for revolutionary praxis, on the other hand, and especially for gender workers, her work is potentially threatening in the wake of growing backlash.

In this paper, I invite scholars especially those of African origin and/or those interested in African studies to take Oyewumi's critiques more seriously. My invitation is predicated on a need to examine the critical questions that she raises regarding the de/colonization of discourse and benefit from the critical methodological window that she avails for analysis. I am personally drawn to her critical deconstructionist approach to the investigation of social phenomena and her persistent attempt to draw attention to the complexity of social phenomena. I am also drawn to her relativist position. Yet I worry about her rather rigid and static stance on the question of difference, which I argue, threatens gender work. These threats include the premature foreclosure of discourse, culturalization of gender, caricaturization of opposed views, romanticization of ethnic culture and the simplification of difference. While

appealing to relativism myself, I find an essentialized relativist position counter-productive.

Challenging colonialism, looking to history

In her critiques of the colonial implications of scholarship on and about Africa, Oyewumi (1997) invites us to return to history by asking fundamental questions about African societies. Locating her work within Yoruba society, she examines the pre-colonial histories of Oyo life, which she compares with colonial social formations in order to unveil the false inscriptions and constructions imposed on that society. Using conceptual and linguistic analysis, she embarks on archaeological excavations that enable her to problematize and render suspect scholarship on and about African cultures by Western and colonized African scholars. She premises her claim on the assertion that both Western and colonized Africans employ structures and frameworks that are alien to and as such distort local realities while imposing meanings that limit and misrepresent African experiences.

Arguing that modern studies on and about Africa have been dominated by Western modes of reality and knowledge-production, Oyewumi (1997) argues that:

At the core of the problem is the way in which business is conducted in the knowledge-producing institutions; the way in which the foundational questions that inform research are generated in the West; the way in which theories and concepts are generated from Western experiences; and the way scholars have to work within disciplines, many of which were constituted to establish dominance over Africa and all of which have logics of their own quite distinct from questions about the social identity of scholars. (p. 22)

Using materialist analysis, Oyewumi demonstrates how imperialistic intellectualism, research funding politics and class affinity contribute to the re-inscription and sustenance of dominance and dependency. The complex interrogation that she embarks on leads her to raise arguments and make claims, all of which I am unable to address within the limits of a paper. Hence, at the risk of simplifying her thesis, I focus on, what I believe to be, the central issues she raises regarding cultural

re/productions and their implications for the interpretation of social relationships and interactions in African societies. Specifically, I examine her claims regarding perspectival differences and what they mean for the conceptualization of gender.

Differing perspectives, complex meanings: The question of difference is central to Oyewumi's (1997) analysis of the colonizing implications of scholarship on and about African cultures/societies. She points to the differences that exist between African societies and Western societies and how those differences affect the framings and re/productions of social systems. In particular, she points to metaphysical and linguistic differences and their implications for cultural mis/understandings. These differences, she intimates, are central to what is valued and legitimate. She argues, for instance, that in the Western scheme of things, that which lends itself to empirical examination is more likely to pass the test of truth and validity while that which does not is more likely to fail. She attributes this to the Western need to universalize and attain an absolute Truth, reflected in the blind appeal to scientism and its attendant needs for objectivity, replicability and predictability. Tracing this to the Cartesian mind, which is disembodied and supposedly weaned of all emotions in order to pass for being, Oyewumi asserts that the mind becomes privileged over other forms of knowing. In the process, viewing rather than sensing, becomes the means for validating and legitimizing experiences. Predicated on sight, Oyewumi argues, a worldview limits the experiencing of the world in its totality. She asserts that, on the contrary, African societies access the world through diverse media and in multiple ways. Hence, African societies can be described as accessing the world through a world sense.

Oyewumi (1997) argues that for African societies and specifically the Oyo Yoruba, there is the need to appeal to senses beyond vision to understand the world. By so doing, varying knowledges are generated and experiences captured. The recognition of the need to capture varying experiences and representations of the world creates room for embracing contradiction and conflict. This introduces a complexity that reinforces

difference in ways that make multi-perspectivalism and plurality of experiences desirable criteria of knowledge production.

World sense, according to Oyewumi, is holistic and pluralistic. It is holistic to the extent that it draws on all senses, the sensual and extra-sensual, to provide interpretations that are total without being totalitarian or universalizing. There is no privileging of one sense over the other. Predicated, and rightly so, on the fact that sensing is at once personal and public, and particular and universal, world sense allows for the reaching of multiple explanations. By extension, what passes for truth varies and as such there can be no absolute truth in the sense implied by Oyewumi of a worldview. What constitutes legitimate knowledge depends on both the empirical and non-empirical. History takes on a new role in the knowledge production process.

The appeal to history, one that examines contexts and subjective positioning in addition to isolated facts and events, becomes a crucial part of the process of validating and legitimizing claims. As she explains, the kind of historical explorations urged is not one of looking at mere individual and isolated events but also of the unique framing and shaping of discourse. It is a call for the historicization of phenomena as urged by Joan Scott (1992).

Writing on experience as a valid form of knowing, Scott makes a distinction between history as an event and history as a process. The former, she argues, lacks an appreciation of cultural imperatives while the latter involves a conscious attempt to contextualize and situate events within their specific and unique cultures. For Scott, during the historicization process, experiences become the basis for bringing meaning to events. The historicization process makes possible the use of subjective evidence to establish objective truths. Therefore, subjective and objective criteria have similar legitimacy.

Consistent with Scott's appeal, questions about subjective positioning during the processes of making meaning have become critical in cultural analysis in recent time. Questions have been raised regarding the modes and motives of the viewer, the media through which the object is viewed, the time and period of the viewing and, the level of participation,

as well as the implications for the viewer and viewed (Said, 1979/97; Foucault, 1980). In his famed work that interrogates colonial framings of the peoples of the so-called Orient, Said raises questions that trouble Western constructions of the 'Orient.' He contests structures of imperialism to expose their role in distorting the realities of histories that are distinct from those of the West. Categorizing the Orient as the dominated and the Occident as the dominator, Said shows how these relations are implicated in the mis/construction of the experiences of the so-called Orient. Orientalism becomes a means 'for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient' (p. 3) as reflected in research, teachings and writings on the 'Orient'.

Similarly, Oyewumi (1997) associates Western mis/presentations of African cultures, social systems and social phenomena to relations of dominance. This domination is possible, Oyewumi suggests, because of Western mis/readings of the world of the dominated in the rush to judgment. It is also reflected in the ways that African scholars, owing to their colonial training and allegiances, fail to interrogate social phenomena critically. Rather they embrace and impose Western constructs on African cultural systems in their zeal to project Africa in the light of the West. She argues that such scholars fail to ask the most fundamental questions about African cultures and social formations resulting in problematic faulty replications of Western systems.

Oyewumi (1997) asserts:

Different modes of apprehending knowledge yield dissimilar emphasis on types and the nature of evidence for making knowledge-claims. Indeed, this also has implications for the organization of social structure, particularly the social hierarchy that undergirds who knows and who does not know (p. 30).

By extension, subjective positioning is very important to the meaning making process. Indeed, one's position as viewer (gazer) or the viewed (the gazed) makes a difference in what is brought to the epistemic process. Drawing from metaphysical and linguistic analysis, Oyewumi explains how such differences in positioning affect the conceptualizations of phenomena and the implication for meaning making. It is against this backdrop that she argues that gender is a Western imposition.

Making sense of gender: In her struggle to make sense of gender among the Oyo-Yoruba, Oyewumi (1997) argues that the concept and its manifestations in diverse forms in Yoruba societies today, is a result of Western imperialism. She argues that gender was non-existent in pre-colonial Yoruba society. Her analysis leads her to conclude that gender and all its 'discontents', to borrow from Said, are imported and therefore alien. She makes this assertion in many places and devotes her analysis to establishing this claim. For instance, she points out that:

The way in which dissimilar constructions of the social world in other cultures are used as 'evidence' for the constructedness of gender and the insistence that these cross-cultural constructions are gender categories as they operate in the West nullify the alternatives offered by the non-West cultures and undermine the claim that gender is a social construction.

Western ideas are imposed when non-Western social categories are assimilated into the gender framework that emerged from a specific socio-historical and philosophical tradition. (p. 11)

For Oyewumi, history is very important for re/discovering the true nature of the Yoruba social world. In fact, it will be hypocritical to ignore history and treat the new realities of African societies as part of the timeless universal order of things. Whether this history will make any significant difference in addressing today's gendered realities or how far such an endeavor can help in addressing gender-based problems, Oyewumi does not say. Rather, what she offers is an appreciation of history and possibly a means for reclaiming that history.

While dismissing the suggestion that gender is omnipresent, Oyewumi (1997) inadvertently admits that other forms of discrimination did exist in pre-colonial society by asserting that Yoruba society was organized hierarchically according to age (seniority) rather than sex. For her, questions of lineage and kinship were more important in the framing of the Yoruba social world than sex. Although she fails to raise issue with age-based discrimination or of the possible implications for males and females, consistent to her own dismissive position, she acknowledges that class, race and ethnicity play significant roles in social relations. This undermines her efforts to engage with the question of the intersectionality of social phenomena in the framing of social worlds.

The question of intersectionality is critical for appreciating the fluidity of subjective positioning and of the experience of realities. Yet, somehow, Oyewumi's analyses end, sometimes, in a static position. For instance, rather than acknowledging that there were equally important forms of organizing principles beside gender, she chooses to dismiss gender and in its place supplants sex as if the two were diametrically opposed. This line of criticism also weakens the explanations she advances regarding her ambivalence over imposed dichotomous relations, binary oppositionalism and dualized analyses. In asserting difference and engaging in the politics of identity, an embrace of the fluidity of spaces and the multiplicity of impinging forces is possible. It is in light of this that Dei's (1994) analysis, which reflects African women as occupying shifting, often contradictory, often conflicting positions, becomes more tenable.

Like Oyewumi, Dei finds cultural analyses suspect that fail to appreciate complexity and/or capture intersectionality of social positioning. However, Dei's analysis does not end in the replacement of gender with some other force or oppression/subjugation with empowerment. Instead, he recognizes that African women occupy positions, which are multi-layered and complex reflecting contradictions and conflicts.

Contesting the reductionism in feminist analysis of social phenomena, Oyewumi argues that the gendered relations that exist in African societies today are Western inventions. She attributes such reductionism to the mistranslation and imposition of the concept woman on the African feminine. She finds problematic the tendency of equating females with women as if the two concepts mean the same things in all contexts. Drawing attention to differences in cosmology, she raises critical questions with serious consequences for knowledge production. Specifically, she shows how differences in Western and Yoruba cosmologies are reflected in epistemic productions in ways that result in the genderization or not of social relations. She explains that in the Yoruba social world:

The word *obinrin* does not derive etymologically from *okunrin*, as 'wo-man' does from 'man.' *Rin*, the common suffix of *okunrin* and *obinrin*, suggests a common humanity; the prefixes *obin* and *okun* specify which variety of anatomy. There is no conception here of an original type against which other vari-

ety had to be measured. Enyiyan is the non-gender-specific word for humans. In contrast, 'man,' the word labeling humans in general in English that supposedly encompasses both males and females, actually privileges males. ... In Yoruba conception, *okunrin* is not posited as the norm, the essence of humanity, against which is the other. Nor is *okunrin* a category of privilege. *Obinrin* is not ranked in relation to *okunrin*; it does not have negative connotations of subordination and powerlessness, and above all, it does not in and of itself constitute any social ranking (p. 33).

Oyewumi (1997) demonstrates that trapped in the Western bio-logic feminists have not been able to separate successfully biological determinants from social constructs. Due to that entrapment, she suggests, feminists are unable to imagine a non-oppositional and unordered society where relations and interactions are equitable. She argues that, in contrast, in the Yoruba scheme of things, it is possible to separate biological factors from social ones and as well bodies can occupy varied and multiple positions without being necessarily opposed and ordered.

Oyewumi (1997) makes clear the radical differences in Yoruba and Western (English) framings of females and males. She shows, without doubt, that in the Yoruba world sense, femininity has different connotations from that of the Western worldview. The very rooting of sexual differences in Judeo-Christian logic, where the female species is a derivative of the male species warrants a cultural logic where females are subsumed under the male species. Hence, the possibility for the use of concepts such as 'man,' 'human,' 'mankind' and 'he,' even when it is obvious that both female and male are in audience. Since traditional Oyo-Yoruba society did not share in that cultural logic, at least not before contact, it becomes possible for Oyewumi to claim that the concepts gender, patriarchy and women, were non-existent in that society.

However, I argue, that the explanations that Oyewumi (1997) advances to warrant her doubts about gender are suspect. For instance, although she doubts its timeless origins she does not provide sufficient justification. She also uses very problematic explanations to dismiss claims that bridewealth and dowry are marks of gender oppression. She argues, for instance, that bridewealth and dowry assign sexual rights to males over wives as well as fatherhood rights over children. The implications of the sexual and fatherhood rights for wives are hardly of any con-

cern to her. Also, she draws on evidence of a few female chiefs and religious leaders as sufficient justification for concluding that pre-colonial Yoruba society was non-gendered. While Oyewumi might be justified in her assertion of differences in cultural representations this does not warrant the kinds of conclusions that she draws regarding social relations and interactions among African societies.

If the argument that gender is a social construction is anything to go by, it will be consistent to argue that the constructions of gender among Western and Yoruba societies are different. It is therefore unpardonable for some feminists to ignore the differences that their own theorizing of gender as a social construction includes and precludes. At the same time, it is worth acknowledging that some Western feminists have been at the forefront of the discourse of difference. Lorraine Code, Judith Butler, Linda Alcoff, Mary O' Brien and even Virginia Woolf all spoke with the voice of difference although in ways that differ from Oyewumi's. Elizabeth Ellsworth (1989), a white Western feminist, raises similar concerns when she asks: Why doesn't this feel empowering? Ellsworth is concerned about how purported liberatory causes fail to acknowledge differences in the subjective positioning of the oppressed. Indeed, it has been a long struggle on both sides of the globe. Useful lessons can be learned from both sides.

Back home in Africa we can learn from Patricia McFadden who learns from Toni Morrison. Wary of the challenges of androcentric knowledge framings of the cultural 'other,' McFadden (1994) learns to write response-able from Morrison (1992). She identifies four dimensions of response-able writing. These include writing from the personal as political, using writing as a site for challenging androcentric notions, initiating efforts to uncover culture's hidden agenda and recognizing and using the power of the written word to re/claim voice. It is to the taking of such responsibility that Oyewumi admonishes feminist scholars. I agree!

The foregone demonstrates that uncritical scholarship and unequal alliances can be and have been colonizing. They have been colonizing to the extent that they have been framed and shaped in contexts that differ significantly from African societies and yet have often been unduly gen-

eralized across cultures. Such generalizations have resulted in the denying and dismissing of difference and diversity and their implication for making meanings. The call, then, is for scholarship to be decolonized and replaced by processes that result in multi-layered interpretations and enriched meanings as unique cultural identities, subjective realities and multiple positions become central to knowledge production processes. By so doing, a relativist position becomes tenable, one that allows for the embracing of difference rather than the discounting of it. In this era of postcolonial critique and doubt of imperialist enterprises and appeal to diversity and complexity, the relativist argument is tenable.

In fact, a relativist position that embraces difference and diversity is critical for decolonizing and liberating not only discourses but also entire peoples from the snares and shackles of neo/colonialism. However, I argue in the following section that even the much lauded relativist position is not without its own challenges. Indeed, a rigid appeal to relativism as evidenced in many places in Oyewumi's analysis can return us, unwittingly, to essentialism and nihilism.

The challenges of uncritical relativism

Although some of Oyewumi's critiques and claims are enlightening and valid, I suggest in this section that there are potential dangers of adopting an uncritical relativist position. This is more so when questions about gender are at issue. I talk about gender here in recognition of the fact that it has and will continue to be a fact in African social systems. Indeed, African cultures have grown from what they used to be before and since contact. African societies like all other societies are dynamic and as such are ever evolving. Through cross-cultural learning and borrowing, as well as through learning from within, African societies have and will continue to grow by hatching new ideas, taking on new elements and shedding those considered moribund as they carve and shape their identities. In the process, barriers become fluid, murky and indistinguishable and, may even disappear. We can not, therefore, afford to continue to hold on, rigidly, to the view that cross-cultural contacts are inherently colonizing.

It might well be the case that contact is necessary for the very survival of minority cultures in an ever-evolving world. In such a case, it becomes necessary to heed to calls to acknowledge and participate in the struggles to challenge these new realities rather than the dismissive stance often taken.

It is in light of this that I draw attention to the potential dangers of an uncritical embrace of a cultural revivalist position by some relativists. These dangers include premature closure of discourse, culturalization of gender, caricaturization of the meaning of gender, romanticization of indigenous cultures and the simplification of difference.

Premature fore/closure of discourse: The danger of premature foreclosure arises when in discussions about gender issues difference is treated as static resulting in the closing off of possibility for dialogue and negotiations. Proponents of relativism who fall into this trap deny all evidence of gender-based discrimination and argue that any exercise that seeks to explain differences in the relative locations of females and males in society is misleading and as such constitutes colonialism. For them, to try to explain or even claim that females suffer discrimination is to necessarily talk Western. Proponents are quick to dismiss dialogue or critical interrogations. Choosing denial over dialogue they tend to minimize and dismiss any form of gender oppression as a cultural invasion. They are quick to appeal to the argument: *that is how things have always been*. As to how it could have been done differently, they are not prepared to debate. It is also obvious that such persons have personal investments in the existing oppressive system, which they guard jealously. Any invitation to critical dialogue is viewed as a threat and direct affront to cultural survival.

It might seem that as far as gender is concerned males might be offering such resistance. While this might be true in part, it is also the case that some females participate actively in such resistance. For instance, in my society (in Ghana), excised women are the first to tease those who refuse to participate in the practice. Also, more often than not women are the ones who perform the harmful widowhood rites that compromise the human rights of fellow women. The distinction however

needs to be made between acting as a custodian and as a beneficiary. Beneficiaries have direct stakes in the system and their actions and inactions serve to maintain vested interests. However, custodians act because they are required to do so. Their actions/inactions/reactions might stem from a need to be trusted gatekeepers and not necessarily out of conviction. In the case of excision (female genital mutilation (FGM)), in spite of the massive campaigns and criminalization of the act some females continue to offer themselves for the practice. Such females are often quick to complain about their suffering. Yet, will readily offer themselves for such brutalities to be visited on them. They have been made to believe that it is the only way of preparing themselves in readiness for a husband in future. I wonder what future husbands have to prepare in readiness for wives!

The culturalization of gender: One evident backlash that confronts gender workers, when gender and culture clash in the face of racism, is what Sherene Razack (1998) has called the culturalization of gender. In her book titled, *Looking White people in the eye*, she discusses how the cultural relativist argument is employed in racist court rooms and classrooms to dismiss obvious questions of gender-based violence in ethnic communities.

The culturalization of gender is manifested, when racists in their false need to be politically correct, appeal to and use difference in cultural identities and meanings to explain their actions and/or inactions. The case is often made, falsely, of how ethnic cultures must be respected and their value systems preserved when handling issues within and affecting so-called ethnic communities. By taking this stance it becomes possible to suspend action and delay justice, as alternative channels are supposedly explored. Oftentimes, the case is subtly thrown out of court under the pretext of seeking redress at the community level. Ultimately, justice is denied due to the delays and denials. The relatively high levels of gender-based violence among ethnic communities have been attributed, in part, to the false appeal to this argument (Aryeetey & Kuenyehia, 1998; Razack, 1998; Williams, 1991).

As argued by Razack, the issue at stake is not one of not respecting cultures but one of the racist genderization of it. For, while similar cases

among dominant communities are treated as human rights issues, similar cases occurring among minorities are often thrown out as they are treated as cultural issues. Razack suggests that in the case of gender-based violence, also Williams (1991), universal principles become more tenable. She posits the case of the blurring of universal and particular principles in matters of gender-based violence. A related case that calls for a reconsideration of the relativist argument is the issue of fundamentalism.

Oyewumi (1997) entreats us to ask basic and fundamental questions. Within the context of a research project, the fundamentalist argument might be tenable. However, in today's world of growing religious fundamentalism, where cultural revivalists invoke the relativist argument in order to visit pain and suffering on unsuspecting peoples, the danger is more obvious. What should the comity of nations do regarding the many cases of inter/ethnic brutalities that are going on in many parts of Africa? When is it an internal case and when does it cease to be one? When fundamentalism becomes the instrument for perpetuating dominance over women, the relativist position becomes suspect. For instance, when the Sharia law is invoked to castigate a woman without any mention of her partner, should the nation or world look on without re/action? Also, should our law courts dismiss evidence of gender-based brutalities such as wife beating, rape, kidnapping and FGM because they have cultural implications? Should the Christian man be left to brutalize his family because the biblical tradition gives him the prerogative? Should the plight of majority of the human species, women, especially those living in rural and or 'Third World' conditions, be dismissed in the name of cultural autonomy? Specifically, should the thousands of women condemned to servitude in various shrines in some regions of Ghana be left unsanctioned, as is the case, because culture/religion demands such services as reparations for the sins of their families?

The Trokosi and Workoye systems, practiced among some sections of some ethnic groups in Ghana have become the subject of strong criticism by human rights and gender activists for the ways that they devalue women and subject them to perpetual servitude in spiritual shrines (Attu, 1997; Aryeetey & Kuenyehia, 1998). In spite of history or its historiciza-

tion, there can be no justification for enslavement. Yet, these practices persist. So far, the national government has failed to issue a policy statement condemning and/or criminalizing the practice. The inaction by the Ghanaian Government has warranted the perpetrators of such acts to parade their victims as culturally liberated ‘queens’ and ‘princesses’ who have escaped the snares of cultural imperialism and who have chosen to practice their indigenous religion and customs faithfully?

These questions yearn for answers and must be addressed if what we call cultural relativism is not to end in the glorification of gender-based violence.

The caricaturization of opposed positions: In a zealous attempt to re/claim voice and establish identities, some cultural critics have fallen into the same traps that they often attribute to universalizing discourses. This has taken the form of the undue generalization and/or minimalization of opposed positions. In the case of feminist critiques, for instance, this has taken the form of what I call the caricaturization of feminist positions. Evidence of such caricaturization is implied in the work of Florence Dolphynne (1991) who tends to equate feminism to radicalism. She equates feminism to the uncompromising stance of the women’s liberation movement, radical feminist discourse and queer feminist politics. Writing about some of the disagreements that characterized deliberations during the Beijing Conference, Dolphynne points, and rightly so, to the cultural differences in the framing and understandings of women’s concerns. Agreeing that there were obvious areas of intersections, she still attributes the areas of disjuncture to the radical and queer stance of Western feminists.

While it might be true that some of the disagreements arise from some radical perspectives, it will be misleading to argue as if all feminists hold one position. Indeed, queer theory today has become a driving force propelling the re/engagement of the meanings of the concepts, women and gender. I am thinking of the works of Judith Butler (*Gender Trouble*) and Elizabeth Ellsworth and Janet Miller (*Working Difference*), among others. Also, Western feminists, who are also ethnic minorities such as Gloria Anzaldua, bell hooks and Audre Lorde, to name a few, have writ-

ten extensively about the complexity of subjective positioning in discursive formations. Their works, among others, have and continue to compel universalists' mainstream feminists to re/consider their positions and to re/engage discourse from multi-faceted perspectives.

In the case of Oyewumi (1997), her dismissive explanation of gender results in her equation of its essence to its critiques or antecedents. By this, I refer to her explanation of gender as the ordering of society according to sex, which I believe, is one of the many questions that gender critics raise. On a personal note, my understanding of gender as referring to relations between females and males and how such relations affect their locations in society does not lead me to assume an essential hierarchy. Yet, I know that by the very positioning of females and males, hierarchies can easily emerge. The hierarchies emerge from the analysis and not in the meaning of gender as suggested by Oyewumi. That is to say, the analysis of gender relations by critics or feminists can result in the hierarchization of the locations of males and females as empowering / disempowering, oppressor/oppressed, and dominant/subjugated. This ordering or framing of positions in itself does not constitute gender. Rather, they are antecedents of the feminist critical project. It will therefore not be very accurate to equate the term to its antecedents. Also, Oyewumi does injustice to feminism by failing to acknowledge critical feminists' interrogations of universal theories about women.

Perhaps Oyewumi is more accurate when she challenges feminists' assumptions about gender oppression as the fact of all societies or *the* essential determinant of social relationships and interactions. Yet, when the issue is pressed further, it becomes clear that some feminists, especially critical feminists challenge the very basis of women's oppression. For instance, some feminists express ambivalence over the use of the concept due to its patriarchal history while others, especially Third World feminists, contesting the claim that women have always occupied oppressive positions, argue that even in those sites reside elements of empowerment. I am reminded of the works of Lorraine Code, Judith Butler, Elizabeth Ellsworth and Magda Lewis, among others.

Perhaps Changu Manathoko's (1999) explanation of feminism is worth citing here. Manathoko, writing about feminism and gender issues in Southern Africa explains that,

Feminism is a broad term for a variety of conceptions of the relations between men and women in society. Feminists question and challenge the origins of oppressive gender relations and attempt to develop a variety of strategies that might change these relations for the better. All feminism pivots round the recognition of existing women's oppression and addresses the prevailing unjust and discriminatory gender relations. Feminism does not just deal with issues of justice and equality but also offers a critique of male-dominated institutions, values and social practices that are oppressive and destructive (p. 33).

The explanation offered by Mannathoko helps shed light on the meaning of the feminist project. It shows that there are many versions of feminism and diversity in project orientation. To therefore, pick one view and assert it as *the* view is misleading and constitutes an injustice to feminist causes.

The simplification of difference: Another danger that can arise from taking an uncompromising position on cultural diversity is the simplification of difference. This danger is manifested in relativist debates that fail completely to acknowledge any possibility for cultural crossings. As a result, the assertion of difference becomes a simple case of setting up dualities or oppositionalities, which Oyewumi starts out resisting vehemently. Yet, there are instances, where she takes a rather dualized stance. For instance, she rightly points out that African feminists can learn from the methods of feminists scholarship and 'do more serious work detailing and describing indigenous African culture from the inside out, not from the outside in' (p. 21). Her preference for the 'inside out' approach leads to the closing off of possibilities offered by an 'outside in' approach. Yet, this does not need to be the case. In fact, the complexity that difference discourse offers requires that negotiations be approached holistically. bell hooks (1994) does a better job explaining the possibilities of taking a holistic approach. She asserts:

The sense of wholeness, impressed upon our consciousness by the structure of our [marginalized] daily lives, provided us an oppositional world view - a mode of seeing unknown to most of our oppressors, that sustained us, aided us in our struggles to transcend poverty and despair, strengthen our sense of self and our solidarity. The willingness to explore all possibilities has characterized my perspective in writing *Feminist Theory from the margins to the cen-*

ter. Much feminist theory emerges from privileged women who live at the center, whose perspectives on reality rarely include knowledge and awareness of the lives of women and men who live in the margin. As a consequence, feminist theory lacks wholeness, lacks the broad analysis that could encompass a variety of human experiences (p. ix -x, emphasis in original).

The scenario that hooks sets up is one of borrowing from both sides - margins and center, inside and outside. Positioning herself in the margins, hooks shares her privileges and challenges as a cross-cultural traveler. She explains:

To be in the margins is to be part of the whole but outside the main body. ... Living as we did - on the edge - we developed a particular way of seeing. We looked both from outside in and from the inside out. We focused our attention on the center as well as on the margin. We understood both. This mode of seeing reminded us of the existence of a whole universe, a main body made up of both margin and center (p. ix).

In spite of her entrapment in the logic of a worldview, to say with Oye-wumi, hooks is able to experience the world in multiple ways. Gloria Anzaldua (1997/87) corroborates hooks work in hers regarding living at/on the edge. In her work on occupying the borders and living at the intersections of diverse cultures Anzaldua writes:

In fact, the Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch, where the space between two individuals shrinks with intimacy.

I am a border woman. ... It's not a comfortable territory to live in, this place of contradictions. ...

However, there have been compensations for the *mestiza*, and certain joys. Living on the borders and in the margins, keeping intact one's shifting and multiple identity and integrity, is like trying to swim in a new element, an 'alien' element (p. vii, emphasis in original).

In today's world of continually eroding borders instanced by technology, globalization and developmentalism, Anzaldua's notion of the border as fluid and immaterial is very real. Physical borders are ceasing to exist, as boundaries are becoming thinner and more blurry. This does not, however, mean that difference or diversity ceases. Rather, it suggests that questions of difference are becoming even more complex needing very sophisticated tools for comprehension. It is in light of this that Anzaldua

proposes the use of the metaphor: kneading, for tackling difference. To knead is to work with difference at all angles and areas. We need to engage in the constant processing of issues and re/defining of identities as we re/shape our relations among ourselves as Africans and with peoples of other cultures even in our shared and/or differing locations.

The basic reality is that cultures will continue to collide and as such will need re/composing. A complex rather than a simplified framing of difference becomes a more plausible option for tackling the challenges that will emerge. To this end, the analyses of hooks and Anzaldúa become appealing as the complexity that they posit is devoid of the kind of fragmentation that emerges from Oyewumi's analysis. In her zeal to challenge the disembodiment that characterizes Western biologic, Oyewumi ends up fragmenting the body resulting in the complete separation of the social from biological. Neither a fragmented or disembodied representation of cultures or bodies can capture the complexity that characterizes difference.

The romanticization of ethnic cultures: The danger of the romanticization of cultures arises when cultural revivalists adopt an overly protective stance and ignore obvious cases of contestation. The agenda for taking such a radical stance is to deny the possibility for the sharing of values and practices among cultures. When compelled to acknowledge commonalities, these are often exceptionalized and dismissed in order to give prominence to the differences that the romantic strives to protect and project resulting in unnecessary exaggerations and glorification. The defended culture is held up high as pure and harmless resulting in the denial of any evidence of negative and/or even retrogressive elements.

The romantic imagines a past that is marked by 'primitive innocence;' one that is perfect by all estimations and yet is threatened by the snares of 'modernity.' This protectionist stance arises from a feeling of annihilation and an almost puritanical appeal to lost territory, real or imagined. Filled with a feeling of nostalgia, the romantic yearns for a return to an unadulterated past. Seeking to defend unconquered spaces and reclaim lost territory, the romantic dwells on returning to and re-

claiming of an uncorrupted identity. The resulting struggles could be antagonistic or even fatalistic.

Taken together, the five issues examined above, can pose real danger to gender work and liberatory struggles if necessary precautions are not taken. Such a development could contribute tremendously to the erosion of the successes obtained so far. In fact, the resulting backlash could constitute a big blow to the project of de/colonization. The struggle to re/define identities, which requires ongoing negotiations, contestations and confrontations, could be marred by the refusal to acknowledge fluidity. Also, the process of the re/clamation and re/insertion of voice, pertinent to the project of decolonization, could be hampered by the non-recognition, denial and dismissal of clear evidence of domination. Above all, such rigid and uncritical stance could return us to 'new' forms of colonization rather than the desired liberation.

A response to Oyewumi's proposal?

It would be naïve to assume that there can be a straightforward and/or an outright response to the question, is gender a colonial project? For, to expect such a response is to believe that there can be a conclusion and/or end to the struggle against colonialism. It should become clear by now that critical postcolonial interrogation of the kinds rooted in a politic of identity is a never-ending endeavor that is characterized by constant struggles. These struggles are sustained through the continual emergence of critiques, development of counter projects and the collision of positions. The complex interactions and negotiations that occur make it possible for conflicting and contradictory perspectives to emerge. For instance, on the one hand, it can be argued that cultures vary no matter their location and origins. On the other hand, it can be said that even these varying cultures possess shared values. Also, on the one hand, it can be argued that minority cultures have been misconstrued and misrepresented to the point of annihilation by dominant cultures. On the other hand, it can also be argued that out of the need to survive, cultural minorities have recreated themselves in ways that have strengthened bonds. In addition,

while it might be true to argue that gender is a colonial imposition from the West in some instances, in others, it might also be possible to claim that gendered practices have deep roots in traditional societies.

As a response to the question, therefore, I will still return us to the relativist position. I will say that it depends on what is at issue as well as subjective positioning. It depends on whether our emphasis is on issues of the history of discourse, realities of African women or purely academic engagement. I will argue, with Oyewumi and others of like mind, that gender has cultural specific framings and multiple significations, and as such its meanings differ from culture to culture. It will therefore be misleading and indeed colonizing to impose meanings that are oblivious of cultural diversity and its shaping and framing of social relationships and interactions. However, I will be quick to add that in today's world, the fact of women's subjugation is real and we can not pin this solely on colonialism. As I argue elsewhere, our own patriarchal social systems have provided and continue to serve as fertile grounds for the sowing and nurturing of the seeds of Western paternalism in all its imperialistic and patriarchal manifestations (Apusigah, 2002). Hence, I am motivated to say with McFadden (1994), who learns from Toni Morrison (1992) that it is imperative to write response-ably. I believe this is what Oyewumi set out to do. Indeed, scholars must be responsible not only in their writing but also researching!

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‘Crafting epicentres of agency’

Sarah Bartmann and African feminist literary imaginings¹

by Pumla Dineo Gqola

Abstract. ‘Crafting epicentres of agency’: Sarah Bartmann and African feminist literary imaginings. The story of Sarah Bartmann has been one of the fascinations of academic writing on ‘race’, feminism and post-structuralism in the late twentieth and early twentieth-first century. An enslaved Khoi woman, she was transported to Europe where she was displayed for the amusement, and later scientific inquisitiveness of various public and private collectives in London and Paris. Her paradoxical hypervisibility has meant that although volumes have been written about her, very little is recoverable from these records about her subjectivity. In this paper I am less interested in tracing and engaging with some of the debates engendered by this paradox and difficulty more broadly. Rather, I want to read and analyse how African feminist literary projects have approached Bartmann’s absent presence. My paper then tasks itself with exploring the possibility of writing about Sarah Bartmann in ways unlike those traditions of knowledge-making that dubbed her ‘the Hottentot Venus’. It analyzes a variety of texts that position themselves in relation to her as a way of arriving at an African feminist creative and literary engagement with histories which fix representations of African women’s bodies, via Bartmann in colonialist epistemes.

Key words: Africa, feminism, gender, philosophy, post-colonial, poetics

Editorial note: the spelling of the name of the protagonist of this argument, Sara(h) Ba(a)rtman(n) has a number of versions, also in the present volume, and because of the respective perspectival, conflicting identity implications it was decided to retain this multivocality at the copy-editorial level.

¹ In its earlier incarnations, this paper has been presented at the *Mother Tongue, OtherTongue? The 14th International English Academy Conference in Southern Africa*, the University of Pretoria, 4-6 April 2002 and *The Black Body: Imagining, Writing, (Re)Reading*, DePaul University, 23-24 April 2004. A longer version appeared as the third chapter of ‘Shackled Memories and Elusive Discourses? Colonial Slavery and the Contemporary and Cultural Imagination in South Africa’, an unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Munich, Germany (2004).

Steatopygous sky
Steatopygous sea
Steatopygous waves
Steatopygous me
Oh how I long to place my foot
on the head of anthropology. (Grace Nichols (1984, 15).

As the casket left the embassy, I wondered if Sarah Baartman was looking down from heaven and having a chuckle. The empire had indeed struck back, her people had come to claim her, and the 'savages' were running the show (Gail Smith 2004, 4).

The quotation at the beginning of this paper is from a poem by Grace Nichols, a celebrated Guyanese/Black British poet. It is an attempt to recast the world in a manner that is friendly to those who inhabit subjectivities inscribed with histories of white supremacist and patriarchal epistememes about African women's bodies. In other words, it is a worldview that places African women at the centre in affirming ways. Such an endeavour imagines a world with sky, sea, and waves which reflects the pathologised African woman's body as the norm. If everything in the world Nichols' persona imagines, reflects the steatopygia that the Black-woman subject lying in the bath and thinking, fantasizes about, then this could not be a world which casts her as a freak. Nichols' poem is part of that writer's poetic *oeuvre*² which challenges the stereotypes and various demanding historic representations of women of the African world throughout history. It would be a world within which she is comfortable and the norm. She would not be a 'freak' or a spectacle, or solely corporeal. Nichols' speaker continues to express anger at the traditions that have led to the necessity of the 'fat black woman' dreaming in this way: various violent epistemic traditions housed in the disciplines of anthropology, history, theology as well as contemporary patriarchal capitalist

² In the rest of the collection *The Fat Black Woman's Poems* (Virago 1984), as in *i is a long memoried woman* (Karnak 1983) and *Lazy thoughts of a lazy woman* (1989) various constructions of Black women are explored, from slavery, slave revolts, colonialism, anti-colonial imaginaries, nationalist movements, to twentieth century 'global' culture.

industries which take advantage of such racist violence. The stress in Nichols' poem is on the 'fat black woman' thinking, imagining, and feeling anger; in other words, with the expression of her will. Part of the activity of her will, through the juxtapositioning of herself with the objects of her fantasy, is to draw attention to the manner in which a 'Steatopygious me' is the product of the imagination which seeks to assert itself as natural. Her act of the imagination is therefore a willed act which is used as sharp contrast to the overdetermination of African women as excessively corporeal. This representation of the exclusively and hyper-embodied African, also known as objectification, was a necessary facet of the justification of slavery. It was also one for which Sarah Bartmann's history of display and dehumanisation has been used as shorthand to illustrate. Indeed, the use and recognisability of the medico-scientific term 'steatopygia' echoes Bartmann's display and dissection.

To the extent that most traditions, either racist or patriarchal, or a combination, do not represent *thinking* African women subjects, Nichols' 'fat black woman' fantasizing about a better world while lying in the bath is powerful and necessary. Its importance is not so much because it charts a counter-narrative, but rather because it significantly alters the terms of the debate altogether.

The story of Sarah Bartmann has been one of the fascinations of academic writing on 'race', feminism and post-structuralism in the late twentieth and early twentieth-first century. An enslaved Khoi woman, she was transported to Europe where she was displayed for the amusement, and later scientific inquisitiveness of various public and private collectives in London and Paris. Yvette Abrahams (1997, 2000, 2004, Abrahams and Clayton 2004), Jean Young (1997) and Zine Magubane (2001, 2004) have written on the contradictions that characterise her story. Her paradoxical hypervisibility has meant that although volumes have been written about her, very little is recoverable from these records about her subjectivity. This is because for most of those who have written about her over the centuries, she has been the body used to illustrate some other academic point that has little to do with her personhood. Magubane has noted that for much colonial thought in the eighteenth and nineteenth

centuries the black body offered ‘the meeting of two contrary impulses – of a suffering that could not be denied but that nonetheless had an incredibly fungible character’ (2004: 103).

In this paper I am less interested in tracing and engaging with some of the debates engendered by this paradox and difficulty more broadly. Rather, I want to read and analyse how African feminist literary projects have approached Bartmann’s absent presence. Indeed, if the general hegemonic status of the black bodies has been as spectacle, ‘made to function less as flesh and blood entities than as fertile discursive sites to be mined for images and metaphors’ (Magubane 2004: 106), what happens when the most famously embodied black subject is imagined creatively in ways that do not foreground her corporeality? This failure to reify Bartmann as body, emerges as the most striking similarity in how feminists of the African world³ have chosen to engage with Sarah Bartmann’s legacy as the ‘Hottentot Venus’. This legacy, and the power of its accompanying scientific knowledge, is such that several centuries later, in the twentieth century, many feminists would continue to write against the *felt* effects of the gaze which fixes them/us as oversexed, deviant object. My paper then tasks itself with exploring the possibility of writing about Sarah Bartmann in ways unlike those traditions of knowledge-making that dubbed her ‘the Hottentot Venus’. It analyses a variety of texts that position themselves in relation to her as a way of arriving at an African feminist creative and literary engagement with histories which fix representations of African women’s bodies, via Bartmann in colonialist epistemes.

³ Feminists of the African world is used here to refer to writing and creative theorisation that I see permeating the works of feminists beyond the continent and into the diaspora. I wish to explore this in the work of some Caribbean feminists here, and although I find the use of ‘African feminist’ to describe them equally useful, for the sake of clarity, I defer to the more conventional understanding of who is an African feminist, even if this is also sometimes contested. The essays in *Agenda* issues 50, 54, 58 which were special issues labelled variously *African Feminisms* Volumes 1 (2001), 2 (2002), and 3(2003) explore these contestations. See also the essays in Nnaemeka, Obioma. 1995. *Sisterhood, feminism and power: From Africa to the Diaspora*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press.

This writing, as I will show, proceeds far beyond simply writing back to histories of the hyper-corporealisation of the African as played out in colonialism, slavery and other white supremacist woundings. Faced with the slew of creative writing on Sarah Bartmann by feminists in the African diaspora and beyond, I remain uninterested in charting, reviewing and analysing the varied ways in which she has been characterised in literature. My concern here is with the emergence of what I see as a very specific idiom which emerges in literature of the African feminist world, and which, as I will show, offers radical departures from conventional representations of her as only embodied (object), pathologised (deviant), evidence (knowable) and/or singular ('freak', myth). This work draws from the insights gleaned from African feminist work in non-literary genre, and recognises this *corpa* as invaluable. Still, the three central creative texts which will be used in addition to Nichols' are Zoë Wicomb's *David's Story*, Dianne Ferrus' poem 'I Have Come to Take you Home' and Gail Smith's 'Fetching Saartje', because they offer refreshing narrative possibilities which are more imaginative than

'the science, literature and art [which have] collectively worked to produce Baartmann as an example of sexual and racial difference [which also] offered exemplary proof that racial and sexual alterity are social construction rather than biological essences' (Magubane 2001, 817).

These traditions, Zine Magubane demonstrates, are informed by a variety of ideologies on race, gender and class positions, but have nonetheless been strengthened in their ahistorical usage to explain how Sara Bartmann became the icon for sexual alterity in theory. 'Molara Ogunidipe's invitation to African feminists is that

'[w]e should think from our epicentres of agency, looking for what is meaningful, progressive and useful to us as Africans, as we enrich ourselves with ideas from all over the world' (in: Lewis 2002).

The texts analysed here embark on and approach the topic at hand from various angles, but will be read, nonetheless, as participating in the same larger African feminist project. In other words, as I will demonstrate, while the specific structures of the narratives differ, there are ways in which all three are activities along the same continuum. All grapple with

the (im)possibility of representing Sarah Bartmann by probing the ways in which the silences of history are more interesting for what they refuse to tell us about her, than the volumes of overwritten narratives while she was alive, or the body critiqued by Magubane (2001).

My choice of technique is motivated, firstly, by my conviction that creative spaces offer an ability to theorise, and imagine spaces of freedom in ways unavailable to genres more preoccupied with linearity and exactness. I have become increasingly intrigued (cf. 2001, 2005) by the creative theorisation in the arena of African feminist imagination. By 'creative theorisation', I intend the series and forms of conjecture, speculative possibilities opened up in literary and other creative genres. Theoretical or epistemological projects do not only happen in those sites officially designated as such, but emerge from other creatively textured sites outside of these.

Secondly, read against the texts I will discuss, I find Nthabiseng Motsemme's thinking on silences and African women's subjectivities compelling. Motsemme asserts that 'the mute always speaks', and her work suggests that a key African feminist tool has to be our thinking about how to hear the mute, and what that hearing might look like. Like her,

My aim is not to romanticise silence and thus undermine the power of giving voice and exposing oppression. It is rather to remind us that under conditions of scarcity and imposed limits, those who are oppressed often generate new meanings for themselves around silences. Instead of being absent and voiceless, silences in circumstances of violence assume presence and speak volumes (Motsemme 2004a: 5).

Crafting epicentres of agency

Zoë Wicomb's novel *David's Story* (2000) confronts the dilemma of positioning, which is to say historicising, directly. In her novel, Wicomb approaches the trickiness of historical location in a variety of ways. In all these, there are intimations of the connections to the historically concrete subject that was Sara Bartmann. Her novel is the fictional biography of David, an activist, who decides to have his life story recorded in the post-

apartheid moment. David's sense of how lives are told, and rooted in past lives' trajectories differs substantially from his Blackwoman fictional biographer's idea of how to record life stories. The novel and the fictional biography it encapsulates is both David's story and not. He takes no joy in the private ownership of it that the biographer imagines should determine his relationship to the story. He chooses not to claim it. Rather, he insists that his story is one that starts with the Khoi women, Sara Bartmann, and Krotoa, the latter of whom is also known as Eva. Both these women are positioned as 'firsts' or symbolic beginnings in some ways: Krotoa, as the first indigenous translator between the Khoi and the Dutch, and Bartmann the beginning of many narratives of belonging. However, Wicomb writes David so that he does not simply romantically root himself through these women, or even position them simply as his foreparents. He repeatedly refuses the psychic safety that would flow from simply claiming and embracing them; they are part of a difficult and necessary identitary project aligned to both memory and the imagination, a project he cannot completely preside over. Interestingly, his fictional biographer is at pains to steer him in the direction of stability. For David, who does not imagine himself participating in an individual project he needs to police, the disquiet centres around what is missing from his narrative, what is elusive. His resistance to narratorial tidiness leads his fictional biographer to muse that 'promiscuous memory, spiralling into the past, mates with new disclosures to produce further moments of terrible surprise' (*David's Story* 194-5) because she has long noticed how:

[h]is fragments betray the desire to distance himself from his own story; the many beginnings, invariably flights into history, although he is no historian, show uncertainty about whether to begin at all. He has made some basic errors with dates, miscalculating more than a hundred years, which no doubt is due to the confusing system of naming centuries; but then, as I delighted in the anachronism, he was happy to keep it (*David's Story* 1).

This anachronism is deliberate on Wicomb's part and points to the relationship between different modes of telling stories, ways more nuanced than timelines. It also exposes the challenges of historicising experiences when there is no dependable narrative, only the colonisers' in written form, plotted along a dateline which is not in itself logical, even as it is

paraded as neutral. David's interest in history suggests that he has reshuffled the events to highlight the desired associations with other herstories, to display more clearly, in Prins' words,

Because even though I do not know when my ancestors lived
I know that each one of their lives
Left a mark on my life
[...]
Even though I do not know ('Timelines' l. 18-25).

Such a desire is highlighted in his insistence, for example, on the anchoring of his story through Krotoa and Sarah Bartmann even though he makes little attempt to mythologise them. He is at pains to avoid their erasure, as well as their iconicisation, because he is aware that a wealth of highly problematic writing exists on them already. His response,

'[o]ne cannot write nowadays (...) without a little monograph on Bartmann; it would be like excluding history itself',

can mean in this way (*David's Story* 1). As his biographer suggests, 'the many beginnings, invariably flights into history, although he is no historian, show uncertainty about whether to begin at all' (1). Wicomb's David is convinced of their importance to his narrative, but need not dwell in the precise manner in which their narratives intersect with his, a detail which frustrates his biographer to no end. Rather than wanting to control the narrative, David is content to testify to a collective history which self-consciously points to its constructedness. Succeeding in this venture makes it clear that his narrative does not contain everything. For Wicomb's project, the task of writing history requires that the imagination perform differently, chaotically, in a manner that messes up centuries. Irritated by his logic, his biographer asks him, 'what on earth has Baartman to do with your history?'; to which he replies,

But it's not a personal history as such that I am after, not biography or autobiography. I know we're supposed to write that kind of thing, but I have no desire to cast myself as hero, he sneers. Nothing wrong with including a historical figure (*David's Story* 135).

When in further response to her, 'She may not even have been a Griqua', David says, 'Baartman belongs to all of us' (*David's Story* 135), this is

particularly telling. Sara Bartmann is important for greater reasons than the mere accident of a possibly shared ethnicity, David seems to be saying. His claim to her is not because they both may have Griqua, or more generally Khoi, ancestry. Rather, David's recognition of Sara Bartmann as important is linked to another project which is *not* about the 'recovery' of indigeneity. It is akin to Diana Ferrus' acknowledgment in her poem 'A Tribute to Sarah Bartmann' (1998). David and his biographer both note the extent of his outrage at the mere mention of Cuvier's name. This indignation finds accompaniment in Ferrus' persona's emotions, expressed in the second stanza:

I have come to wrench you away –
away from the poking eyes of the man-made monster
who lives in the dark with his racist clutches of imperialism,
who dissects your body bit by bit,
who likens your soul to that of satan
and declares himself the ultimate God! (ll. 10-15)

Ferrus' poem, written in Holland in June 1998, would eventually be responsible for the release of Sara Bartmann's remains by the French government, facilitating her return for burial in South Africa nearly two centuries after she left South Africa for England and France as a slave. While African feminist historian, Yvette Abrahams, wrote the first full-length study on Sarah Bartmann after noting the absence of academic material which sought to make sense of Sara Bartmann as subject rather than object, human rather than symbol or spectacle, Wicomb and Ferrus provide two imaginative texts in which it becomes impossible to view Sarah Bartmann as anything but a concrete historical subject. However, even an investment in humanising her is a thorny path for creative representations of Bartmann. Both Wicomb's and Ferrus' projects engage with this pointed issue. Through highly varied mediums, the acts of self-definition for both narrating subjects in Wicomb and Ferrus are thoroughly historicised, and acutely mindful of the interaction between the present and various possible pasts. For David, then, a historicising of his experience, although necessary, is not easy. His recognition, and indeed acceptance of its inevitability, translates into an ability to leave his life-story unpoliced. It facilitates his surrender of it once it is written down.

A similar impulse hides in the narrative uncertainties that are left unresolved by Ferrus in her poem as laid bare in the links between the desire of the speaker to use peace as the emotional currency that clears space for her conversation with Bartmann. Although the manner in which the persona treats Bartmann is illuminated as claiming one of her own, and therefore bringing her peace as part of taking her back home, it remains rather enigmatic how Bartmann has managed already to bring the speaker peace. Lines 21-22 and 29-30, respectively read:

and I will sing for you
for I have come to bring you peace.

and

where I will sing for you,
for you have brought me peace.

Within the context of the poem, where the reader is positioned as listening in on a private conversation between two people joined by a relationship s/he is excluded from, there is no room for explanation of what may already be understandable to the two subjects engaged in conversation. This absence from a poem, which, in its written form is always accompanied by a glossary, can only be read as part of the context of how meanings and knowledge is circulated within the internal ordering of the conversation. It is therefore not a failure, any more than David's bungling narrative is a fault.

Although this reading is suggested by the structuring of, and selective translation of exchanges in both texts, it is not an interpretation which enjoys wide recognition. Writing on representations of Krotoa and Sara Bartmann, Kai Easton (2002) has commented that the two are

'very allusive and elusive characters who figure in [*David's Story*], only to slip out of the story'.

Further, Easton continues,

'[d]espite their fleeting presence in Wicomb's novel, both of these women, I would argue, are integral to a book that refuses to engage them wholeheartedly

in its plot'.⁴

For Easton then, the fact that Krotoa and Bartmann are not represented is seen as a lack in the novel's material and treatment of the historical positioning of these women. In order to discover the manner in which they are integral then, Easton needs to read specific meanings into the 'refusal to engage them wholeheartedly'. While this reading of the absences of Wicomb's (and Ferrus') text is commendable, and also informs my own reading of these texts, it falls short of recognising that this refusal is part of the plot, rather than an unresolved anxiety. Against the overwhelming discourses and regimes of knowledge that write about these African women as known, and yet reveal little about their human-ness, African feminist imaginative projects such as Wicomb's and Ferrus' draw attention to the need to write about Krotoa, Bartmann and other historic African women differently.

That Sara Bartmann and Krotoa are not portrayed in any detail save for their importance in understanding David's story testifies to the validity of Easton's argument. However, to the extent that Wicomb's reader is not allowed to forget their presence, through the various narrative techniques discussed below, I think it inaccurate to characterise the novel as 'a book that refuses to engage them wholeheartedly in its plot'. This deliberate re-presentation, especially of Bartmann, which does not offer comfortable or reliable characterisation is exactly an unreserved engagement with these two women that Easton misses in Wicomb's novel. In Wicomb's novel, the silence is a very loud one whose echoes the reader is constantly mindful of.

Further, the 'as told to' structure of the novel echoes eighteenth and nineteenth century slave narratives, and the references to Krotoa and Sara Bartmann reinforce this connection. Although much is revealed, there is no possibility of narrative completion. David's beginnings, he thus seems to insist, lie in slavery and colonialism. They also linger in multiple discursive and linguistic registers, and require meticulous and constant translation. It is not coincidental that Krotoa was a translator

⁴ Easton 2002, p. 237.

who spoke English and Dutch in addition to her mother tongue; or that Bartmann spoke English and Dutch, and had learnt some French by the time she died at the age of twenty eight. The reader is invited to constantly translate first between the biographer and the protagonist and between tangible presences and implied ones. Nor is it accidental that both women are rendered homeless: one transported to another continent, and the other banished to an island off the coast of her homeland. They are both exiled, and therefore separated from any sense of 'authentic' rooting through various tropes. A tale that begins with them, therefore, cannot be one with narrative certainty. Required of the reader is the constant mediation between the various worlds of meaning uncovered and recovered in the pages of Wicomb's novel. Here, then, Wicomb's reader is invited to participate in the contact zone as theorised by Susan Bassnett and Harish Trivedi. This contact zone is 'a place where cultures met on unequal terms, the contact zone is now a space that is redefining itself, a space of multiplicity, exchange, renegotiation and discontinuities' (1999: 14). This space foregrounds the reality that 'languages articulate reality in different ways' (Bassnett 2002: 13).

Inattentive to this, David's biographer is plagued by a divergent set of practical concerns. Given that there are numerous written texts on Bartmann, would it not make more sense to use a shortcut and simply quote these here, she asks. What she cannot understand, an aspect Wicomb's reader may not miss, is that rooting his narrative with Bartmann has little to do with a linear historical chronology which she criticises him for 'bungling up'. Having established Sarah Bartmann as starting point, although Wicomb occludes what it is Sarah Bartmann can anchor, there are few more references in the text to the latter. These do not yield concrete information about her. All of these entail writings by David, or sketches, or a combination. Each time the biographer is stunned by their significance. They illustrate nothing for her, except the impossibility of excavating their relevance. *David's Story* does not mention Sarah Bartmann again at any length⁵ or in any explicit manner, which is to say

⁵ See brief references to her on pages 33, 134-5.

there is no new material except the constant assertion that she will not be inserted into this narrative in the usual way. Wicomb does not allow us to forget her presence, but at the same time will not write (about) her in ways that mythologise or fix her. The challenges for a reader of this novel, perhaps in search of Sarah Bartmann, but who doubtlessly has also read about this woman at great length, is to make sense of the ways in which Wicomb chooses to engage with her legacy and to represent her physical absence from the text. Clearly, to speak her name is to invoke more than associations with the concrete historical subject that she was, it is also to awaken a litany of images and narratives seen to be easily associated with her. As David reminds his biographer,

[t]here've always been other worlds; there always will be many, all struggling for survival' (*David's Story* 197).

The reader is to participate in the contact zone 'for to interpret is no less than to act' (*David's Story* 89).

When Wicomb writes a novel that begins with Sarah Bartmann but does not participate in the project though which she has been the subject and object of myth, she is in conversation with the literary and theoretical lives of Sarah Bartmann. Bartmann's treatment is not isolated, so Wicomb scripts a fictional world peopled with elusive Blackwomen characters that 'appear' subservient only to turn out as revolutionaries. Because Sarah Bartmann's specific resistance cannot be pigeonholed, it can be rendered imaginatively as the participation of various young African women whose bodies may mask this subjectivity. The preponderance of names like Saartje, Sarah and Sally as a continuum where at times the same character moves back and forth, again locate the most famous 'Saartje' or 'Sarah' within a context that normalises her, like Nichols' poem where the world reflects and centres 'the fat black woman'. The insertion, but not definitive description, of these Sarah/Saartje/Sally figures' interiority signals that their histories begin with and link indefinitely with Sara Bartmann and Krotoa's in as much as David's does.

Similarly, the activist Dulcie, whose name peppers the narrative because of her association with David's own activism, proves as illusive as Sarah Bartmann, or Krotoa. Although her name finds its way into the

various explanations and self-narrations offered by David, little is known about her at the end of the story. The biographer goes to great pains to extract specific details about her, but in the end he fails. That the revolutionary Dulcie often appears shortly after the mention of Sarah Bartmann, or rather David's attempt to speak his anxiety more coherently about these women, links them in Wicomb's novel quite forcefully. It underlines the delicacy of ways of seeing, and emphasises the necessity of translation activity in the contact zone. This becomes quite important in light of the connections between Sarah Bartmann and Dulcie (September), both elusive women from the records, one from the nineteenth century and the second from the twentieth.

Their separate, and joint, elusiveness, as well as their immersion in various narratives of masking and unmasking, and of narratives by Blackwomen are significant. They suggest the ever-presence of a multitude of ways of seeing, and the simplicity of engaging only the surface meanings. Bartmann's resistance, like Dulcie's and that of the numerous other women in Wicomb's text, points to the activity of alternate storying, and suggests the pervasiveness of sublimated histories of struggle which reside in spaces that do not easily give up meaning. Wicomb's project makes the imagining of these sites possible. Dulcie is central to David's life, yet few details about her are provided.

In her 'Fetching Sarah',⁶ Gail Smith notes a rare moment of relaxation for those South African officials responsible for the particulars of Bartmann's repatriation. After Bartmann's coffin has been loaded onto a plane headed for South Africa, the Deputy Minister of Arts and Culture,

⁶ There are two versions of this essay. One, shorter was published as 'Fetching Saartje' in the *Mail and Guardian* 2 May 2002. Another, longer, is as yet unpublished, and is under the title 'Fetching Sarah'. I choose to read Smith's pieces as literary even though its publication in the above newspaper framed it as an opinion piece because closer examination of the piece reveals Smith's reliance on a range of literary, 'fictional', and creative techniques. Some of these include the suspension of disbelief which is invited by Smith when she imagines Sarah Bartmann laughing, the splitting of the narrating voice into different selves, the play with the fiction/faction and autobiography genres, and so forth. The page numbers refer to the longer, unpublished version.

one of these officials, seems calmer. Smith notes that in her relief, Deputy Minister Mabandla reminisced about 'exile travel stories, and a rare moment of poignant remembering of Dulcie September, another great South African woman who had died a horrible death in Paris' ('Fetching' 4). Dulcie September was assassinated by agents of the South African apartheid state in March 1988, outside the ANC offices in Paris, and the highly visible, if convoluted, gathering of information on possible assassins notwithstanding, nobody has ever been charged with her murder.

To the extent that Dulcie September's name is well-known, it is she who is hinted at when the trajectory is unearthed in Wicomb's novel; Dulcie, the character, then suggests September, or others whose names are less known to chart along with the numerous Sallys, Saartjies and Sarahs in Wicomb's narrative, varieties of participation in anti-colonial struggle. Wicomb's text charts a pattern of Blackwomen's presences which has been inarticulable in the conventional hegemonic languages of white supremacy or African nationalism. It pays

'broad attention to [how] voice, communication and agency enlarge conventional understandings of women's agency and transcend the 'resistance' models that have often constrained understandings of women's roles as political and historical actors' (Lewis 2002a, 1).

David's Story invites us to question to what, and whose, ends stories work and, more specifically to make these inquiries in relation to the various discursive constructions of Sarah Bartmann. Wicomb's novel bravely defies and resists closure. Unlike much of the writing on Sarah Bartmann, it at once acknowledges that she is more than object and/or icon, and registers some of the ways in which she resists closure. There can be no disclosure which brings us closer to her and this acknowledgment is a crucial precursor to any project which does not re-objectify her and continue to erase her subjectivity and the agency whose demonstrations are lost to us. Writing on her which does not recast her as a 'freak', reading her in ways that parade her as the ultimate icon of alterity, can only draw attention to the reality that we know nothing about her. Yet her presences continue to haunt us in Wicomb's text.

Remembering home

I have lived in so many places, I think I have forced myself to find home in smaller things.⁷

Making a home has become a critical instinct in all living creatures, and for humans who claim that they are above all other creatures in terms of intelligence and the ability to survive, home is the true marker of having arrived, of being there and having lived (1999, n. p.).

The above quotations seem to speak to two antagonistic impulses in the naming and definition of homespaces. In the longer citation, Patricia McFadden points to the sociability of home. It is that space which, although usually physical, bears the mark of relationship to human-selfhood. This relationship to self is always marked in tandem with other creatures, and a stamp which apparently shows humans' superiority over other living beings by the level of sophistication human abodes represent. Human homes are evidence of people's existence, and as such are of enormous importance. For African feminist poet, Jessica Horn, home is mobile, and more conducive to carrying within as a psychic space. It is not so much proof of having being here, or there, but a condition which responds to obligation or necessity. Like McFadden's, it is a relationship to the human-self.

Both Horn and McFadden underscore the negotiated element of home, its choices, its locations and its necessity. Horn makes it smaller, but still needs to 'find home'; McFadden defines it as a 'critical instinct' at the same time as she underscores its social value. In both cases home is necessary.

Sitting in Holland, in June 1998, Diana Ferrus wrote one of the most famous pieces on Sarah Bartmann. It might be more appropriate to describe it as a poem *to* her. In its very title, 'Tribute to Sarah Bartmann', the poem unsettles expectation and marks itself as participating in an undertaking markedly different from many of those who have scripted Bartmann. A tribute is an acknowledgement, a mark of respect. It is the

⁷ Poet and feminist activist, Jessica Horn in an interview by Christopher Simpson for the BBC Radio 4 show, *Other*, 20 July 2003.

opposite of the degradation Sarah Bartmann endured in the last years of her life. However, the relationship Ferrus' persona details with Bartmann need not be mediated through colonialist, and other related mythologisations, of Bartmann. The poem is not a celebration of Sarah Bartmann in the sense of recovering her from the many ways in which she has been objectified. Ferrus does not offer her reader, or listener, for she often performs her poetry, a straightforward representation of Bartmann. Her persona is concerned with the comfort of Bartmann's inner workings, her emotional and psychic health. Bartmann is being taken home.

In an interview, Ferrus has noted how she came to write the poem:

I was doing a course that included a segment on sexuality in the colonies, so my mind went to Sara Bartmann and how she was exploited [...] But more than that, the really big thing was how acutely homesick I was. [...] My heart went out to Sara, and I thought, 'Oh, God, she died of heartbreak. She longed for her country. What did she feel? That's why the first line of the poem was I've come to take you home (in Setshwaelo 2002, n.p.)

Further, Ferrus' refrain 'I have come to take you home' (l. 1, rpt. as 24 and 29) addresses Bartmann directly as one who has a home. Taking her home is a gesture of intense emotional saliency. The meanings which attach to home challenge the status of Sara Bartmann as object, positioning her instead as a loved one. Home is a place of particular importance for the exiled and enslaved; it is a space which provides the possibilities of belonging, of acceptance and special significance. The love suggested in the act is further intensified given the specific meanings which attach to the act of taking her home. Taking somebody home is always an intimate act of rescue given that only specific people can participate. Ferrus' interview underscores this when she speaks of the possibility of dying from heartbreak when going home is foreclosed. Its importance is so emphasised that 'going home' in some (African) languages is conceptually and linguistically different from going back to the place where you live⁸. Further, home is a space where one is always welcome, a sanctuary

⁸ This intimacy is emphasised when we imagine the separate, more *intimate* verb that 'going home' has in some African languages, like for example, the isiXhosa language in southern Africa, which uses 'ukugoduka', as completely separate from the act of

to which one always has access. To be away from home, exiled, and in need of being brought home speaks powerfully to the alienation of the one away from home. The late Edward W Said, who has written movingly about exile, and the condition of homelessness in great detail, called it the feeling of being ‘out of place’, the title of his memoir. When Ferrus’ persona offers to take Sara Bartmann home, it is a declaration of immense affection.

I have come to take you home –
Home! Remember the veld?
The lush green grass beneath the big oak trees?
I have made your bed at the foot of the hill,
your blankets are covered in buchu and mint,
the proteas stand in yellow and white
and the water in the stream chuckles sing-songs
as it hobbles over little stones. (ll. 1-9)

The tone of the poem, which stresses connection, intensifies the relationship between the speaker and the addressee. The memory of home is one that is shared, gesturing to a common past and that they have the same home. Ferrus’ persona has, through effort, ensured that upon her return home, Sara Bartmann will be comfortable. Home is more than the physical dwelling inside which people live. It represents the psychic familiar which brings peace. The evocation of proteas, mint and buchu along with the use of ‘veld’, clarifies where this home is located geographically. However, it also captures the presence of smells, tastes and other feelings which do not correspond to how Bartmann feels in exile. These familiar things are also put in the position of being desired because they represent, and are from, home. The memory that is evoked and stressed is one of familiarity through which Bartmann knows how to shelter herself from the elements. It is one that entails Bartmann’s freedom to roam about in the veld, unlike her enslaved position in Europe. Home offers pleasures by way of beautiful proteas to behold, and musical water flowing over little stones.

going anywhere else. ‘Home’ is the location of your parents and birth family, and is never the abode (also ‘home’ in English) you set up with your life partner (and offspring).

Further, the speaker is also committed to the project of restoring Bartmann to herself, which is to say, bringing her home, to allow her to *be* and *feel* at home. Ferrus' persona is thus, akin to the family of the addressee, and 'I have come to take you home' is the verbal equivalent of an embrace that cannot be refused. Because home is a place that one voluntarily goes to, the fetching marks the event as somewhat urgent, bearing as it does strong overtones of rescue. The emotional prominence of home is further complicated as the persona imbues it with additional layers of meaning.

Home is signalled here by everything that the addressee's current location is not; it has fragrant buchu to soothe the effects of the humiliation from being displayed as well as to counteract her objectification as slave, freak/specimen and her dissection for further examination after her death. Home in Ferrus' poem has open spaces ('veld') and protection ('shade') which are contrast to the confinement of Bartmann in Europe. She is not peered and poked at there. The proteas too, which are missing from the Europe she remained enslaved in, represent something particular to home. The speaker appeals to an emotional memory as well as a memory of the senses. Home is cool, and she can lie in the shade unexposed. She can see the breadth of the veld, and the colours of the proteas. It is her eyes, and the eyes of the persona from her home that are privileged here. The smell of buchu, and mint, as well as their healing possibilities are also foregrounded. To complete the image of home, Ferrus offers the playful sounds of water flowing freely and singing.

In the writings of late eighteenth-century Europe, in various public debates and court cases, it became clear colonialism was being explained in a variety of intertwined ways. First, the colonised space tempted the coloniser to subordinate it, and the very difference offered and embodied by the territory and peoples invaded propelled the colonising mission into a justification of an increasing spiral of violence in an effort to make it knowable, and thereby controllable (Kitson 1998). Within this violent regime of knowing, or making knowable, was the body of the slave or colonised. Clearly, then, this was a quest which had no illusions about the coupling of material and epistemic violence. To be known, the colonised

and enslaved had to be brutalised, and their home fundamentally altered. Further, this violation of the subjected was an integral part of the coloniser's own self-definition and constitution as ultimate power, and exclusively authoritative (Kitson 1998). This pattern inevitably affects the ways in which (previously) colonised subjects then interact with each other, which is not to say that Africans are defined wholly by the experience of having being brutalised.

However, this history does have implications for the framing of an African feminist project addressing itself to the creative imagining of Sara Bartmann by addressing the kind of language, and a politics of representation that can be used in its service. It is no small matter that the feminist texts analysed here make no attempt to re-view Bartmann since gaping at her has become the standard way in which she features in a variety of discourses. The literary texts examined here are informed by a politics which resists the oppressive gaze. Therefore, Bartmann, when represented here, is not discernible via a series of physical descriptions, as she is in Cuvier's notes for example. Part of resisting the dominant tropes through which Bartmann has become 'familiar' is a disavowal of linguistic systems which represent her primarily through her corporeality.

Wicomb leaves her reader with an elusive Sara Bartmann. Ferrus allows her persona anger and gentleness depending on who is being addressed. Bartmann is the beloved, she is treated as human with feelings of sadness, homesickness, and so forth. Ferrus, however, stops short of romanticising Bartmann. She does not make Bartmann someone we merely look at, or a subject in need of all our embrace and rescue. Rather, she invests her with commonplace, in other words human, internal workings. The simplicity of this move serves to highlight the utter brutality of the systems that put Bartmann on display.

When Wicomb resists showing Bartmann as knowable, and Ferrus speaks to a Sarah Bartmann whose interiority is privileged, this stems from a refusal by both writers to describe Bartmann, to offer her as a known and knowable subject. It is enough that she is human, and to explore the obvious things that accompany that recognition. Among these are that she must have experienced emotions, felt sensations, and recog-

nised the humiliation she was subjected to. It also is obvious that she must have resisted it. Both texts participate in a new politics of representation, crafting a new language through which to speak to the creative imagination at hand. This is based on the recognition that

[o]ne difficulty with the assumption that language can be overturned in favour of an entirely new lexicon and world outlook is the problematic assumption that words and their meanings can be neatly separated from a globalised cultural repertoire pervasively underwritten by centuries of western discursive dominance (Lewis 2000a, 3).

It is important that Ferrus offers descriptions of the landscape as part of her reminder to Sara Bartmann's imagined self since part of the alienation of colonialism is the separation of 'native' from her land. And, in Bartmann's case, as well as that of many other slaves, displacement from this home. It was important, as the Dutch became Afrikaners, that the same land(scape) be emptied of its indigenous occupants. One of the consequences of this pertains, more recently, to the paucity of landscape in Black South African literature, as opposed to its centrality in the Afrikaner novel, especially the *plaasroman*⁹. That Ferrus' speaker, who intends to take Sara Bartmann home, has access to their land she prepares for Bartmann's return charts a different location to land in the literary imagination. Part of her return, part of the mutual exchange of peace, has to do with being at home, and having part of one's humanity restored. It is noteworthy that while the anger expressed at those responsible for Sara Bartmann's fate is unflinching, it does not detract from the purpose of the speaker's trip and therefore is confined to six out of the total thirty lines which make up the poem. In this manner the speaker resists complicity with the colonial mistreatment of Bartmann by concentrating on the scientific and colonial quests to which she fell victim. Rather, the focus is shifted and altered significantly in addressing her as a beloved, as ordinarily human.

⁹ Literally translated into 'farm novel', a widely subscribed to genre in Afrikaans literature. For a lengthy discussion, see J.M. Coetzee (1988) *White Writing: On the Culture of Letters in South Africa*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

The third stanza further challenges conventional representations of Sara Bartmann by showing her as one who is loveable, desirable and aesthetically pleasing; in other words, she is humanised since all human beings are these things to someone. Line 20's 'I will feast my eyes on the beauty of you' highlights a different way of looking at her than fills the volumes penned about her in the last two hundred years. Here again Ferrus' project intersects with Wicomb's, who, without specific reference to Bartmann each time, nonetheless installs the image of steatopygia as normal for all the women in her novel, and later points to its valuation in another context as beautiful. It is also a location which welcomes her, like the world of Nichols' poem above. It is a worldview which is not hostile to Bartmann; it is a literary homing. All four feminist writers examined here choose not to reinscribe Sara Bartmann's discursive hypercorporeality; at the same time they do not pretend that she is unembodied. She is not invisible physically or metaphorically; but in the imaginations of feminists of the African world, her body is like many others: recognisable, and therefore cannot be the spectacular focus of attention.

Smith's title puns on her 'fetching' of Sara Bartmann to bring her home. A member of team responsible for repatriating Sara Bartmann's remains for burial, and the scriptwriter on a second Sara Bartmann documentary collaboration with the director Zola Maseko, Smith's speaker also echoes Ferrus' more figurative home-bringing. The act of 'fetching' signifies more than mere collection since one fetches things and people one claims ownership of. Additionally, to fetch somebody suggests that you will ultimately return with that person home, and that the fetched is currently misplaced. This is why for Smith's narrating voice the act of fetching is linked so closely to the ability to claim Sara Bartmann back.

Like Ferrus' speaker's tone in the second stanza, 'I have come to wrench you away' (l.10), there is indignation in Smith's piece at the degradation Sara Bartmann had to suffer. Smith lashes out in an acidic manner at the trajectory of scientific racism, and at the celebrated anatomists who took pleasure in such depravity. However, she is unsurprised by the rise of rightwing sentiment in present-day France because, for her, events in history are linked. Thus her troubled stance as she recognises the pat-

tern is exacerbated by the surprise she finds expressed in the French media. There are no shocks for her in the politics of contemporary France, with the threat of Le Penn taking leadership as she writes. Historical narrative is portrayed as a series of complex linkages rather than sporadic moments. Consequently, Le Penn, the exhibition of Bartmann and the lies which aimed to keep her remains in the Musee are not unconnected. They occupy moments apart in time, but are all part of the same logic.

Smith's confrontational stance, like Ferrus', is, however, modulated by another gentler voice. Ferrus' and Smith's imaginative projects centre on Sara Bartmann. As such, then, the bulk of the narrative space needs to be dedicated to concern with her. This is evident in the proportions of time between the expression of anger towards Sara Bartmann's exhibitors on the one hand, and acknowledgement of her interiority, on the other hand. The confrontational stance and the harsh tone when discussing the monster she needs to be rescued from rhymes with the outrage that the same monster, Cuvier, evokes in Wicomb's David.

Gail Smith's, unlike the other writers discussed, was first published after Bartmann's return, reflecting on the process of fetching her from Paris. Wicomb's novel was finished long before, and published prior to Bartmann's return. Although Ferrus' poem would eventually bring about the return of Bartmann, to do this it had to be written long before the actual event. Ferrus' tribute, then, is in some respects prophetic.

In her piece, Smith eschews the distance prized by conventional academia between the knowledge-maker and the subject, or 'object', of her text. Instead her narrative voice plays on the politics that decide which meanings can be made about the past, on how the knower and dispenser of knowledge participates in this, as well as on the violence involved in epistemic projects. In this text, she explores these issues specifically in relation to the history and science on Sara Bartmann. For both Smith's essay and Ferrus' poem, it is more than the mere fetching of Sara Bartmann's remains that matters; it matters who is fetching her.

It is an emotional act of bringing back, clear enough when her narrator comments, 'My spirit self was reclaiming an ancestor', making Sarah Bartmann part of her past, and herself (like David too in Wicomb's

novel), part of Bartmann's future. The narrator positions herself in relation to Sarah Bartmann as more than object, as someone whose relationship is also circumscribed by a subjective history. No pretence at objectivity is made by either speaking personalities. It is poles apart from the allegedly objective, unemotional treatment which saw Sarah Bartmann used so violently and degradingly. Smith, like Ferrus' speaker, does not shy away from the contradictions that this poses but rather acknowledges the split between the self who is claiming an ancestor and the other one, the 'earth self' making a film about the return of Sarah Bartmann. There is no need to mask such a conflict, and Smith's narrating splitting undulating voice makes no attempt at this. This is not a narrative that this African feminist writer chooses to tell from a distance, coldly. Bartmann's life and hers are influenced by similar discourses, even if not to the same extent. Sylvia Tamale has underlined that 'no African woman can shield herself from the broad negative and gendered legacies left behind by forces such as colonialism, imperialism and globalisation' (Tamale 2002, 7). Given this recognition, it is possible to see contemporary (Blackwomen's) lives as being shaped by the histories which so demonised Sarah Bartmann, to the same extent that the French cannot be free of histories of men like Cuvier. This is how Smith's concept of shame works. It is the brutalisers, in the legacy of Cuvier and the later, curators at the Musée who lied about having lost Bartmann's skeleton, genitalia and brains, who should be ashamed.

The split-spirit persona Smith constructs disavows the objective distance that is valued by science, and later in her piece, she points to some of the reasons why this is both important and possible. Her stance is different from that of Cuvier, who felt greatly honoured to present Sarah Bartmann's corpse after he had dissected her¹⁰. Smith, instead, recounts how 'unremarkable' the bottles containing Sarah Bartmann's body parts are to her, and wonders about 'what treasures of scientific discovery they

¹⁰ I have chosen not to reproduce Cuvier's reading and notes on Sarah Bartmann here. Yvette Abrahams has analysed them in some detail, as have I in less detail than Abrahams, in our respective doctoral dissertations. See Abrahams 2000 and Gqola 2004.

could possibly have yielded'. Unlike Cuvier *et al.*, however, she reflects on the implications of trying to ascertain something spectacular in the parts of Bartmann's body that lie pickled in the jars. Repulsed by responding in a manner that may be seen to mirror Cuvier's, she remarks that she stopped trying to ascertain what was so remarkable about Bartmann's brain and genitals. The writer is equally struck by the contexts within which she was kept at the Musee del'Homme. Walking through the Musee del'Homme she is struck by the many bodies meticulously catalogued in the name of science. The neatness of the cataloguing system leaves her feeling 'horrified', 'appalled' and 'disgusted' by the rows of cupboards each with a page that

'listed the contents (...) skeletons, skulls and other bits of indigenous people from every corner of the earth, but mostly Africa, North & South America' ('Fetching' 2).

Cuvier's science that legitimates a feeling of honour at the display and dissection of human beings and animals contrasts with the spirit Smith speaks about: both her own that comes to claim an ancestor and make a film about the return, as well as Sarah Bartmann's own which must have 'cried out again and again to be taken home, and her cries have reverberated through the centuries, and her name has lived on' ('Fetching' 3).

As 'the ancient mountains shout [Bartmann's] name' in Ferrus' poem, so in Smith's literary essay Bartmann's spirit 'clearly cried out again and again to be taken home, and her cries have reverberated through the centuries, and her name has lived on' ('Fetching' 3). The Director of the museum, Andre Langenay, had lied about how Sara Bartmann's remains had been destroyed in a fire long before he was employed by the institution (captured on tape in a conversation and incorporated into Smith's and Maseko's earlier film). About this incident, Smith remarks in retrospect,

Sarah Baartman was not simply a powerful symbol of scientific racism, but she clearly has magical powers. She could bring back her own genitals and force the modern day representatives of the men who dissected her into a shame-faced apology at being caught out in a very public lie ('Fetching' 2).

Smith's speaker makes connections between the logic of lies at the core of the French scientists, curators and director's words claims to knowledge, which she sets up against the more complex sets of relationships and relationality between herstories of knowledge creation. She and Bartmann have spirits that find expression in ways that need no forced linear narrative of lies, but through routes that index a more creative relationship to time. Interestingly, in her choice of language, Smith rejects the Eurandrocentric violent heritage of lies, taking risks instead with complexity that cannot be flattened out as her own voice splits and Sarah Bartmann works her magic beyond the grave.

Turning the circle

Representations of Sarah Bartmann have incensed feminists of colour the world over due to the manner in which she has been instrumentalised as part of inscribing Blackwomen's bodies in white supremacist colonial culture as oversexualised, deviant and spectacular. In her 'Thoughts drifting through the fat black woman's head while having a full bubble bath', the poem on which this paper opened, Grace Nichols reclaims and subverts dominant representations of African women's bodies. Her speaking subject lies in her bath, thinking about a world that reflects her in different ways from those that have historically positioned her in terms of a deviant body that requires explanation. It is with anger that the 'fat black woman' in the bath responds to both the multiple sites of this inscription, as well as to the combined authority it continues to exert. As she lies in the bath, then, she allows for the possibility of enjoying her own body, her own mind, of being more than she is to the white supremacist capitalist epistemic systems that she must continue to endure. These epistemic systems continue to exert power over her. Importantly, she links her positioning as a contemporary Blackwoman to the historical constructions of that subject category, whether these take the form of anthropological discourse, historiographic inscription, theology, or the diet industry.

Nichols's narrator locates her reality in tandem with the violence with which Sarah Bartmann was inscribed. Like Smith, Nichols refuses to

pretend that the volumes penned to make sense of Blackwomen's bodies are removed from her own persona's lived experience. The vision she immerses herself in, like the full bubble bath, is a fantasy that she needs to create for herself, where steatopygia is the norm, where the world reflects her. It is not a distant reality, but one which intersects in a variety of ways with her own imagined home.

Further, Wicomb's text asserts the necessity of historicising Bartmann and Krotoa, which is to say, the need to make them human, and at the same time demonstrates that this project of representation and her-storification is not one which offers wholeness or closure. Indeed, Wicomb's text both structurally and metaphorically resists offering definitive answers, or seeking refuge in explanatory narrative. The reality we are faced with, after volumes of ink outlining 'facts' have been spilt about Sarah Bartmann, is that:

Dismembered, isolated, decontextualised – the body in the glass case epitomises the way white men were trying to see Khoisan women at the time, as unresisting objects open to exploitation. [...] After reams of measurements and autopsy notes, we do not know the simplest thing about Sarah Bartmann. We do not know how she laughed, her favourite flowers or even whom she prayed to. We cannot even know with certainty how she looked (Abrahams 1997, 45).

And,

Very little is known of Baartman's experience in Paris. No one can say for sure where she lived, if she had friends, what she took for menstrual cramps, what she thought of French food, or the cold (Smith 2002, 3).

Given the near total absence of information about her person, how then is she representable? And what available tropes are there for this representation in ways unlike those systems that mythologise her? Wicomb chooses to weave traces of Bartmann's ghost into her novel, never allowing her to be a known character. In this way she ensures that Sarah Bartmann is seen as relevant to the larger picture in a myriad of ways. Similarly, that Sarah Bartmann is found in echoes throughout Wicomb's text highlights the difficulty of representing her in refreshing ways. Wicomb's novel, like Smith's essay and Ferrus' remarkable poem, partakes in the project of *remembering, connecting, contextualising* Bartmann and Krotoa. For Smith, Sarah Bartmann's history is linked to her own, and is not one from

which she feigns emotional distance. It is linked to Dulcie September's. Equally, it intersects with the struggles over identity and self-positioning which accompany the readings of Blackwomen's bodies in ways that trap them/us in discourses of hypersexualisation. It is this circulation of 'white supremacist, Eurocentric beliefs about knowledge and its production' which perpetuates 'practices that invisibilise black women' (Matlanyane Sexwale 1994, 65), that is unsettled by the writers whose work on Sarah Bartmann I have analysed here. In their collective resistance to cast Bartmann as spectacle, to force the reader to look at her physical being these writers recognise, as Gabeba Baderoon has pointed out, that:

Black people live amid the visual precipitate of racism. How does one engage with this legacy of images of which Black people have been not only the subject but also the audience? Should we prohibit them? Does showing them repeat their initial impact? (Baderoon 2000, n.d.)

The writers here examined seem to answer the final of Baderoon's questions in a qualified affirmative. They suggest that there is necessarily a variety of lenses brought to bear in representing Blackwoman subjectivities, and also that these are linked to Bartmann, as one of the women most conspicuously subjected to the violence of this gaze. Homi Bhabha writes:

The Other is cited, quoted, framed, illuminated, encased in the shot/reverse-shot strategy of a serial enlightenment. [...] The Other loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse. However impeccably the content of an 'other' culture may be known, however anti-ethnocentrically it is represented, it is [...] the demand that [...] it be always the good object of knowledge, the docile body of difference, that reproduces a relation of domination (1994, p. 31).

In these texts, Sara Bartmann does not remain the 'docile body of difference'. The main question all these texts address pertains to the difficulty in speaking about how Blackwomen's subjectivity is constituted. Indeed,

'[w]here does agency lie when the body in question has been defined and manipulated by Eurocentric, and hegemonic cultures?' (Shaw 2003, 2)

Like Smith, Wicomb, Ferrus and Nichols refuse the arbitrary distance which is constructed as a necessary position from which to theorise,

to make knowledge. The thinking subject lying in the bath is 'Steatopygous me'. The literary texts here discussed unsettle the Eurandrocentric perspective as norm by imaginatively illustrating the inescapable marrying of perspective and discursive construction. Thus, the logic and aesthetics of colonial valuation, biased in the interest of white-supremacist patriarchy, are unravelled in the refusal of linear narrative strategies (timelines). Collectively the literary texts imagine a revision of prevalent literary representations of the past. Bartmann is not used as an illustration for some alternative ideology. Rather, her narrative is engaged with in ways that are irredeemably contaminated by the past of her violation. One of the most obvious ways is her positioning as spectacle, as excessively corporeal. To the extent that all three representations of Bartmann in the texts analysed in this chapter avoid resting the reader's gaze on the spectacle of her body, this is not a viable form of imaginatively rendering her. The stance taken by the writers above problematises the repetition of certain oppressive positionings. In this regard, they link up with Abraham's (1997) earlier rejection of Sander Gilman's incessant repetition of the sketches made when Sarah Bartmann was exhibited. Sarah Bartmann's representation becomes a matter of balancing to what extent repetition of colonialist and misogynist material can work to subvert original intention. For the writers analysed here, as well as for the scholars Abrahams and Magubane, this is an unworkable option.

The African feminist writers whose literary work I have analysed above suggests that representing Sarah Bartmann is more complicated than appears to be the case when at first encountered by her prominence in the academic imaginary. All gesture towards what is not knowable, invite us as readers to

'wrestle with ways of unifying concepts which [we] had come to believe were polarised opposites, or could be placed into neat hierarchies, such as is the case with speech/silence' (Motsemme 2004a, 4).

What has emerged is the manner in which re-presenting Sarah Bartmann within an African feminist imagination has to be about making her speak/visible through drawing attention to history's silences/blanks about her. All three literary texts suggest that rather than speaking about her

obliquely, it is possible to gesture to Sarah Bartmann's absent presence, contextualise and humanise her imaginatively. The literary texts examined herein participate in this project of

creating spaces which facilitate the telling of ... stories as connected as possible to [our own African feminist] centres of meaning, then we will have to take the risk of leaping into places which have become unfamiliar for many of us fed on the restricted diet of the power of articulation and the text (Motsemme 2004a, 5).

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Discursive Challenges for African Feminisms

Desiree Lewis

Abstract. Discursive Challenges for African Feminisms. In what follows, I draw attention to the necessity for connecting national and continental feminist challenges to those that confront feminisms globally. Two main discursive manifestations of the neo-liberal co-optation of feminism are explored: the growth of moderate rights-based discourses; and secondly, the co-optation and adulteration of gender research and teaching. While there are important differences in the way that these trends have evolved and currently function in different parts of the world, I stress that they are politically connected. In the third and final section, I focus on ways in which some feminist commentators are invigorating the language and practice of feminism to contest our present context of hegemonised knowledge and information.

key words: Africa, feminism, gender, philosophy, post-colonial, globalization

Introduction

It is sometimes assumed that the ‘indulgence’ of deconstructing discourses should be undertaken mainly in Northern contexts and that ‘practical’ and ‘material’ struggles must be paramount in the South. The fallaciousness of this assumption is revealed in Nawaal el Sadaawi’s comments on the universal use of language against oppressed peoples. ‘We need’, she writes, ‘to unveil the words used by global and local governments, by their media and education’ (2004: 5-6). Describing one of the most potent weapons in the attack on women’s rights, she argues:

Language is often used against women and the poor in every country, especially in our countries, the so-called South’. Today, the word ‘liberation’ means military and economic occupation in Iraq and Afghanistan. The word ‘peace’ means war, and ‘terror’ means the massacre of Palestinian women and children under Israeli occupation. The word ‘development’ means neo-colonialism, robbing people’s economic and intellectual riches in Africa, Asia

and Latin America. (2004: 5).

Our present context of limitless information, globalised power relations, transnational media oligarchies, and commoditised academic knowledge mystifies patriarchal and neo-imperial injustice through the rhetoric of 'liberalisation' and 'legitimate' paternalist protection and patriotism. Radical struggles have become increasingly challenging because the exercise of domination has become progressively more overwhelming. The deluge of information that routinely bombards us has contributed to and ensured this. Those who wield power in the present age also wield control over and access to knowledge: knowledge circulated via the World Wide Web, information - promulgated in institutions of higher learning - that often only appears progressive; 'public' information ostensibly aimed at marginalised groups, yet concerned least with their interests and most with profit-making.

Critiques of neo-liberal challenges to African gender struggles have increased in recent years. Ruth Meena (1992) and Marjorie Mblinyi (1992) writing on Tanzania, Pat McFadden (2001) dealing with Zimbabwe and Dodzi Tsikata (1997) focusing on Ghana have all critically examined ways in which 'good governance', structural adjustment, patriarchal state building, and elite consolidation have led to neo-imperial states acting in collusion with the donor community and international capital to orchestrate token policymaking for gender transformation. Such manoeuvring addresses the proviso made by donor communities that third-world countries should liberalise in order to obtain foreign funding. They also seek to placate women's movements in countries where such movements have battled for substantive gender transformation.

But a relatively neglected facet of the neo-liberal environment is the upsurge of what could be termed a gender industry on the continent, and the extent to which this, ultimately, has been shaped by the developmentalist paradigms that entrenched neo-imperialism and economic dependency. Ranging from the growth of duplicitous discourses on rights to the mushrooming of technocratic and conservative trends in tertiary education, the industry has set in place technologies of gender designed to reconstitute what is substantively transformative, and to institutionalise a

bureaucratic ethos of top-down engineering and politically correct rhetoric.

The neo-liberal co-optation of feminist demands is not, of course unique to third-world contexts. It is an overwhelming feature of contemporary ostensibly 'postfeminist' liberal-democratic societies. The hegemony of global imperialism is increasingly eroding feminism and radical cultural expression and discourses in civil society at an international level. What takes the place of these are industries of information and knowledge production that often work to consolidate elite interests, exploitative patterns of consumption and distribution, and long-established global economic and political inequalities.

In what follows, I draw attention to the necessity for connecting national and continental feminist challenges to those that confront feminisms globally. Two main discursive manifestations of the neo-liberal co-optation of feminism are explored: the growth of moderate rights-based discourses; and secondly, the co-optation and adulteration of gender research and teaching. While there are important differences in the way that these trends have evolved and currently function in different parts of the world, I stress that they are politically connected. In the third and final section, I focus on ways in which some feminist commentators are invigorating the language and practice of feminism to contest our present context of hegemonised knowledge and information.

The pitfalls of rights discourse

In analysing the politics of contemporary women's-rights discourses, it is instructive to examine the development of gender discourses in South Africa. This is because South Africa during the last decade exemplifies the way mainstreaming progressively dilutes gender activism and discourses. This trend has been a rapid one: in the space of a decade, South Africa has come to be viewed as one of the most 'gender-sensitive' countries in the world because of the centrality of women's rights and gender equity to an official narrative of nation-building. The ambiguity of this language of gender equality is the focus of the first half of this section.

The eighties marked a high point for integrating gender into public and political discourses on human rights in South Africa. Various community, regional and national organisations¹ provided structures for working women, students and activists to play dynamic roles in anti-apartheid politics. From the early nineties, by the time of the release of political prisoners and the national preparation for dismantling apartheid, the ground had therefore been laid for systematically confronting both gender and racial injustices, since women's organisations and civil society activism had effectively prioritised feminist demands in the struggle for South African democracy.

A crucial event marking the shift away from the articulation of gender struggles in civil society activism was the formation of a Women's National Coalition four years before the first democratic election. As the culmination of years of activism, lobbying and organisation, the Coalition's primary objective was to ensure women's equality in the constitutional dispensation being negotiated by different parties and organisations at the time. Its role has been described in the following way: 'In creating the WNC, all of the major women's organizations allowed something larger and more representative to command an authority that none of them could achieve alone, making the WNC something that they could not avoid affiliating to as well as something that could not be controlled by any one organization' (Kemp, Madala, Moodley and Salo, 1995: 151).

The Coalition, of course, was distinctive not only because it drew together different groupings, but also because this amalgamation marked a process of sidelining political differences to achieve consensus around nation-building and 'democracy'. It indicated how the 'mainstreaming' of gender concerns into the national democratising agenda entailed compromise, arbitration and regulation as myriad organisations and individuals focused on negotiated legal and formal rights. The taking up of gender

¹ These included the Natal Organisation of Women, the United Women's Congress, the Federation of Transvaal Women and other organisations aligned to the United Democratic Front.

into the nation-building agenda, or what Shireen Hassim has identified as the 'gender pact' (2003) entailed an arbitration process through which particular gender concerns were identified as those that should be institutionalised in the discursive construction of democracy. It could be argued, then, that the Coalition signalled the displacement of the nature of gender activism as earlier preoccupations with women's agency and interests were jettisoned in favour of pursuing consensual rights-oriented lobbying and policy-making that postulated common rights and entitlements monitored or granted by the state.

The transformation of the nature of gender activism was accompanied by a concomitant displacement of the *locus* of gender struggles - away from civil society and into the state bureaucracy. This was associated, for example, with the committee work of a caucus of Parliamentarians; the Women's Budget in 1966, which focused on policy areas specifically concerning the needs of women; the Office of the Status of Women in the office of the President, regional Gender Desks and a national Gender Commission.

It is indisputable that women's movements and radical currents within civil society prompted mainstreaming in the first place. It is also clear that gender mainstreaming is a desirable goal when defined as a systematic and holistic process for introducing policy implementation, institutional restructuring, educational transformation and planning in ways that rectify persistent gender inequalities. In fact, the belief in this structural change motivated the concerted involvement of radical organisations and individuals in mainstreaming processes during the nineties. In recent years, however, there has been growing scepticism about the effectiveness of state structures. In particular, many feminist writers and activists have raised questions about the disparity between policy and practice.

Generally, the argument is that blueprints for gender transformation in South Africa are in place, but there has generally been a failure on the part of policy-makers, actors within the state or existing structures and institutions to realise the goals of policies. A special issue of South Africa's leading feminist journal, *Agenda*, entitled 'Realising Rights', made this argument very clearly in 2001, with the editorial stating that: 'While

our Constitution is regarded as one of the most progressive in the world, 'Realising Rights?' questions the extent to which women are able to realise the rights enshrined therein. The passing of a number of progressive laws and the amendment of certain pieces of legislation, theoretically implies the improvement of women's positions in society – yet the reality is that the majority of women continue to face marginalisation and discrimination in their homes, workplaces and communities (Moolman, 2001: 2).

A persuasive explanation of the gap between South Africa's gender-oriented theory and practice is provided by Amanda Gouws (2004). Gouws draws attention to how different voices are always already inscribed in legislation, and to 'different discursive inputs being made within different sites' (2004: 43). Her discussion is suggestive in its Foucauldian attention to the way that power is played out through a 'multiplicity of discursive elements that can come into play in various strategies' (2004: 43). The analysis of policy-making can be taken further if we bear in mind how much discursive power is unequally distributed. Negotiation processes in South Africa have not simply entailed various voices in dialogue with each other. They have involved domination, covert censorship and hegemonisation, with different voices having hugely disparate access to sites for articulating knowledge, information and goals.

The uneven allocation of discursive authority has led to the evolution of a levelled, mediated and compromised notion of what the interests and goals of a generalised group of women are, and to the circumscribing of terms around who is included and who is excluded in discussions about justice. The emphasis in public discourses of gender transformation has therefore shifted dramatically from a bottom-up articulation of the interests of women's organisations, to the top-down codification of negotiated rights and entitlements that are believed to have national relevance.

The discursive terrain has changed in remarkably swift ways. Where the language of gender transformation was formerly marked by a climate in which the class, regional and racial political interests of particular women drove them to struggle for distinct agendas for social trans-

formation, our current rights-based discourse assumes that melioristic and state-engineered transformation can grant rights and entitlements in terms of generalised notions of what 'women' of South Africa need and want. These abrupt changes in the first decade of democracy have gone hand in glove with a veering away from the notion of 'justice', towards a veneration of 'rights'. 'Rights' have levelling and universalised legal meaning. 'Justice', on the other hand, is far broader, and implies a holistic understanding of ways in which certain groups and institutions can prevent others from realising their different liberties. Speaking for 'rights' can occur within the framework of formal procedures that ensure the nominal access of all to certain platforms or resources, without comprehensively considering whether all relationships and structures in society actually guarantee this access.

The emphasis on women's rights in policymaking, legislation and the language of transformation has generated a very distinctive national mythology about gender transformation in post-apartheid South Africa. A rhetorical climate shaped by circumstances including the constitutional emphasis on gender equality; policies on sexual harassment and employment equity in the workplace; and legislation such as the Domestic Violence Act of 1998, has set in place a persuasive rhetoric, and has charged certain words and expressions with a sense of their reflecting a new reality. Phrases such as 'gender equality', 'women's empowerment', and 'gender transformation' therefore permeate public discourses in ways that are both remarkably authoritative and also deeply superficial and complacent. First, it is as though rhetorical force were being substituted for any real reflection on actual gender relations and agendas for change. Secondly, the terminology in place consistently stresses the technical and formal dimensions of social dynamics, rather than their political and socially transformative repercussions.

The persuasiveness of the current language revolves considerably around the fact that it often refers to conditions or situations that are fundamentally in accord with neo-liberal development and patriarchal anxieties around changing the gendered status quo. It is noteworthy, for example, that 'women's empowerment', 'women's equality', 'gender

parity' or 'gender equity' are often used in policy documents or public discourses, rather than phrases such as 'women's freedoms' or 'feminist liberation'. The former expressions point fairly straightforwardly to the idea of power within the status quo, to women's aspirations to the status and privileges that men have, while the latter complicatedly opens up the possibility of situations and conditions that may lie beyond existing class and gender models of material achievement and public success.

Many other terms that have become current underline the gradual shift towards moderacy. The term 'gender' in itself has acquired growing influence in defining interest groups, social change and political goals. Consequently, where it used to be legitimate to argue that the voices and interests of *women* were paramount in identifying how patriarchal domination marginalised a group on the basis of gender, the current ascendancy of 'gender' neutralises power relations and almost implies that the social categorisation and identity of women as women and of men as men is not of key importance. Revealing too is the way that 'gender activism' has successively displaced the term 'feminism'. It as though the radicalism signalled by the latter term were being anaestheticised and patriarchal anxieties about change were being appeased. Ostensibly, the jettisoning of 'feminism' is made in relation to claims about its being westerncentric. But this argument disguises a deep-seated conservatism thinly masquerading as a healthy populism. The avoidance of 'feminism' placates the unease of patriarchal nationalism which routinely invokes the charge of spiralling 'westernisation' to attack African women's radicalism.

The need to placate anxieties about change is well-illustrated in the consistent avoidance of 'patriarchy', and its substitution with phrases such as 'male dominance' or 'gender inequality'. Repeatedly, the tendency is to underplay politics and power relations, and to construct a view of hierarchies and inequalities which turns them into 'anomalies' easily corrected through moderate, melioristic and formal rights-oriented strategies for change.

As the rapid transformation of the political terrain around gender struggles in South Africa reveals, mainstreaming has been borne out of a process of negotiation in which the language of rights both reflects and

regulates the accommodative incorporation of political agendas into the state bureaucracy and official narratives of nation-building. The effects of mainstreaming in an environment characterised by the unequal distribution of discursive power must lead us to ask hard questions about how and why ostensibly progressive agendas can so easily be watered down. By turning to the ways in which co-optation and compromise occur through language, we can become more vigilant about the ways in which double standards and duplicity deflect progressive action. Rather than simply positing a gap between language and goals or action, it may be more useful to explore as well the ambiguities and paradoxes embedded in discourse itself, as well as the range of institutions, texts and discourses that rewrite messages of freedom.

The impetus behind mainstreaming in South Africa has been the women's movement and progressive forces in society, although the discursive and political context in which gender activism is now located dilutes its political focus. A similar situation prevails globally. Internationally, what became known as 'gender mainstreaming' peaked from the early nineties, and, through the Beijing Platform in 1995, was identified as a *radical* strategy for guaranteeing state, intersectoral and international collaboration in alleviating women's structural subordination (see True and Mintrom, 2001).

The visibility of this global diffusion, however, needs to be considered in the light of how international instruments and policies function as discourses. Transnational instruments set in place a language of rights which targets universal and transhistorical subjects as clients or beneficiaries who 'receive' what has been conceptualised as just mainly by others. Apart from the projection of individuals as supplicants, the main problem here is that rights discourse assumes the universality of social subjects. In other words, rights discourses privilege certain forms of freedom and justice over others; they fallaciously assume generalised access to measures and mechanisms that are set in place to safeguard individuals. There are related practical problems associated with the universalistic model. When we consider CEDAW, for example, it is clear that there are no actual mechanisms by which states can be held accountable to the

United Nations. While the UN may insist on certain measures to protect women's freedoms across the world, legislation and policy-making that directly affects women is undertaken and regulated at the level of the nation-state. Through rights discourses, gender mainstreaming consequently constructs universal subjects as passive recipients, shuts down on their agencies in driving change to foreclose possibilities for them to drive alternative gender transformation in society, and privileges the subject positions of globally and regionally dominant subjects.

While the pitfalls of the global dispersal of gender transformation in the nineties may seem obvious, it is alarming how rapidly such diffusion has taken place. The language of rights is firmly entrenched in lobbying, planning and policy-making around gender justice, while the radical activism that formerly drove feminist transformation is now, according to popular wisdom, dismissed as *passé*, outmoded or obsolete. By a deft slight of hand, the discourse of rights, which so evidently sets in place passive, de-historicised and politically disempowered subjects, has achieved ascendancy as the language of social transformation.

It is noteworthy how the language of rights has set in place a model for 'dealing with gender' which mirrors the model that – over the last decade – has been entrenched in South Africa. It is small wonder, then, that the idea that many women in the North today live in a 'postfeminist' age, namely, an age where feminist struggle has become obsolete, has gained currency. When paradigms of progress and freedom are shaped by a language that identifies universally agreed upon and measurable success and achievement, and when such models are instituted by states, or through international agreements, it is difficult to insist that there is a need to struggle for change within civil society or through women's actions; change appears to be guaranteed both by the 'gender-sensitive' paradigms that exist, and by the language inscribed in these models. Naomi Wolf's (1993) writings have gone some way towards critiquing this situation. By condemning the salience of what she terms 'victim feminism', she accurately describes the present mood of gender awareness in the North: 'over the last twenty years, the old belief in a tolerant assertiveness, a claim to human participation and human rights - power

feminism - was embattled by the rise of a set of beliefs that cast women as beleaguered, fragile, intuitive angels: victim feminism' (1993: 147). Wolf identifies the construct of women as supplicants in relation to the state and policymakers, of women positioned as recipients rather than agents; of generalised notions about women's universal needs and entitlements. And as Elizabeth Schneider (1991) has argued, the pre-eminence of rights discourse turns women into passive targets and victims who become dependent on the state and other instruments and sources of power both for articulating and granting their freedoms.

Gender teaching and research

The manoeuvring around language in relation to popular myth-making and public discourses is reflected in gender teaching and research. This has been the case nationally and globally. In South Africa, 1994 marked a stage when the state and state-recognised sectors within civil society created a new mood around gender research, new patterns of funding and support for it, and also a new public awareness of its relevance to emerging agendas for democratisation. One effect of this galvanising of governmental support for 'gender' was a trend towards technocratic and functionalist developmentalism. This was buttressed by the shift towards market-driven and career-oriented teaching in South African higher educational institutions.

Nationally, over five women's and gender studies units offering postgraduate programmes in gender studies were launched in different provinces. And the climate of institutionalised gender research quickly encouraged technocratisation. Teaching increasingly became less concerned with feminism in the academy, with students' political and personal growth or with making women visible in research and writing, and progressively more preoccupied with how gender analysis should equip students with applied or analytical skills².

² I am referring here mainly to the packaging of courses within universities, which have become more and more concerned with marketing degree programmes. Whether

The mid-nineties therefore ushered in a phase of consolidation and marketisation around women's and gender studies, with this 'mainstreaming' being geared towards teaching gender 'expertise' and 'skills' to promote the efficiency of state structures, policy-making and commerce. Bureaucracy, professionalisation and technocracy spiral in this context, alongside a prominent group of 'experts' whose analytical tools, methodologies and concepts often directly shape planning and policymaking. Pat McFadden astutely points to this trend at a continental level in her polemical 'Why Feminist Autonomy Now?':

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...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 (see *fito*, www.fito.co.za).

Spaces and discourses that seem progressive have been co-opted into national efforts to mainstream and market technologies of gender, and to situate gender concerns within neo-liberal state building and 'good governance'. This is starkly reflected in the renaming of women's studies as gender studies, for example. Or in the painstaking efforts to market women's studies courses as being of 'use' to students in the demand for skilled human resource persons in government and the workplace. No longer is there an assumption that women's studies matters because it prompts the broad personal and political transformation of human beings. Gender studies is seen as serviceable because it is securely written into a moderate template for state consolidation and neo-liberal development under the aegis of 'mainstreaming'.

or not individual lectures and researchers have resisted the depoliticisation of gender teaching, courses, within the broader framework of university policies, are marketed and defined according to the logic of their practical usefulness for the job market. The effect of this has often been to underplay the humanities and arts, and privilege disciplines like psychology and the social sciences. For a further discussion of this, see Lewis, 2002, especially Appendix, 'Institutional Review'.

A mainstreaming trend that has been growing increasingly prominent in Africa is one in which 'women's studies', as the title of a discipline, or of departments, is being viewed with greater awkwardness and anxiety. 'Women's studies' is rapidly giving way to 'gender studies', and the new term is embraced for its inclusiveness and its rejection of ghettoisation. Many courses have been revamped, course outlines rewritten, and the general culture of departments altered to turn them from supportive spaces aimed primarily at empowering women's students, into spaces where men and women are believed to grapple collaboratively with issues to do with gender.

The intellectual usefulness of 'gender' here is indisputable: 'gender studies' correctly captures the extent to which feminists need to engage with identities and processes that mould relations between men and women, in other words, gender dynamics. Clearly too, 'gender studies' captures the fact that the subject of study cannot be 'women' in isolation, but women in relation to men, as well as processes and relationships that are gendered. What remains revealing, however, is the way in which the new labeling of a field of study has modified the *politics* of the field of study, and in many ways buttressed a broader climate around mainstreaming.

The emphasis on opening up the field and making it inclusive for women and men occurs alongside the underplaying of long-entrenched power relationships, a neglect, for example, of the fact that today there is still an absurdly preponderant focus in knowledge production on men as subjects. The question that this situation therefore begs is why there should be a concern within women's studies with 'balancing out', when this is one of the few spaces where the privileging of men's knowledge production is directly contested. Overall, therefore, there are huge problems with the 'commonsensical' idea that mainstreaming gender studies corrects a passé emphasis on the compensatory and atomistic focus on women. Distinct institutional needs and contexts (for example, the fact that rape is a regular occurrence in many universities in South Africa and more generally throughout Africa) make separate women's studies departments important and strategic. Separate women's studies departments

have the potential to provide invaluable supportive cultural pockets of focused feminist support, research and teaching within institutions which remain, overall, extremely fraught spaces for women academics and students to negotiate.

The skewing of feminist research and education has also occurred in the North. In a powerful critique focusing on the meanings and fate of 'theory', Barbara Christian (1990) identifies the two connected trends of commoditisation and professionalisation that - over the years - have worked to depoliticize feminist scholarship. In the seventies and eighties, a collective identity of women in academia - supported and influenced by the resurgence of feminism in the sixties - formed caucuses and associations, or engaged in lobbying, or spearheaded disciplinary innovations in contesting the exclusiveness of the patriarchal academy. Their interventions were deeply political and radical, and they struggled to challenge injustice, silencing and domination on various fronts.

By the nineties, as Christian notes, much left-wing academic theory had

'become a commodity which help[ed] to determine whether we are hired or promoted in academic institutions' (1990: 37-8).

Most importantly, this theory grew more and more marked by what is monolithic and monotheistic, by what is elitist and exclusive. Professionalism, through which feminist academics and discourses are absorbed into the canon by echoing its exclusivist and monolithic language and procedures, became the goal of feminist academia. As Joan Scott (1991) therefore concludes, the elevation of 'professionalism' firmly replaced the preoccupation with 'politics' as many feminist academics capitulated to notions of mastery and excellence, and so sanctioned the exclusion and silencing that an earlier generation of feminists had squarely denounced.

In the North, the 'success story' of feminist scholarship revolves largely around its progressive shift away from a defiant 'marginality' towards a mastering of the theoretical tools and strategies of the mainstream. Women's studies, as the site in which a language for speaking about women's agendas was inaugurated, can be seen to have moved from the disparaged margins to the triumphant centre. The centrist desti-

nation has been linked to a fixation with high theoretical rigour and a recuperation of the idea, formerly anathema for many feminists, of knowledge as science, of knowledge as that which can 'stand up firmly by itself'. The professionalisation of gender research and education in Africa has revolved mainly around the growing complicity between a gender industry and the state's ideological apparatus, creating a situation in which much gender education and research tends to service mainstreaming and neo-liberal development. In the North, such professionalisation has mainly involved the commoditisation of research and the elevation of knowledge as cultural capital. This has led to the growing alienation of academics and knowledge production from civil society activism and women's organisations.

This trend is clearly reflected in the turn towards an uncritical poststructuralist deftness. Here there has been a growing de-politicization of language as the site of revolutionary practice, towards a preoccupation with language as that which must capture the 'complexity of things'. The consequence of this has been astutely explained by Jacqui Alexander: 'Postmodernist theory, in its haste to disassociate itself from all forms of essentialism, has generated a series of epistemological confusions regarding the interconnections between location, identity and the construction of knowledge... Postmodernist discourse attempts to move beyond essentialism by pluralizing and dissolving the stability and analytic unity of the categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality. This strategy often forecloses any valid recuperation of these categories or the social relations through which they are constituted (1997: XVII). On the intellectual left, therefore, discourses have spawned such deft phrases as 'negotiating identity' or 'negotiating freedom' which often foreclose any systematic attention to power.

Many poststructuralist concepts are aimed at destabilising a fixed notion of struggle, and drawing attention to the multiplicity of agencies and social identities. They seek to stress how social actors make sense of their experiences from their point of view and to emphasise their agency in the face of those who presume to speak and act for them. They have been invaluable in dislodging doctrinaire notions of struggle associated

with leftist orthodoxy. This includes the leftist orthodoxy of Marxism and western-centric feminism. Poststructuralism intervenes here because it allows one to think about processes, consciousness and agency beyond hegemonic notions of what impossibly ‘universalised’ persons must want. In particular, they allow us to take into account the extent to which certain social actors are circumscribed by particular relations and practices. They also encourage us to consider how certain women’s struggles make sense on their terms and to respect the fact that particular groups have distinctive legacies of resistance.

But the concepts and methods of poststructuralism also hold out the possibility of disarticulating relations of power. In short, they can provide ideological cover for proliferating divisions and injustices in the contemporary world, and especially for shifting attention away from identifying power and its effects. Bell hooks, among many other feminist commentators, shows how this language has developed as certain academics seek legitimation and access to academic and intellectual canons. She writes:

While academic legitimation was crucial to the advancement of feminist thought, it created a new set of difficulties. Suddenly the feminist thinking that had emerged directly from theory and practice received less attention than theory that was metalinguistic, creating exclusive jargon; it was written solely for an academic audience. It was as if a large body of feminist thinkers banded together to form an elite group writing theory that could be understood only by an ‘in’ crowd (2000: 22).

What should be stressed here is not – as I hope my preceding discussion has demonstrated – the belief that African and other third-world and socially engaged feminists should concern themselves only with ‘bread-and-butter’ issues, rather than with theory, with discourses and with deconstructive and postmodern theories. The language and practice of deconstruction can contribute enormously to shaping radical and revolutionary social and intellectual activism and struggles for gender justice. What I am concerned about here is the extent to which certain applications of postmodern feminism can feed into existing relations of power and function purely or mainly as symbolic capital for individuals and groups who use intellectual currency to gain access to the centre.

Imagination and the public sphere

Today, an unprecedented circulation of information is guaranteed by apparently limitless knowledge production, the massive growth of print technologies, global flows of information and knowledge, cyberspace and the Internet. At the same time, intellectual knowledge production is uniquely registering the intricacy of social identities, the complexity of individual and social behaviour, the nuances of institutional and social processes. The deluge of information, knowledge and language that persistently overdetermines the political has led Manuel Castells to coin the term, 'information politics' (1997: 310). Although Castells is referring mainly to the burgeoning electronic media as the new 'privileged space of politics', it is important to acknowledge the complicity of pervasive professionalisation and commoditisation within the academy, and the steady process through which ostensibly subversive knowledge has been adulterated and depoliticized. At the same time, the language of 'rights from above' dominates public debates about gender transformation at the communal, national and international level, and seriously constrains civil society activism and independent debates. The result of this hegemony has been silencing. When we consider the evolution of discussion and debate in the public sphere, and the current apathy within civil society, we must ask what all these apparently liberating and democratising discursive processes really mean. Somehow, the promise of lively public discourses and civil society activism has rapidly diminished in recent years.

This stasis should encourage us to re-assess what the new forms of wielding power in our current information age are. Specifically, they must lead us also to reconsider, for example, what 'censorship' means in our present age. To what extent can we think about radical feminist knowledge as being 'censored' despite the fact that it is allowed, formally, to exist. To what extent do the procedures and value systems for elevating certain kinds of expert knowledge function as forms of repression, surveillance and silencing? And how do current forms of gatekeep-

ing curtail the circulation of radical knowledge even in spaces that seem amenable to the free flow of information and ideas?

It is no coincidence that many radical feminist writers today are searching restlessly for terms that powerfully invoke transgression, the quest for new ways of thinking and speaking, and the pursuit for what is 'visionary' and 'imaginative' (see for example, McFadden, 2004; hooks, 2000; and Pereira, 2002). Posing a challenge to African feminists to transcend neo-imperial and patriarchal frontiers, Pereira raises imperatives that have both cognitive and practical implications:

There is no way of creating knowledge that is not circumscribed by the oppressions of our times if we cannot imagine a better future... Without imagination, we cannot search for the kind of knowledge that allows us to fully understand our divided realities in order to transcend them. It is the imagination that allows us to move from where we are to where we would like to be even before we get there. We must learn to liberate the imagination, to unleash the energy that so many of us dissipate, often without realising, in upholding the intellectual barriers that divide us not only from one another, but also from ourselves and from other ways of knowing (2002: www.feministafrica.org/fa%201/2level.html2002).

One of the primary challenges that face feminists today is the challenge of re-imagining our goals, of insisting on the powers of the imagination to articulate our desires in ways that transcend the limiting visions bequeathed by neo-liberal globalisation. In an argument that the struggle for democracy needs to take new forms, Alan Touraine identified the slipperiness of discursive control in neo-liberal democracy and called for the need to re-think 'activism':

Power used to be in the hands of princes, oligarchies and ruling elites; it was defined as the capacity to impose one's will on others, modifying their behaviour. This image of power does not fit with our reality any longer. Power is everywhere and nowhere; it is in mass production, in financial flows, in lifestyles, in the hospital, in the school, in television, in images, in messages, in technologies...The fundamental matter is not seizing power, but to recreate society, to invent politics anew, to avoid the blind conflict between open markets and closed communities, to overcome the breaking down of societies where the distance increases between the included and the excluded, those in and those out (quoted in Castells, 1997: 309).

Touraine describes our present age of globalised neo-imperial domination, a phase following the independence of many African countries, the

disintegration of soviet societies and the attack on left-wing movements in the North. These processes occur against the backdrop of a global diffusion of coercive control and 'manufactured consent'. The situation that currently faces feminists is far more insidious and multifaceted. And as we confront our current discursive landscape, we must squarely face the need 'to recreate society, to invent politics anew'.

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African Feminism:

Resistance or Resentment?

Chielozona Eze

Abstract. African Feminism: Resistance or Resentment? Using specific examples from Nigeria, this paper analyzes the philosophical underpinnings of African feminism. I argue that African feminism is largely flawed by being couched in the discourse of African anti-colonial movement. By so doing it inevitably inherited parts of the cultural setbacks of the movement. My take on African postcolonial discourse is that the line between resistance to the evil of colonization and resentment of the cultural world of the colonizer was largely blurred. There was therefore an overabundance of reactionary impulses. While in agreement with the discourse about the concerns of women's human rights, I suggest that African feminism or rather feminism as articulated by African women thinkers must free itself of resentment in order to focus on creating flourishing communities in Africa. I analyze two of the most recent Nigerian narratives – *Purple Hibiscus* and *Everything Good Will Come* – as examples of works that seek the flourishing of communities with the liberation of women in the background.

key words: Africa, feminism, gender, philosophy, post-colonial, globalization

The moral claims of African resistance

Analyzing the phenomenon of African self-representation, Achille Mbembe, observes that the African postcolonial discourse switches between voluntarism and victimhood. On the one hand, Africans see themselves overwhelmingly as victims of history, and since the continent is a victim of slavery, apartheid and all imaginable negative isms 'Africa is said not to be responsible for the catastrophe that are befalling it' (Mbembe 243). On the other hand, however, Africans claim some agency in the remodeling of their shattered world. This is done by a pronounced reference to some glorious past, to tradition or authentic Africanness.

There is, according to Mbembe, ‘a narrative of liberation built around the dual temporality of a glorious – albeit fallen – past (tradition) and a redeemed future (nationalism)’ (249-250). These two poles, victimhood and voluntarism, indeed, go hand in hand. The claim of victimhood allows in the victim the ease of conscience to appeal not only to an essence that excludes the victimizer, but also to develop a warped sense of moral edge or some degree of inculpability in the manner evocative of Cartesian phrase: I am hurt therefore I am right. Or you hurt me, therefore I am good while you are bad. There arises a feeling which Nietzsche identified as that of resentment, which, he argued, gave birth to Christian morality. I have discussed elsewhere the phenomenon of resentment in African socio-political discourse.¹ For purposes of enhancing my argument in this paper, I would like to sum the core argument of resentment as a source of morality. A victim of oppression feels the hurt of injustice done to him. He wants to avenge but he cannot because the injurer is stronger than him. He sulks and reserves vengeance for the future. Reliving the feeling of hurt and at the same time realizing his weakness allows him to evolve a new standard of evaluation of reality. In sum: (1) the mind is negatively tuned on account of the experience of hurt. (2) There is the need to avenge, and because the injured cannot avenge for fear of aftermath, he or she invents a force that would do it for him or her: God, nemesis, heaven and hell. (3) Summarily, the other is condemned to hell. The person of resentment claims moral superiority, which according to Max Scheler implies some ‘blindness’ to [others’] qualities’ (58). The most important point here is that the morality resultant upon the feeling of hurt is essentially reactionary. The victim no longer bases his idea of good and evil on any standard beyond the fact of his having been hurt, his being the historical victim.

As long as the victimizer, y, lives, he is evil and he, the victim, x, does well to keep reminding the other of his evil nature by different forms

¹ See Eze, Chielozona, ‘African *Ressentiment* and the Task of Nation Building: Some Reflections.’ *Gefame: Journal of African Studies* Vol. 1, No. 1 (2004) <http://www.hti.umich.edu/g/gefame/> for a somewhat deeper discussion of resentment and how it plays out in African postcolonial discourse.

of blame. And – important in his moral arsenal – as long as the victimizer, y, is evil, he the victim, x, cannot be as evil, therefore, he, x, is good. Any time the victim blames the victimizer either by collecting the wrongs of the past in passable concepts: colonialism, racism, sexism etc the victim rehashes this moral power taxonomy. That blame is an expression of helplessness which is at the same time an affirmation of a presumed strength. Every attempt is made to establish and maintain essentialist difference between both; the victim is preserved from all reference to the victimizer because it is in this difference that his moral superiority is established. There is a form of reverse racism because of reference to perceived essentialist differences. This, to my mind, is what Achille Mbembe refers to when he points to ‘dual temporality of a glorious – albeit fallen – past (tradition) and a redeemed future (nationalism).’ The return to tradition is only a consequence of reactionary moral partitioning of the world, and of course, the failure to cede to some weakness or fault in the humiliating act of defeat. The valorization of the victim – his inimitable past, his innocent present – leads to a glossy, if illusory painting of the future. In the end, however, the future which is no more than a gradual unfolding of the present remains a shade of reality.²

African feminism partakes of the illusory moral edge resultant upon the reliving of the feeling of hurt and the hidden but impotent wish to wreak vengeance.

African feminism and anti-colonial struggle

African feminism is often defined by identifying what it is not; it is not European feminism. This definition via negativa, has of course, historical justification given the degree of animosity with which it was greeted by the African menfolk. Glo Chukukere documents the African feminist conundrum with examples from Nigeria. On the one hand, African women express the need for them and their condition to be better. On the

² I discussed this at length in my already cited essay.

other hand, most of them react rather aggressively when feminism is mentioned. According to Chukukere, one gets varied expressions such as:

The word liberation doesn't arise here at all because we were never in any form of bondage.'

'Please don't confuse Nigerian women with that nonsense.'

'Feminism is for developed countries like America and Great Britain. Our women here are all right... no problem (Chukukere 134).

And while people shy away from feminism and Women's Liberation, the theoretically more troubling issue, however, is rooted in larger concern of the society. There cannot be global sisterhood, that is to say, global feminism because women in the West and in Africa have diverse experiences. The reason as Glo Chukukere formulates is thus:

the liberation of women in Africa is linked to that of the entire continent from colonial and neocolonial structures. Western schools of feminism, such as Marxist, Socialist, and radical are part of the history of those countries' political development and reflect their concerns with class contradictions. This scenario is not exactly the case in Africa, in general, and Nigeria, in particular. For Nigerian women, ours is an anti-colonial, non-separatist movement (137).

Strictly speaking there is nothing wrong in the good-natured, motherly instinct exhibited by the African woman in her claim that she cannot be free unless the 'Mama Africa' is free from the shackles of colonialism and imperialism. It is to be understood in line with the proverb: no mother is healthy when her child is sick. I think, however, that this is flawed. The implication of the above adopted approach is that the African woman should bear the excruciating pain of fractured existence and its injustices while standing by the side of the African man in their fight against imperialism. Rigorously considered, nothing prevents the African woman from demanding respect from her husband or brothers even while they all fight against imperialism. In that regard therefore, if Western concepts such as Marxism, Capitalism or Socialism could help improve the standard of life for the African woman, then why would she avoid it precisely because Africans did not make such experience? Yet, the strength of African feminism, as I pointed out, seems to be poured in a type of choral repudiation of Western negative isms. Besides this repudiation, however,

there does not seem to be an articulate vision of the African woman beyond mere reiteration of the traditional roles women play albeit in glossy, celebratory language. There is sadly the case of what Olufemi Taiwo identified as the poverty of theory. 'Every time African scholars are forced into these sterile but needed efforts to assert that we are or we think,' he argues, 'the urgent tasks of identifying and explicating what we are or what we think remain undone or only partly done' (Taiwo 45).

To be sure, Taiwo points out the 'imperialistic arrogance' (52), present in Western feminists theorizing about African women so that African women were beasts of burden; they did all the work at home while the men did nothing. This also constitutes African women's burden of self redefinition and their need to free themselves from others' image of themselves, and, in the words of Oyeronke Oyewumi, do feminism on their own terms. But are they really doing it on their own terms?

African women and the production of glossy past

In Achille Mbembe's above cited text, the fact of Africa privileging of victimization indeed ultimately reveals itself as a claim of voluntarism albeit through the backdoor. He writes:

Philosophically, the Hegelian thematics of identity and difference, as classically exemplified in the master-bondsman relationship, is surreptitiously reappropriated by the ex-colonized. In the move that replicates an unreflexive ethnographic practice, the ex-colonized assigns a set of pseudohistorical features to a geographical entity which is itself subsumed under a racial name (244)

In her address to the first Conference on Women in Africa & the African Diaspora (WAAD I), 'Zulu Sofola takes time to remind her largely women audience how African people 'have been subverted culturally, psychologically, materially, and intellectually' (Sofola 51). Describing the processes and implications of what she terms the de-womanization of the African woman, she claims that the African woman

assailed by Western and Arab cultures, [...] has been stripped bare of all that made her central and relevant in the traditional African socio-political domain. Even though both male and female children of Mother Africa were assailed by

the invasion of the male-centered and male-dominated European and Arab cultures, the female suffered the greater damage. (52)

She concludes her exegesis on victimhood by asserting the helplessness of the present African woman. 'Demotion of African womanhood,' she writes 'has produced the contemporary African women who are to a large extent disoriented, weakened, and rendered ineffective and irrelevant' (52). This, at the risk of sounding redundant, equals to denying agency to the African woman of today. Certainly this is far from her intention. Rather this is done to allow her room to dwell on the past achievements of African women, the dignity of tradition. Part of her address is garnished with reference to uplifting aspects of history beautifully rendered in the rest of her historical essay, in the following phrases: 'monarchical co-rulership' of women (55); 'female line of power and authority' (56) in traditional Africa. She concludes in a somewhat predictable way: 'One would have expected nothing less from women in the diaspora who themselves were undoubtedly descendants of warrior queens, monarchs, women intelligence spies, economic magnates, and powerful daughters of the land' (60). Her argument is organized in the following sequence: a) establish the disruption of great past b) dismiss whoever brought it about c) be the harbinger of a strong future.

It is understandable that all this is aimed to instill new life into the African woman of today. To my mind however, it does not do any analytical job of elucidating the condition of the African woman. Ama Ata Aidoo in her essay 'The African Woman Today,' even takes some steps further to claim that the present poor African woman who is shown to be beyond her years with drooped, withered breasts is not far from the cliché of Western photojournalism. There is no doubt that the Western media are hungry for exotic sensationalism, and mostly report news of famine and poverty and disease about Africa. Ama Ata Aidoo rightly observes that it is a sorry pass on the daughters of Africa. But in her bid to redress that image she tells her listeners that these daughters of Africa are all

descended from some of the bravest, most independent, and most innovative women this world has ever known. We speak of the lady Tiy of Nubia (ca. 1415-1340 B.C.E.), the wife of Amenhotep III and the mother of Akhenaton and Tutenkhamen, who is credited, among other achievements, with leading

the women of her court to discover makeup and other beauty-enhancing processes. Her daughter-in-law was the incomparable Nefertiti, a black beauty whose complexion was far superior to the alabaster with which she is now willfully painted. (39-40)

Preceding the above glorification of African women's putative ancestry according to Aidoo, is the belief that the African woman of today is a 'media creation.' She does not exist because it is impossible for her to exist given the glorious past. However, even if she does exist, Aidoo's thought goes on, the reason must be the 'result of the traumas of the last five hundred years' encounter with the West, the last one hundred years of colonial repression, the current neocolonial disillusionment, and a natural environment that is not behaving like an implacable enemy' (41-42).

The confusion apparent in the above thought has absolutely nothing to do with the thinker's inability to recognize simple contradictions. Rather it is one of the results of existential and ethical denials which in turn are the obvious consequence of resentment and delusions or cultural relativism. I talk of ethical denial because it is obvious that the individual women are not challenged to look inward, face up to the difficult situations of the African woman, this real human being out there, my mother, sister, my neighbor. Existential denial incorporates the negation of the wishes of this single human being beginning from the affirmation of simple pleasure to the right to avoid pain. Before I discuss this in a somewhat greater depth, I wish to consider some of the ideas of two of the most vigorous theoreticians of Nigerian feminisms: Oyeronke Oyewumi and Nkiru Nzegwu.

Feminism as an anti-racist ideology

In the introduction to her edited collection of essays, Oyeronke Oyewumi declares that African women have taken steps to define themselves, their interests and concerns. This, she claims, is done 'on our own terms, and can put behind us once and for all a culture of misrepresentation and marginalization which absorbs so much of our creative energy. We will

continue to define ourselves and our concerns on our own terms' (Oyewumi 22). This is no doubt a dignified goal, and as Olufemi Taiwo pointed out in the already cited paper, the worthwhile goal of self-definition must be carried on by Africans. Oyewumi's essay, 'The White Woman's Burden: African Woman in Western Feminist Discourse,' to my mind achieves less than the stated goal of self definition. Rather it falls into the same old quicksand of ideological attack of the West. She declares: 'It is the discursive domination of the West that I call into question' (27). Perhaps it would have been better to weave a solidarity among African women to interrogate the African patriarchal system rather than attack the West by sandwiching their theories, as I pointed out in the introduction, in the cracks of the wall of Western imperialism. I cite her in full in order to demonstrate in clear terms what I am concerned about.

The historical context within which Africanist discourse was produced was a period of unprecedented European expansion and domination of non-European peoples. In Africa, it was the period during which the Atlantic slave trade flourished, imperialism thrived, and the framework for eventual colonial domination was put in place. Nor surprisingly, the tone, content, and form of this literature were imperialistic and racist, designed to justify and rationalize European plunder and domination. Africans were projected as inferior to prove their need for the 'guiding hand' of Europeans. (26)

It is a surprise that this type of mental disposition would practically carry African feminism into the 21st century especially considering the ravages of ethnic-related conflicts in the preceding century.

Nearly in the same frame of mind, Nkiru Nzegwu examines in her essay, 'Oh Africa: Gender Imperialisms in Academia,' the 'varied forms of gender imperialism that arise from the denials of one's cultural rights and cultural personhood' (99). I have to point out that her goals in the essay are in no way divergent to the plight of, nor do they further the cause of the African woman. Strictly speaking, it has nothing to do with African feminism broadly conceived as the betterment of the African woman's life. When Nkiru Nzegwu declares that her political struggle was to disrupt imperialism, guard against its exploitation of her experience and 'resist its racist erasure' of her personhood and because of that she had to be alert to 'its multiple sites and continually changing forms,'

she, it could be argued, uses her personal experiences to fight the cause of the African women. Thus she constantly questions the basis on which she was being invited to participate in events. She critically evaluates ‘the convener’s agenda as well as the operative modalities for selecting the speakers’ (101). Effectively using her experience in the academia, she examines ‘how that relationship influences authorial production of knowledge and what tacit gender images and expectations rule in that setting, many of which I am expected to uphold’ (102). Invited for a panel discussion, she had to think through what imperialism had done to her in North America. Addressing an predominantly white audience, she argues:

Many things are still painfully difficult in your white system. The pain derives from the forced mutilations, identity destructions, oppressive psychological manipulations that take place each time one functions in your system. Even in this mundane public act of sharing my experiences with you, I still undergo innumerable metamorphosis and translation. [...] I have to suppress large parts of myself and familiar ways of speaking [...] Then I have to switch languages and translate my visceral thoughts into cold foreign words that leave out the spirit of my talk (still I hear: oh, you have an accent. Where are you from?). [...] I have to swallow my anger, and valiantly find some lessons that I could offer the sea of white faces to let you know that I value you, that you are blameless. (104)

In establishing the pervasive racism/imperialism, the African women also implicitly declare their impotence, victimhood. No wonder then that Olufemi Taiwo bemoans the absence of theory among both the European women writing about Africa and the African women responding to these writings. And while we effectively sympathize with Nkiru Nzegwu, we fail to glimpse what she thinks of herself as a woman. She is presented here merely as a victim of a faceless form of injustice. The African woman, for sure, is not one who asks for pity, for Nkiru Nzegwu’s presentation, it appears to me, seeks nothing more than that. But behind this seeming appeal to pity, as I pointed out in the explication of resentment, is a hidden dogged will to establish some kind of superiority – that of the conquered. Every blame, as Mbembe explained earlier, is a claim for power albeit through the backdoor.

In the same vein that the African woman blames the West, she makes conciliatory gestures to the African man in the name of womanism.³ But neither the critique or racism, nor the warm gestures of womanism ever makes demands on the African woman. Simply stated, it fails to show the African woman as one who possesses a mind of her own. In fact the African mode of feminism discussed so far does not aim to elucidate or solve any problem; it merely provides alternatives to Western feminism with the flawed goal of vindication of the African world. In this, it tows the path of anti-imperialist struggle and does nothing to explore the African woman's personhood. All explanations tend to protect the endangered African community. In sum, African feminists fail to give a robust image of the African woman that the African man is bound to respect.

Woman, where art thou?

In the face of the above conundrum, in the jungle of assertions and denials, one searches in vain for the African woman. One is left to wonder what good there is in the African amorphous war on racism and imperialism with regard to the issues facing the African woman.

While the African women were busy challenging the anonymous evil of imperialism, it took the American, Alice Walker to plumb in her literary works the fate of individual human beings of female gender in Africa. In her novel, *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, she highlights among other issues the devastations that the old practice of female circumcision leaves on the body and soul of individual women on which it was done. A number of African women saw in it a false representation of Africanness, and promptly subsumed it under the general neo-imperialistic patronizing by the West.⁴ The issue of concern here is much more the reactions from

³ See Chikwenye Okonjo-Ogunyemi's African Wo/Man Palaver for a an in-depth discussion of Womanism – an idea whose goal is to establish healthy relationships among people, despite ethnic or gender differences.

⁴ See Nontsasa Nako 'Possessing the Voice of the Other: African Women and the "Crisis of Representation"' in Alice Walker's *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, &

African women which, to my mind, underscore the burning wish to deny and rationalize the poor condition of the African woman and thereby evade direct confrontation with issues of interest. Answering the question about female circumcision, Buchi Emecheta declares:

I did not treat it in any of my books because in our area it is not all that important. I was in Nigeria for three months and I saw only boys being circumcised. Like I said when people have left Africa for a long time, they get excited over irrelevant things. Reading some of her books [referring to Alice Walker] you would think that as soon as you get to Africa, every girl is snatched and circumcised. That is the type of picture she is painting and we are very offended about it here in London because it is not that important. [...] You see, Africa is so vulnerable. So she wants to write about something sensational to bring Africans down. (Ogundele, 454)

We observe Emecheta's use of the first person plural. The offended people are probably the African community in London, and perhaps more particularly the women. Her declaration that Africa is vulnerable puts her in a defensive position. The defense of Africa as a collective becomes more important than the discourse of issues pertaining to the flourishing of human beings considered as individuals with diverse feelings and wishes. Buchi Emecheta's answer is surprising not only because it is an outright misrepresentation of the stark realities of many African women,⁵ but more so because it comes from a person who, in her fictions represented the African man and African culture in harshest terms ever imaginable. She qualified the African person as lazy, African culture decadent and used adjectives such as beast, apelike to describe her fellow African. This took place in the time when such could have come from sworn racists. She writes in her novel, *Second Class Citizen*: 'All that Francis needed to be taken for a gorilla was simply to bend his knees' (86). *Second Class Citizen*, it is argued, is a fictional biography of Buchi Emecheta, and the novel was written shortly after her arrival in London.

Oyeronke Oyewumi, 'Alice in Motherland: Reading Alice Walker on Africa and Screening the Color 'Black' in Oyeronke Oyewumi, *African Women and Feminism: Reflecting on the Politics of Sisterhood*.

⁵ This, of course, negates such narrative of lived experience as Waris Dirie *Desert Flower* and her current UN-supported campaign to eradicate female genital mutilation in Africa.

The idea I am trying to convey is that contrary to what Buchi Emecheta said about the negative views and sentiments towards Africa by Africans who have been far removed from the continent for a long time, that is, those who begin to see Africa the way the West see it, I argue that it is exactly the Africans who have stayed long in the West, who feel the pressing need to protect the 'vulnerable' African and therefore evolve glossy images of the continent. These glossy images include outright denials of the flaws of some of the cultural practices such as female genital mutilation. However, the fact that Emecheta did not see girls circumcised in her three months stay in her country does not mean that such practices were not done. And if it was still done even on 1% population of Nigerian women, then it is worth writing about.

In an attempt to answer the question, 'Woman where art thou?' it is expedient to examine some of the pictures of the African woman. For this, I rely on *Things Fall Apart*, regarded by many as nearly authentic as possible in the fictional depiction of the pre-colonial African society. *Things Fall Apart*, while giving a realistic depiction of African life, part of which is the place of women in society, undertakes a rather impersonal deification of women. The earth goddess is seen as representing the respect accorded to women. Chielo is a priestess of Agbala (75), a profession which places her above men in that culture. But what does it all say to the concrete African woman? Adewale Maja-Pearce puts it succinctly:

It is not enough to say, as Achebe does in *Things Fall Apart*, that pre-colonial African societies recognised the importance of the female principle in terms of the society's pantheon, or that Okonkwo's punishment is in part explained by his offence against Ani, the earth goddess; it is not even enough to say that Ani 'played a greater part in the life of the people than any other deity', if the position of women as human beings is then denigrated to the extent that Okonkwo's crime is not so much that he beats one of his wives, but that he does so at an unpropitious time. (24-24)

Recognizing the role of goddesses as controlling the lives of people has no existential relevance. It is comparable to calling Africa 'Mother Africa' and thereby giving African women the impression that they were taken seriously by the continent.

In *Things Fall Apart*, the image of the woman as Rose Ure Mezu has argued, is nothing to write home about.⁶ A scene that speaks much about the place of women in that society runs thus:

‘Who killed this banana tree?’ he asked.

A hush fell on the compound immediately.

‘Who killed this tree? Or are you all deaf and dumb?’

As a matter of fact the tree was very much alive. Okonkwo’s second wife had merely cut a few leaves off it to wrap some food, and she said so. Without further argument Okonkwo gave her a sound beating and left her and her only daughter weeping. (27)

The beating took place during the feast of New Yam Festival. It is not difficult to understand the pain and humiliation Okonkwo’s wife must have undergone. The situation has not changed for most families in that culture even in the 21st century. While in the West women have achieved some degree of right to sue their abusive husbands – alas after years of fight for liberation – some African women appear contented to first of all destroy Western imperialism before a woman could have the right to be happy.

Female genital mutilation: What it is not

When Osman Conteh, Sierra Leonean writer was asked why he chose to write about female genital mutilation in his country even though he is man and he answered that a happy woman was an asset, he could not have expressed a greater and deeper truth.⁷ Happy, fulfilled woman, indeed, fulfilled individuals are assets to their societies and if we could help remove what impedes one’s happiness or life fulfillment then it would be

⁶ See Mezu, Ure Rose. ‘Women in Achebe’s World,’ <http://www.uga.edu/~womanist/1995/mezu.html>.

⁷ At his reading during the Conference of European Association of Commonwealth Literature in Malta, March 21-26. He won the Macmillan Writer’s Prize for Africa (2002) for his children’s novel, *Unanswered Cries*.

a mistake to sacrifice such individuals on the altar of perceived societal dignity. Reading Waris Dirie's memoir⁸ about her genital mutilation, and the ordeal she underwent to escape being sold to marriage, puts all arguments for or against female genital mutilation into their right perspective. Discussions about female genital mutilation is not about ridiculing the vulnerable Africa in the West. It is not part of neo-imperial evil machination against Africa and it is not even about a person making a cheap name for herself by approaching such a sensational issue. It is all about the dignity of the individual. And while Buchi Emecheta, an Igbo, denied that female genital mutilation was still practiced, another Igbo, Okumephuna Chinwe Celestine born in 1977, and who still lives in Nigeria and does not have the perceived burden of being apologetic about Africa writes:

Reasons for that include; custom and tradition, religious demand, protection of virginity, prevention of promiscuity, increasing sexual pleasure for the husband, family honour, aesthetic reasons, purification, enhancing fertility, giving a sense of belonging to a group and increasing matrimonial opportunities. (Okumephuna Chinwe Celestine)

She writes further that unlike in most other parts of the country, the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria circumcise their girls at an early age. It would appear to be a belaboring of the obvious to hint that the implication of female genital mutilation or female circumcision as it is often euphemistically called is simply the objectifying of women. Women should be guarded against promiscuity; they should not experience pleasure. This seems hardly a revelation against the background of cultures in which women have meaning as human beings only to the degree to which they give birth to boys. It is male issues that give meaning to a woman in Africa. Reasons range from the fact of having someone who would sometime challenge the bullying husband, to having a person through whom the woman could have a share in the husband's property. Unlike in the West where a bereaved spouse inherits the deceased partner's property, women in most African societies cannot inherit unless they have sons. It is not even they who inherit, but their sons. It should therefore not be a surprise

⁸ See Waris Dirie. *Desert Flower*. London: Virago, 2001.

that the majority of Nigerian women writers are rather obsessed with the theme of barrenness as Flora Nwapa rightly observes:

African women writers have been accused of dwelling too much on barrenness. They were told by male critics to write on other 'more important' themes. What are these other important themes? [...] A wife is more often than not betrayed and abandoned by her husband if she does not have a child. (96)

Barrenness therefore appears to be the point around which African women's discourse rotates. This will understandably irritate literature lovers outside the culture, and perhaps if surprisingly, even men within. In clinging to the issue of barrenness, the African woman wants to be seen, heard and taken seriously as a human being, and not as objects or means to an end. In the face of this constellation therefore, why then should an African woman claim to wage war against imperialism or colonialism while the African man never sees her as his equal. It is comparable to some African soldiers fighting side by side with French and British soldiers against the Nazi army, yet these African soldiers would return to the colony to once more address their former fellow soldiers as *massa* (master).

African feminists allowed themselves to be dragged into believing that imperialism attacked African essence. Their mistake, however, is falling into the delusion of defense of African world as though it were infallible. As I said elsewhere, the most far-reaching consequence of forms of delusion on African cultural discourse is that age-old cultural practices gain halos of impeccability once they are perceived as being attacked from without. Like in the case of sati practice in India, the critique of human rights abuse in Africa promptly attracts defiant, 'No-Saying' attitude from most African defenders of culture. Esther M. Kisaakye demonstrates that the predominant argument for the justification of practice of polygamy in Africa is cultural:

polygamy is natural to Africa and is deeply entrenched in African society. Underlying this argument is the notion that monogamy is a Western value and its 'imposition' on Africa would be an attempt to impose those values on the African community. (277-278)

The same holds of the defense of female genital mutilation. 'In any of the communities practicing FGM,' she writes, 'proponents have argued that the practice is so deeply imbedded in the value system of the communities that its abolition is likely to be seen as an attack on the age-old respected cultural practices and beliefs of the communities' (272). Corinne Packer quotes one Somali woman thus: 'If Somali women change, it will be a change done by us. When they order us to stop, it is offensive to the black person or Muslim person who believes in circumcision' (Parker 346).

In this largely reactionary attitude to reality it is evident that the will to live lacks. The African woman is made to believe that her desires, dreams, feeling of pleasure and pain are inextricably tied to the collective. On the one hand, it is true that she cannot thrive as a member of a particular community without that community. Nevertheless, it need be stated that the feeling of pain or pleasure is not a gift to the individual by the community. It is the duty of the community to see to it that the individual experiences the least amount of pain and the greatest amount of pleasure, for it is around these two principles that life revolves. At the risk of sounding paternalistic, it seems rather more appropriate to demand of the African woman to forget about allusions to goddesses, Nefertiti or queens and warriors of the past and demand respect for her body and mind. And as an African woman, her primary audience is the African man, her immediate community. That, to my mind, is the beginning and goal of feminism whether radical or conciliatory. It does seem to me however, that this is exactly what the new generation of Nigerian women writers is out to do. Lola Shoneyin's poem 'She Tried,' catches how women are pushed to inferior status in a typical patriarchal society such as Nigeria. The persona tells about how society would not allow a woman to be doctor, lawyer, teacher and writer. 'So, she tried to be a woman//They pat her on the back//And showed her the kitchen, the garden//...and the bed' (13). In the same vein, Unoma Azua compares herself with a bird, and not wanting to be a singing caged bird, she declares:

'I need no cage
I need air
And more air.

In the next stanza she compares herself to a fish.

‘I am a fish
I need no poo
Not just rivers
But oceans to ride on tides’ (15)

While there are many young female poets such as Shoneyin and Azuah, I am particularly interested in the narrative works of Sefi Atta and Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, especially their novels: *All Good Things Will Come* and *Purple Hibiscus*.

Conclusion: Young generation of Nigerian women in search of self

Purple Hibiscus is a tightly woven narrative about a family abuse, but that which, according Obi Nwakanma, in Vanguard review

goes further and beyond, into the realm of the psychotic, of dispossession, of young erotic awakening, of the clash of worlds, the old African world in final transition, and the new evangelized unconscious linked to its powerful psychological sources, and its forms of alienation present in the pathology of self-hate. (Obi Nwakanma)

It is in the interstice of the paterfamilias’s psychosis, his brachial exercise of power and the young girl, the narrator’s erotic awakening that we locate the finely nuanced feminist thrust of the narrative. The narrative achieves its power largely through what it does not allow its characters to do. We are brought closer to the family and are allowed to see how Eugene beats his wife to the degree that she has miscarriages; then how he, in the belief that he’s keeping his daughter from sin, practically destroys her; beats her, pours hot water on her feet (194). We are made to challenge the wife to do something: run away, say no, do anything to free yourself from that man. And in her annoying lethargy, we begin to wish she had heard about the worth of women, or feminism. Her daughter Kambili, falls in love with a man who possesses the exact opposite of her father’s qualities: Father Amadi. ‘I wished I were alone with him. I wished I could tell him how warm I felt that he was here, how my favor-

ite color was now the same fire-clay shade of his skin' (221). Father Amadi successfully foils the ugly image of the African man created by Eugene. Eventually Eugene's wife poisons him. Of course the goal of feminism is not to poison men, and we would have wished that she made clear her wish. Nevertheless, this wish is translated in her daughter's appreciation of another man who had affirmed her the way she was. In falling in love with him, she tells us about everything her mother's generation would have wished for from their husbands. Feminism understood within Kambili's world is perhaps nothing more than the wish to be affirmed as a regular human being. That is indeed what she saw in Father Amadi's skin color. Fire-clay shade! The mention of clay reminds us of mud, humus from which humanity is derived. In Chimamanda, African women have one specific demand from their men, and this demand is wrapped in their appreciation of men, their bodies and minds, their humanity. Can the men ever give this affirmation back to women? It is not a complicated demand, I think. The flower, purple hibiscus, the narrator tells us, does not need too much care. Just a little quantity of water. Not too much and not too little.

Seffi Atta's *Everything Good Will Come* also explores intricate family issues in which women are forced to take decisions for themselves.

Enitan Taiwo and Sheri Bakare are friends brought up in different family setups. While Sheri is a biracial child whose father brought her home from London and who was then raised in a polygamous, Moslem family, Enitan is raised in a Christian, ostensibly progressive family; her father taught her to articulate her opinions and to stand by what she believes in. While one learns to avoid the strictures of tradition, the other confronts them headlong with the belief that her situation, that of women and the nation in general can never get better unless these issues are confronted, and the system fixed.

That would, however, demand sacrifices. Enitan, the narrator, is well aware of that, and she is dead determined to go ahead with a Nietzschean conviction that freedom is not just 'freedom from' but 'freedom to,' freedom to assume responsibility. With this, Sefi Atta sets a

broad canvas upon which she, produces a strong narrative that is particular in its detailed Nigerian experience and universal in the ethical issues that inform it. Sheri is gang raped as a teenager. She never fully recovers from the trauma. Enitan's mother has a mental breakdown because of her husband's philandering. Enitan, herself, has her own heartbreak from her otherwise trusted friend, Mike whom she visits one day only to find another girl lying half naked on the sofa where they had made love not quite a week before. But she finally finds a man who isn't a philanderer, but who had his own share of idiosyncrasy, which Enitan has to deal with till she takes a profound decision that would salvage her sanity. Here lies the future of African feminism: the ability of the African woman to take her life in her own hands. It is being proactive rather than reactionary.

Everything Good Will Come subtly redefines African feminism by presenting us with a woman character who knows what she wants. Enitan never bases her happiness on what others think. Rather she is ethically informed and, armed with her fierce intelligence she believes whoever has a voice must use it 'to bring about change' (259). Enitan believes that the ability to make a change in society begins with that to affect a change in the family; the ability for a woman to simply speak out as she does: 'I can't tell a lie-you're hurting me. I've tried my best.' (256) In this utterance she appeals to the humanity of the man. She calls on all to learn to care. 'We have all played a part in this mess, not caring enough about other people, how they live. It comes back to you' (228). With this, Sefi Atta seems to suggest that feminism is all about caring about the other as a human being. This goal is not to dethrone man or enthrone woman on the seat of power. Rather it is to create a community in which human beings flourish.

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The State of Knowledge on Sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa



A Synthesis of Literature

by Chi-Chi Undie and Kabwe Benaya

Abstract. **The State of Knowledge on Sexuality in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Synthesis of Literature.** The study of sexuality is largely underdeveloped in sub-Saharan Africa and few scholars have demonstrable interest and focus in this area. Yet, sexuality is at the core of our existence and is central to the socio-economic and development challenges confronted in sub-Saharan Africa. The lack of professional research capacity in SSA has become more evident with the escalating HIV/AIDS epidemic. The failure to deal with the disease has highlighted limitations of the extensive social science research being carried out on the continent to strengthen programs that advocate change in sexual behavior. The near exclusive focus on behavior change (mainly in terms of number and type of sexual partners and condom use) has limited fuller understanding of sexuality and how it is conceptualized and applied in various societies in sub-Saharan Africa. Our purpose in this paper is, thus, to examine the state of knowledge regarding sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa.

key words: Africa, feminism, sexuality, conceptualisation, socio-cultural institutions

Introduction¹

The study of sexuality is largely underdeveloped in sub-Saharan Africa and few scholars have demonstrable interest and focus in this area. Yet,

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sexuality is at the core of our existence and is central to the socio-economic and development challenges confronted in sub-Saharan Africa. The lack of professional research capacity in SSA has become more evident with the escalating HIV/AIDS epidemic. The failure to deal with the disease has highlighted limitations of the extensive social science research being carried out on the continent to strengthen programs that advocate change in sexual behavior. The near exclusive focus on behavior change (mainly in terms of number and type of sexual partners and condom use) has limited fuller understanding of sexuality and how it is conceptualized and applied in various societies in sub-Saharan Africa. Our purpose in this paper is, thus, to examine the state of knowledge regarding sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa.

The African Gender Institute's (AGI) curriculum work group meeting report for the year 2003 gives an indication of some of the realities involved in undertaking a review such as ours. The report discusses the challenges faced during the preparation of a review essay and a bibliography focusing on sexuality, culture, and identity in Africa. The report indicates that the difficulties encountered during this first attempt were partly due to an overlooked need to map out what is 'do-able' within a review paper's scope, thus

'provid[ing] a framework for navigating through the literature.' Furthermore, it concludes that 'base-line thinking needs to be grounded in existing African thought regarding sexuality' (AGI, 2003).

It is in this spirit that the current review has been conducted, taking the aforementioned recommendations as its point of departure.

Review Methodology

The World Health organization has recently defined sexuality as:

a central aspect of being human throughout life and encompasses sex, gender identities and roles, sexual orientation, eroticism, pleasure, intimacy and reproduction. Sexuality is experienced and expressed in thoughts, fantasies, desires, beliefs, attitudes, values, behaviors, practices, roles and relationships. While sexuality can include all of these dimensions, not all of them are always experienced or expressed. Sexuality is influenced by the interaction of bio-

logical, psychological, social, economic, political, cultural, ethical, legal, historical and religious and spiritual factors (WHO Draft working definition, October 2002).

Whether the above well-cited definition of sexuality encapsulates, or even properly identifies, the different aspects of sexuality for the SSA region is debatable.² Nonetheless, one might consider it as more relevant to the setting we are concerned with here than several earlier, less complex iterations. This paper, thus, relies on the above definition of sexuality and attempts to address several of its facets.

The literature examined for this review was largely derived from articles available on JSTOR (Journal Storage: The Scholarly Journal Archive)³. Using the key words ‘sexuality and sub-Saharan Africa,’ we conducted a search that generated close to 700 articles from a wide array of journals, in disciplines such as population studies, anthropology, and feminist studies. Our literature search also extended to the HINARI database, as well as to the World Wide Web. Using a list of key words related to the subject of sexuality (including sexual behavior, sexual orientation, sexual identity, and sexuality), coupled with the term ‘sub-Saharan Africa,’ we located several articles that were not available on JSTOR. The vast majority of the articles retrieved from HINARI and the Web revolved around reproductive health issues in sub-Saharan Africa.⁴ This was also the case for JSTOR, although the latter did provide several multi-disciplinary articles which examined sexuality issues in SSA outside the realm of reproductive health.

² Another comprehensive definition of sexuality is provided by Dixon-Mueller (1993: 273), who views sexuality as a ‘comprehensive concept that encompasses the physical capacity for sexual arousal and pleasure (libido) as well as personalized and shared social meanings attached to sexual behavior and the formation of sexual and gender identities. As a biological concept transposed by culture, sexuality becomes a social product.’

³ We readily acknowledge the biased selection of papers available through a source like JSTOR, useful as it is. We did note somewhat of a bias in favor of natural science and US/European publications.

⁴ As a result, we deliberately chose to focus on other, less-studied aspects of sexuality in this review.

Our search was opportunistic, an additional way – necessarily so, in our opinion. As scholars resident in sub-Saharan Africa, access to sexuality-related literature posed intermittent challenges.⁵ Thus, any readily available books on sexuality, as well as relevant ‘grey’ literature also formed a part of our review. Drawing on sexuality data from our respective fields of expertise (in Language, Literacy, and Culture, and Demography, respectively), we also included texts we were aware of that examined our topic of interest. Lastly, this review has benefited from a small number of important books (ranging from the recently published to the very old).

To facilitate our navigation through the literature, we have relied upon the World Health Organization’s definition of sexuality, attempting to address each of its segments (as well as other topics relevant to SSA). We examined over one hundred articles related to these segments.⁶

Our examination revealed an undeniable tension in the emergent body of sexuality literature – an opposition between ‘empirical data gathering and hypothesis testing and postmodern, postpositivist constructionist scholarship/science’ (Okami & Pendleton 1994: 90). The essentialist approach is regarded as limited in its ability to unravel the social logic and realities in which sexuality is deeply embedded, or what Treichler (1991, p. 51) describes as the ‘complicated signifying systems where language, behavioral practices, cultural institutions, and self identification regularly produce contradictions.’ A social constructionist view has been increasingly upheld (see, for example, Population Council, 2001; Kim-Puri, 2005; Heald, 2003) in a bid to redress what are seen as imbalances

⁵ As an example of this, a major African source on sexuality issues to which we did not have access (apart from the one article which a contributing author made available online) is the South African feminist journal, *Agenda* – a publication that has been participating in this discussion years ahead of many other African sources.

⁶ Our JSTOR search using the key words ‘sexuality’ and ‘sub-Saharan Africa’ generated over 700 articles, some of which were more relevant to our purposes than others. We selected various articles that touched on the key segments we address in this paper. Our review is, thus, by no means exhaustive.

caused by the theoretical assumption of homogenization that has historically informed understandings of sexuality in Africa.

Social constructionism⁷, however, faces its own limitations as well. In their fight against ethnocentrism, its proponents have been known to occasionally perpetuate the latter, ‘treating culture-specific categories as though they were shared cross-culturally’ (Okami & Pendleton 1994: 87). Ideally, a social constructionist approach would go beyond a mere focus on cultural influence to situate local beliefs within their appropriate historical, social, and cultural contexts (*ibid.*). An additional challenge arises with this approach, which embodies anthropological methods. Much of the research bordering on sexuality has been both agency-sponsored and short-term – an urgent response to HIV/AIDS (Heald, 2003) and other reproductive health problems. The ‘thick description’ which derives from long-term participant-observation and the contextualizing of the ‘insider’ perspective, is hampered by the domination of short-term evaluations (*ibid.*). But, as Heald (*ibid.*) concedes, anthropologists are more adept at the dissection of policy failures than at contributing toward the universalizing exigencies of policy planning. What we know about sexuality in African contexts is explored here amid this ‘war’ of the approaches.

Sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa: The roots of our knowledge

Historically, there have been a myriad of stereotypical myths regarding the sexualities of ‘Third World’ peoples. The rootedness of the investigation of sexuality in the Victorian age explains many of these legends (Leclerc-Madlala, 2004). Unflattering portraits of sexuality in the developing world are legion, constructing this phenomenon as either ‘exotic, mysterious, [and] uncivilized’ (Jolly 2003: 5), or as hypersexual (Gesheker, 1995; Mama 1996; Elliston, 2005). Several authors observe that the

⁷ Rosenblum & Travis (2000: 1) define constructionism as ‘the perspective that reality cannot be separated from the way a culture makes sense of it – that meaning is ‘constructed’ through social, political, legal, scientific, and other practices. From this perspective, differences among people are created through social processes.’

beginnings of our knowledge about sexuality in SSA were shaped within conceptual schemes derived from colonial legacies and thought (e.g.: Mama, 1996; Osha, 2004). Indeed, others (e.g.: Arnfred, 2004; Leclerc-Madlala, 2004) have indicated that contemporary conceptualizations of ‘African sexuality’ continue to be informed by earlier colonial and Western, Victorian-era imaginations. Within this conceptual framing, the portrait of sexuality in SSA that emerges often reflects ‘the unbridled black female sexuality, excessive, threatening and contagious, carrying a deadly disease’ (Arnfred 2004: 67). Men are not left out of this picture. Standing back from medical discourses often collected around issues such as male circumcision and HIV/AIDS, their depiction as sexually irresponsible beings, who

‘would not use condoms if they did not have to, but would rather practice promiscuous sex without any interest in [their] partner’s health’

equally feeds in to colonial notions of the African male (Jungar & Oinas, 2004: 107).

In current research on sub-Saharan Africa – ‘often donor-driven,’ as Arnfred (2004: 59) notes, not to mention program-driven – the conceptualization of sexuality has privileged a severely limited number of themes, including disease and reproduction. This should come as no shock, as much of what we have learned about sexuality in SSA has been stimulated by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The content of this knowledge – drawn primarily from quantitative data in the population and public health fields – has not remained unquestioned, however (see, for example, Watkins, 1993). In the words of Dixon-Mueller (1993: 270), ‘A visitor from another planet would be mystified about sexual behavior if she/he/it were to depend on demographic and family planning journals for information.’ While quantitative research (from survey to biomedical research, epidemiology to computer modeling) has offered undeniably useful portraits of sexuality in the region, by its very nature, it has at the same time employed a limited framework for examining sexuality as a social construct (Watkins, 1993; Dixon-Mueller, 1993; Ampofo, 2004; Poulin, 2005). Consequently, as Watkins (1993: 553) explains, ‘to a surprising degree, our research draws on what we take for granted about

women, men, and the relations between them in order to pose our research questions, to collect our data, and to interpret our results.’ She continues:

‘[O]ur theoretical frameworks are built on maintained hypotheses, the assumed stories we tell about human behavior that we do not test. These tell us not only what to ‘see,’ but also what to ignore’ (Watkins 1993: 567).

It would be erroneous to view quantitative approaches as ‘flawed,’ however. Demographers and public health practitioners, for instance, do not claim to study sexuality as a broad concept. Their interests are necessarily in specific aspects of sexuality that often have critical health outcomes for the populations concerned. But in the absence of sufficient research from other domains, the assumptions inherent in demographic / public health approaches lead to the formulation of limited theoretical framings that may constrain (and thereby distort) our understanding of, or what we know about, sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa. The assumptions have largely been that the motivation behind human sexuality is reproduction – which unwittingly obscures ‘alternative’ sexualities. While procreation is of importance in any culture (admittedly some less than others), an exclusive focus on issues such as the risk of pregnancy and disease oversimplifies the complex nature of sexuality, be it in SSA or elsewhere.

Another theme that has informed the conceptualization of sexuality in SSA has to do with violence, often in the form of female circumcision/excision, now commonly known (although not universally accepted) as female genital mutilation. The debates around this phenomenon are numerous, provoked initially by the potential harm that some forms of female circumcision hold for young girls and women. The need to protect female sexual rights in SSA, including the right to sexual pleasure, has also featured in these debates, as the practice of female circumcision in some societies had/has the aim of moderating the sensuality of women. But several recent interrogations of this matter have revealed the multifaceted nature of female circumcision and its meaning within practicing societies. What is clear from such studies is that the principle of female sexual pleasure can paradoxically exist in a context where female circum-

cision is meant to regulate women's sensuality (Diallo, 2004); that the motivations behind female circumcision sometimes have little to do with sexuality (Dellenborg, 2004); and that female circumcision can be desirable and voluntarily sought-after – indeed, perceived as 'beautiful' (Leonard, 2000), for instance.

In Diallo's (2004) description of societal dealings with female sexuality in Mali, practices that simultaneously hamper and enhance the sexuality of women are shown to co-exist. On the one hand, female circumcision is performed for a variety of reasons, including moderating women's level of eroticism. Conversely, nuptial advisors – whose job it is to train new brides, ensuring that have a pleasurable sex life – form an important part of wedding ceremonies, and continue to provide advice and instruction on sexual and reproductive health matters long after the wedding ceremony.

Dellenborg's findings regarding excision in southern Senegal demonstrate the spiritual motivations behind the practice in this particular milieu, often completely overlooked in common assumptions about the rationale for excision: 'The practice is carried out so that a girl can pray and be part of the women's secret society, to acquire the practical, theoretical, and corporeally 'magical' knowledge that essentially transforms the girl into a real person, into a human being of female gender' (Dellenborg 2004: 90-91).

Finally, in Leonard's (2000) argument for a plurality of accounts of female circumcision, she examines this practice in Mbayé, a village in southern Chad. Mbaye is a village in which female circumcision was not practiced historically, and in which young girls began to independently seek out circumcision (to the consternation of the chief of the village) in the 1980s. The reasons for this are not completely clear, but Leonard's data suggest that there might be several: young girls may perceive female circumcision as a mark of 'modernism,' they may simply be imitating their friends (those who do not get circumcised may be teased by their peers, and excluded from participating in certain dances), or may view the colorful ceremonies that now accompany the practice as highly desirable. As some Western scholars have indicated, the societal pressures that

perpetuate the practice of female circumcision may not be too far removed from pressures faced by some women in the West to undergo tattooing, plastic surgery, liposuction, and other potentially harmful practices which are becoming increasingly prevalent in the Western world (see, for instance, Gunning, 1992; Leonard, 2000).

The above examples give an indication of the diversity of experiences that exist around female circumcision. Clearly, the various aspects of sexuality are much more challenging to unravel than one might initially imagine.

The much-cited 'African sexuality' theory posited by Caldwell and colleagues (1989) was, in fact, driven by a desire to unravel or 'understand sub-Saharan African society and the role of sexual relations within it' (Caldwell *et al.*, 1989: 1). Their contention is that in Africa, morality (which they seem to equate with female chastity) and religion are tangential to sexual relations, which are, thus, characterized by a lack of guilt and a relatively higher level of commercial exchange⁸ than found in other societies. They conclude by linking this mentality, and the consequent patterns of sexual behavior, to a bleak future for SSA in the context of the AIDS pandemic. The essentialist⁹ approach and totalizing perspective reflected in the quest by Caldwell *et al.* for a

'distinct and internally coherent African system [of sexuality]' (*ibid.*, p. 187)

is one that has often been relied upon for engaging the concept of sexuality in African societies. The consequence of similar (essentialist) approaches, coupled with the HIV/AIDS scourge, has been the constriction of the discussion of sexuality in SSA to a few exclusive spheres. Referring to development discourses, for instance, Jolly (2003: 5) indicates that the latter have engaged sexuality by either overlooking it completely, or

⁸ The notion of 'commercial exchange' raises certain questions and is, thus, problematized on p. 14.

⁹ Essentialism may be defined as 'the perspective that reality exists independently of our perception of it, that we perceive the meaning of the world rather than construct that meaning. From this perspective, there are real and important (essential) differences among categories of people' (Rosenblum & Travis 2000: 1).

limiting it to the examination of '(over) population or disease and violence' (*ibid.*). Citing Gosine (1998), Jolly points to a

'racialization of sex' in both development discourse and western popular culture, where positive sensual and emotional aspects of sex are represented for white people in the north, but denied for people in the south where population and disease are taken to be the primary concerns' (*ibid.*)

Although not particularly well-received, the Caldwell article is a helpful point of departure for the conceptualization of models of sexuality in SSA that might be more befitting. Moreover, the many responses to this article (e.g.: Le Blanc *et al.*, 1991; Ahlberg, 1994; Heald, 1999; Arnfred, 2004), devoted to highlighting its theoretical gaps and weaknesses, are useful in granting us a fruitful starting point for theory-building around the subject of sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa.

In this review, we deliberately de-amplify essentialist perspectives in order to redress some of the imbalance that exists in the literature. In the subsequent sections of this paper, we address various aspects of sexuality, using the WHO sexuality definition as our primary guide.

Gender identities and roles

The issue of gender identities and roles, one facet of sexuality, has been theorized and chronicled extensively from an African-centered viewpoint over the past two decades. Here again, in spite of the homogenizing around categories of men and women that is still prevalent in the literature, much has been written to demonstrate the complexities and contradictions in gender construction within many non-Western contexts (Lebeuf, 1963; Sacks, 1982; Mohanty, 1991; Amadiume, 1987; Pereira, 2003). Weedon (1999: 184) describes the conceptualization of gender in Western thought as a 'set of polarized binary oppositions' in which the privileged male is the normative standard against which the subordinate female is measured. But can this conceptual model be applied to the realities of all Africans across all spatial and time spans? To what extent can it be used to analyze cultural issues in sub-Saharan Africa? These questions have been raised and debated at great length – admittedly in some (e.g.:

indigenous West African) contexts much more than others. Evidence from Southeastern Nigeria, for example, indicates the dual nature of women's identities, encompassing that of a daughter and that of a wife, with the former remaining pre-eminent and occupying an undisputed place of privilege and power, unlike the latter¹⁰ (Amadiume, 1987; Oyewumi, 1997; Uchendu, 2003). Some matrilineal societies, such as can be found in Mozambique (see Arnfred, 2001; 2004), for instance, also ascribe an undeniable level of power to women. Indeed, hierarchical subordination may be seen as phenomenon from which no-one is exempt in some African societies. In her examination of the Igbo case, Nzegwu (2001: 15) notes that

[e]very social role and social interaction comes with both a subordinate and superordinate pole that is never constant. Not only are there no fixed or permanent locations of subordination, the subordinate/superordinate feature of roles ensures that no sex group or age group is collectively and permanently privileged or subordinate.

In Pereira's rebuttal to McFadden's (2003) treatise on the relationship between sexual pleasure and power, she cautions against McFadden's generalization that African women – regardless of the diversity of cultures within the continent, and in spite of age and class differences – are sexually repressed (Pereira 2003). While acknowledging that this may indeed be the case 'to some extent [for] many categories of women' (*ibid.*, p. 1), Pereira reminds us that the nuances of inconsistencies and convolutions that gender provokes in the African context should not be overlooked.

Sexual pleasure and intimacy

The very notion of sexual pleasure has faced critique in terms of whether it is a social or biological construct (see Okami & Pendleton, 1994). As many have noted, there is a paucity of engagement with concepts such as

¹⁰ It should be noted that the 'mother'/'wife' duality is also central to the arguments of Amadiume (1987) and Oyewumi (1997) in regard to women's identities.

sexual pleasure, the erotic, love, and desire in the literature. These phenomena are usually only referred to in a bid to bewail their glaring absence. Nonetheless, Moyer & Mbelwa (2003) unveil the hidden ways in which notions of sexuality, pleasure, and morality are framed in the Tanzanian context. Women in particular are noted for their innovative means of interlacing ideas of sexuality and pleasure into cloth design, music, and nuptial ceremonies, for example.

Spronk's (2005) findings among young female professionals in Nairobi, Kenya suggest that the quest for sexual pleasure became an increasingly important objective, as well as a significant 'modern' identity marker, shaping the lifestyles of the study participants', as they progressed in age. Sexual pleasure as an objective is also demonstrated in Brown *et al.*'s (1993) study of men and women in central Zaire, who both perceive a 'dry, tight' vagina as offering immense pleasure, with women going to great (and potentially hazardous) lengths to achieve this effect.

Nzegwu's (forthcoming) philosophical analysis of the indigenous Igbo conception of sexuality centers on

'uncover[ing] a range of formerly concealed practices as well as a subset of sexual behavior and sexual desire that is rooted in pleasure and the attainment of pleasure, and that are not necessarily tied to procreation' (p. 5).

The portrait that emerges from this analysis is a conception of sexuality that positively affirms women, with the vagina taking pre-eminence over the penis as a dominant sexual organ. Furthermore, eight¹¹ kinds of transmarital¹² relationships that occur in this indigenous context are delineated – three of which are rooted in sexual pleasure: it was/is not uncommon for women to develop transmarital relationships when, for work reasons, their spouses are obligatorily absent for long durations; when an aged spouse cannot fulfill his young wife's sexual needs; or in instances where 'there is a physical trait that a wife or the couple sees in some man

¹¹ Nzegwu is careful to note that the list of eight kinds of transmarital relationships she describes are not meant to be exhaustive.

¹² Defined by the author as 'a relationship that is not necessarily 'extra,' but transcends or goes beyond the marital union' (Nzegwu 2005; footnote 5).

and wants to bring into their conjugal unit' (*ibid.*, p 11)¹³. All other instances the author pinpoints as leading to transmarital relationships are rooted in reproductive concerns. In the article, female sexual autonomy emerges as a characteristic of sexuality within the Igbo cultural scheme.

Sex and money

The image presented by Nzegwu stands in stark contrast to much of the literature, which, with gender inequality featuring as a key contributor to the spread of HIV in SSA, has invariably focused on the poverty and vulnerability of women and young girls (Poulin, 2005). Studies abound on the need for African women and young girls, in particular, to have sex for money (rather than for pleasure or to establish intimacy) in order meet their basic needs (Maticka-Tyndale *et al.*, 2005; Mufune, 2003; Nzyuko *et al.*, 1997). This theme has particularly shaped our understanding of the sexuality of young people in SSA. There can be no argument with Poulin's (2005: 2) assertion that

'[p]overty in sub-Saharan Africa is indeed gendered; women are poorer than men [although this does not necessarily apply across the board (see, for example, Silberschmidt, 1999, 2004)]

and their economic independence translates into various health consequences,' and that '[y]oung people are often considered to be at particularly grave risk.' There is, in fact, evidence to suggest that gift giving has an insidious impact on the sexual behavior and negotiation ability of girls, and, to a lesser degree, boys (Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004), although, arguably, this problem is not pertinent to African societies alone. It may be argued that gift-giving (monetary or not) is usually valued and expected in relationships in most societies. Research in the African region, however, tends to ignore the normalcy of this practice and the possibility that it is not always necessarily linked to sexual favors. Helle-Valle's (2004) interrogation of the purported 'transactional sex' issue is both refreshing

¹³ See also Uchendu (1965) for a detailed description of this practice.

and informative, providing insight into perceived differences by some in 'the West' between 'Western' and 'African' sexuality. Says he:

Many Africanists with a 'Western' background, including myself, feel that there are significant differences between sexuality in 'the West' and in Africa. Perhaps it is not so much a question of African permissiveness, or people's preoccupation with it – we certainly find similar traits in certain social groups in 'the West.' The regional difference is maybe more a question of sexual mores than sexual practice. Perhaps the most significant difference is the Western strictness about sex and motivations: romantic love and/or personal pleasure (physical and psychological) are the 'proper' motives for engaging in sex, while strategic, materially oriented uses of sexuality are strictly tabooed – being forcefully embodied in our image of 'the prostitute' (*ibid.*, pp. 205-206).

But Poulin (2005) goes beyond the reality of poverty constraints and risk behavior issues to examine the social meaning of monetary exchange in the sexual encounters of young people in Malawi. What emerges is a highly nuanced picture in which money transfers, seen as both symbolically meaningful and instrumental, take place in emotionally-committed relationships. Furthermore, the sexual autonomy of young Malawian girls at different phases of their intimate relationships is unveiled. Spronk (2005: 273) provides a similar interpretation of relationships in urban Kenya. Her perspective about the receipt of gifts by young women in sexual relationships is summarized as follows: 'This should not be interpreted as material reciprocity, instead appreciation was symbolized materially. Since women learn that men are financial providers, notions regarding a loving and supportive boyfriend are partly defined by financial support.'

Although much of the literature alerts us to the fact that the sexual encounters of young people in SSA occur in risky contexts (e.g.: Izugbara, 2001; Arowojolu *et al.*, 2002; Erulkar, 2004), there are some emerging studies which, while addressing risk, also center on the primacy of intimacy in young people's construction of sexuality. Notably, there is a paucity of similar research on older adults in SSA.

Issues of modernity

Smith (2000) describes Igbo adolescent and young adult sexuality as more distant from biological and social reproduction today than it was in the past. Nevertheless, reticence toward contraceptive (mainly condom) use in this context is paradoxically rooted in social reproduction concerns:

‘Though few young people actually desire a premarital pregnancy, conscious efforts to block fertility are often viewed as undermining trust and intimacy that is ultimately measured in a willingness to procreate together’ (*ibid.*, p. 116; see Kaufman & Stavrou, 2004; and Parikh, 2004, for similar sentiments).

Thus, while sexual intimacy and romance are seen by young people in this setting as a means of creating a desirable ‘modern’ identity, these concepts are simultaneously in competition with more ‘traditional’ models of sexuality received from parents.

In a similar vein, Parikh (2003) highlights the gendered ways in which love letters are used to establish and negotiate intimate relationships between Ugandan youth. Young people are shown to express their intimate emotions through letters written in a highly sophisticated manner. The emerging sexual identities evident in these letters are clearly informed by popular culture and the ubiquitous public health discourse in Uganda. The exigency of reproductive concerns, such as HIV/AIDS, which has provoked this discourse, has also paradoxically heightened a sense of shame and secrecy surrounding the sexual exploration of youth. The unfortunate consequence, similar to Smith’s (2000) description of the Igbo case, is a widened gap between authoritative adults and youth during their critical period of sexual maturation.

But gaps between elders and young people should not be construed as a total rift between generations. For instance, despite the conflict between their desired ‘modern’ forms of sexuality and the expectations of elders regarding marriage and childbearing, Igbo youth appear to simultaneously support these exigencies (Smith, 2000). In her examination of the childbearing views of Guinean women across the life course, Levin (2000) observes an intergenerational consensus regarding reasons for

emerging childbearing patterns. Importantly, the Foucauldian perspective regarding the intersection of sexuality, knowledge, and power in the West is not completely validated by African examples (Renne 2000). The subtle negotiation evident in the senior/junior relations described above is not accounted for in Foucault's (1978) history of sexuality in the West. In Renne's words, 'there is common ground as well as conflict between elders and juniors, and women and men in matters relating to sexuality. It is through careful ethnographic studies ... that the ambiguities of inter-generational and gendered relationships associated with sexuality, past and present, may be more deeply understood' (Renne 2000: xi-xii).

Sex initiation rites

Evidence of indigenous mechanisms for the transmission of sexual education exists in various SSA contexts (Richards, 1956; Ahlberg, 1994; Tumbo-Masabo & Liljestrom, 1994; Mufune, 2003; Blankson Ikpe, 2004). Elders are cited as playing/having played prominent roles in the regulation of young people's sexuality. Changes in the political economy, however, have led to shifts in the moral authority of elders in SSA (Renne, 2000). This phenomenon has had its impact on the sexual behavior of young people, as well as on their socialization process in the realm of sexuality. In earlier times, initiation rites often served as the medium for conveying sexual information, seen as important for the transition to adulthood. Although there is evidence that some of these rites continue (often in a modified form), others are no longer in existence.

Recently, much of the literature devoted to sex initiation rites in SSA has focused on the experiences of females. This is, perhaps, due to a seemingly pervasive interest in more recent times, in the extent of reproductive health knowledge generated by these rites. Historically, female sex initiation rites have also been of interest to researchers. Raum (1939), for instance, describes initiation among Chaga girls of Tanzania as being closely determined by individual sexual maturation, and therefore more private, unlike the case of boys, whose initiation ceremonies are public, communal affairs. According to Raum, female initiation in Chaga society

involves a night devoted to instruction in sexual matters. The importance of, and societal rewards for, virginity and propriety are stressed by a teacher of female initiates. Nonetheless, other secrets of sexual life shared by the teacher, such as the option of intrafemoral intercourse (or 'thigh' sex) and traditional contraceptive measures, indicate that there is room for compromise regarding this ideal.

Van de Walle & Franklin (1996) suggest that sex initiation rites among the Kaguru, also of Tanzania, involve instruction in the form of sex act miming and linking intercourse with pregnancy, coupled with socialization into wifehood roles. But in her study on the Shinyanga region of Tanzania, Roth Allen's (2000) findings indicate that structured puberty initiation rituals were not necessarily common to all Tanzanian contexts. Roth Allen suggests that in the Shinyanga region, these rituals have no history of pervasiveness. Rather, young women in this part of Tanzania have continued to learn about sexuality in a non-uniform manner, through informal networks with one another and trial and error. These studies (among others) conducted in one East African country give an indication of the kind of diversity dealt with in African settings, where even initiation rituals within the same region may not necessarily be described as ethnically specific (Roth Allen, 2000).

There are other contexts in which sexuality information was passed down in a more practical manner. Ahlberg (1994: 230), for example, describes sex initiation in the indigenous Kikuyu setting, saying,

'[I]nstead of lectures, individuals are presented with concrete situations which serve as a case for ethical analysis of themselves and others.'

Male and female initiates were given an opportunity to sleep together provided sexual penetration was not achieved. To ensure this, girls were required to tie a cloth between their thighs, and several couples slept together in a common room, acting as regulators for the proper sexual behavior of one another. This education was also supplemented with instruction that socialized initiates into community values and expectations for adult conduct. Importantly, Ahlberg notes the public, collective nature in which sexuality was addressed during initiation and ritual ceremonies, creating a public discourse around sexuality which stands in stark

contrast to the silence surrounding the subject among the Kikuyu in contemporary times.

An account of the unique form of initiation practiced among the Rukuba of Nigeria is provided by Muller (1972). This phenomenon, like others previously described, involves instruction as to community values and proper behavior. In addition, sexual instruction is provided via a pregnant woman (to whom the initiate is joined in a ritual marriage) who must eventually give birth to a live child for the initiation process to be complete. This male initiate may be aged anywhere from 4 to 14 years of age. Muller explains that

although being so small at the time of the initiation, many Rukuba men later recall with laughter the one night spent with the pregnant woman. They insist on their bewilderment and inability to cope with the situation, the initiate resting with the woman who, apparently, means business however small the initiand might be (Muller 1972: 294).

As Muller interprets it, the symbolism of the husband and father roles that this ceremony evokes are a necessity in the Rukuba culture, ensuring that the initiate (now a 'husband' and 'father' in the ritual sense) can now technically entertain premarital sexual encounters. In Muller's words,

After everything is in order, i.e., after [the initiate] is already a father and a husband, then and only then can he have his reward: sitting at home without the trouble of marriage and children, enjoying the pleasant company of his girl-friend. This state of affairs is however, alas, a heresy which has to be neutralized by setting things to rights in a symbolic way *before the sin is committed*.¹⁴ So Rukuba initiation states bluntly that in this world social duty¹⁵ (here

¹⁴ The 'sin' referred to here is that of premarital pregnancy as a consequence of premarital sex. As Muller explains, in times past, this would result in abortion or infanticide, illegitimate children being regarded as a 'bad' thing. Interestingly, premarital sexual relationships were institutionalized, but pregnancy as a result of them was considered reprehensible.

¹⁵ This assertion concerning social duty is reminiscent of Uchendu's (1965: 193) description of the Igbo case in which 'family'-orientedness (as opposed to mere spousal orientation) is seen as a critical social goal through which sexual behavior may be understood. Thus, '[t]here is no emphasis among the Igbo on sexual services being exclusive and confined to husband and wife. All that the culture demands is that sex be institutionalized.' And so institutionalized it is – within the confines of marriage and concubinage (through which husbands, wives, and the unmarried alike may

fulfilled, albeit minimally, by ritual marriage and symbolic fatherhood) must in some sense precede unmitigated pleasure (Muller 1972: 295).

In contemporary times, it is common for young people in SSA to obtain their sexuality information from the media (Smith, 2000), government school teachers (Stewart, 2000; Prazak, 2000), health workers (Stewart, 2000), and from their peers (Roth Allen, 2000), for example. While this gulf between generations has raised calls for the revitalization of indigenous forms of sex education (e.g. Ahlberg, 1994), Roth Allen's (2000) study of the Shinyanga region of Tanzania gives us pause, reminding us that formal instruction about the facts of life was not necessarily a universal practice in indigenous societies. Moreover, as Arnfred (2004) points out, the dynamic nature of customs necessitates their continual location in present-day realities.

Sexuality and religion

The rituals described thus far in this paper (particularly around sex initiation rites) are invariably embedded in the indigenous African religions concerned. Thus, separating traditional rites from religion in SSA contexts poses a challenge. In contemporary times, however, the intersection between religion (primarily Christianity) and sexuality has been documented. It is noteworthy that this documentation tends to occur, again, in the contexts of risk and disease. For instance, Smith's (2004) study of young migrants in Nigeria demonstrates the profound effect that evangelical/Pentecostal Christianity has upon the young people, shaping their perceptions of HIV/AIDS risk in ways that expose them to potential harm. The study suggests that moralistic understandings of sexuality and the AIDS pandemic hold dangers of their own:

On the one hand, relationships are legitimized as risk-free and decisions not to use condoms are rationalized, for example, 'both my partner and I are moral and Christian, therefore we are protected.' On the other hand, behavior that flouts shared religious moralities is thought about as sin (rather than in terms

enjoy non-marital relationships), with sex outside of these institutions being categorized as 'prostitution.'

of health risk) and dealt with through denial. Among young people who are sexually active, religious interpretations of the disease and moral assessments of personal sexual behavior create obstacles to accurately evaluating risk for both those in 'moral partnerships' and those participating in more stigmatized sexual relationships. Christianity provides explanations for who is at risk and who is not, creating contexts where individuals ignore or deny their own risk (Smith 2004: 433).

Conversely, religious commitment has been shown to delay sexual debuts among young South Africans, and to moderate the tendency to engage in sexual intercourse (Nicholas & Durrheim, 1995). Furthermore, Garner's (2000) South African-based study of members of various Christian church types suggests that Pentecostal church affiliation alone diminishes pre- and extra-marital sex levels, through seemingly stringent cultural practices.

Where Islam is concerned, Imam (1997) alerts us to the dangers of the endemic essentializing of Muslim peoples and societies across time and space, and the consequent implications for the understanding of sexuality in Muslim contexts. Outlining the plurality of experiences in Muslim settings across Africa, Asia, and the Middle East, Imam notes, for example, that unremarkable phenomena in Nigerian Muslim communities, such as divorce and polygyny, are cause for humiliation in India and Bangladesh. The seclusion of women ubiquitously practiced in Bangladesh and northern Nigeria, for instance, is almost non-existent in Senegal, Burkina Faso, and the Gambia.

In her discussion of the Muslim discourses of sexuality, Imam (1997: 3) explains:

There is a dominant discourse and stereotype about 'Islamic sexuality' which presents Muslim women as always both submissive to and tightly controlled by men who have the capacity to marry four wives. Sexuality in this discourse is, of itself, neither good nor bad, but an elemental and natural force that should however be suitably channelled in society. Both men's and women's sexuality are seen as naturally active, and while men's arousal pattern is faster, 'foreplay' is enjoined as a religious duty on men as women also have a desire for and right to sexual pleasure and satisfaction. Women are thought to have a greater potential for sexual desire and pleasure, nine times that of men. However, it is women's passive exudation of sexuality to which men are vulnerable which provokes men who then deliberately arouse and fulfil desire in women. Thus women's sexuality is seen as naturally both greater and more passive than that of men. The idea of natural sexuality here is not solely reproductive,

but it is definitely heterosexual with masturbation, homosexuality and bestiality condemned as unnatural.

On the other hand, the author describes Muslim religious right discourses as typically centering on female sexuality as a root cause of immorality.

Discourses are dynamic, however, and as sexual discourses change, their effect upon the sexuality of men and women will continue to evolve. Imam (*ibid.*), for instance, explains how, over time, institutionalized pre-marital sex play (reminiscent of what Ahlberg (1994) describes concerning the Kikuyu) among Hausa Muslims has come to be regarded as unislamic.

Sexuality and the political economy

Economic and political processes clearly have their effect on sexuality in different locales. Changes in the economy can lead to an increased commodification of sexuality, while political realms or regimes regulate the expression of sexuality (Altman, 1999).

Foucault's (1978) stance that 'the state (or state institutions) controls individuals through the production of scientific knowledge about individual subjects who, incorporating this knowledge about themselves, perpetuate this form of power' (Renne 2000: xi) is well-noted. Renne (2000), however, postulates that the economic constraints of many SSA states have often posed a challenge for their wielding the kind of power Foucault describes (see also Vaughan, 1991). But economic power (or the lack thereof) may not be as all-encompassing a constraint in SSA as Renne would have us believe. African states have been known to control the media and, thus, the information available to citizens (Makungu, 2004). As Kipps (n.d.) notes, 'The African states' relationship with media, and particularly independent media, has always been an uneasy one.' Sexuality-related information or discourse can, thus, potentially be restricted. The 'Vagina Monologues', for instance, inspired by U.S. playwright, Eve Ensler, was banned by the media council arm of Uganda's government (Sheikh, 2005). The play is said to celebrate women's sexu-

ality, examining the joys and pitfalls of the latter. The Ugandan government's resistance to having it performed lay in the play's

'glorifying what [the government] describes as unnatural sex – masturbation, lesbianism and homosexuality' (*ibid.*).

This issue is reminiscent of Gatter's (2001) work on global theories and sexuality. Drawing on Altman's (1999) political economy perspective, he underscores globalization's influence on economic, political, and cultural factors, and, consequently, on contemporary sexualities. In Altman's words:

[I]t is clear that globalization impacts on sexuality in all three ways. Economic changes mean that sexuality is increasingly commodified, whether through advertising or prostitution ... Cultural changes mean that certain ideas about behaviour and identity are widely dispersed, so that new ways of understanding oneself became available that often conflict bitterly with traditional mores ... And the political realm will determine what forms are available for sexual expression, so that there is a far more overt 'gay' world in Manila than in Singapore, despite the considerable gap in wealth, in part because of different political regimes (*ibid.*, p. 563).

Like Altman, the Tanzania Gender Networking Programme (TNGP) also takes a political economy stance on sexuality and its discontents – specifically, the reproductive health concern of HIV/AIDS in the African region. While the norm has been to address HIV/AIDS in Africa as a problem solely related to individual sexual practices ('promiscuous sex with many partners, sex with someone already infected, sex without the use of a condom' (TGNP 2004: 1)), TGNP's (2004) work draws our attention to the linkages between a glaring lack of basic resources (brought on by imperial and global capitalist structures) and the rapid spread of the disease. In the light of these often-ignored realities, the conceptual framings that shape the conventional, exclusive focus on sexual behavior change as the solution to the AIDS pandemic become overly simplistic at best.

Sexuality and the legal system

The legal system's impact upon sexuality in SSA cannot be overlooked. Like the political sphere, the legal domain plays a significant role in shaping the sexuality of men and women. In her reconstruction of the history of Kenya's short-lived Affiliation Act, for instance, Thomas (2000) examines how struggles over sexuality and fertility in postcolonial Kenya, were actually reflected contests over changing gender and generational relations, as well as over material concerns. Passed in 1959, the Affiliation Act was a law that sought to address the issue of illegitimacy by guaranteeing the right of single women to paternity support.

As single mothers in Kenya (some, along with their families) began to benefit from this law, the elimination of the Act became the goal of many men, who were obligated to pay high financial costs for the upkeep of their children born out of wedlock. By employing a rhetorical strategy pitting the 'traditional' against the 'modern' and the 'customary' against the 'civil,' politicians, officials, and citizens alike, preserved men's privileged legal position, to the disempowerment of women via the law. By 1969, Kenya's Affiliation Act was finally repealed.

Since 1999, there have been efforts in some Nigerian states to extend Islamic (or 'Sharia') laws beyond their conventional boundaries of family and personal status law. This reform has had grim legal implications for Nigerian women. Where extra-marital pregnancy is concerned, for instance, some schools of Muslim thought see this state as an adequate confirmation of adultery. Thus, according to Imam (in HRD, 2003),

[W]omen are being held to a different standard of evidence in having to prove their innocence instead of the state proving their guilt. In defense of this patent unfairness, Islamist conservatives have tried to argue that stoning to death for adultery is divine punishment. That's not true: the Qur'an does not mention stoning for adultery. Indeed, the Qur'an has a verse that refers to adulterous women and men marrying each other—clearly impossible if they were dead!

The plight of Amina Lawal comes to mind here. Originally sentenced to death by stoning in Nigeria in 2002 for bearing a child out of wedlock (a recent amendment to the Sharia law), the young Muslim divorcee's fate was overturned on the technicality that she conceived before the modifi-

cation of the law. This process gives weight to Ewelukwa's (2003) argument that a myriad of avenues – including training for judges, social reform, and basic, empowering education for girls – must be pursued alongside the court system if the war of violence against African women is to be won.

The constraining of sexual expression in the SSA context is further exemplified by Tamale's (2003) treatise on homosexuality in contemporary Uganda. Like many African countries, homosexuality in the Ugandan legal sphere is a criminal offense, punishable by a maximum sentence of life imprisonment. Gay and lesbian organizations in Uganda tend to maintain a low profile for this reason. Tamale points out (*ibid.*, p. 2) that references to same-sex relations between women are noticeably absent from the Ugandan Penal Code – indicative, perhaps, of a 'dominant phallocentric culture,' but also reminiscent (and, conceivably, reflective) of Kendall's (1998) 'no penis, no sex' theory.¹⁶

'Alternative' sexualities

The term 'alternative sexualities'¹⁷ as it is used in the literature refers to the various forms of sexuality that are not strictly heterosexual. There has been much debate over the very existence of 'alternative' sexualities on the African continent (often addressed in the literature as same-sex sexuality in this context). Consequently, studies have been carried out with the aim of demonstrating that non-heterosexuality is far from a Western import (e.g.: Murray & Roscoe, 1998). Declarations to the contrary by some

¹⁶ This theory is discussed further on pg. 28 of the present paper.

¹⁷ C.O. Izugbara (personal communication, May 4, 2005) has highlighted the problematic legitimacy which the label 'alternative' grants to heteronormativity. The challenges associated with the inadequate language for talking about sexuality are brought to light by this example, and are addressed later in this paper. For the purposes of simplicity, however, we have chosen to use this prevalent term here, albeit with the inclusion of quotes for the word 'alternative' as an acknowledgement of the problems the expression evokes.

African heads of state have sparked further interest in this subject, provoking a number of studies examining the accuracy of these assertions.

Murray and Roscoe's (1998) seminal inventory of same-sex patterns in Africa concludes by contrasting these patterns with those that dominate the Western model of homosexuality, highlighting a fundamental difference:

[T]he dominant Western model of homosexuality ... defines individuals solely on the basis of sexual object choice. In Africa, however, heterosexual marriage and procreation – but not necessarily heterosexual desire, orientation, or monogamy – are universal expectations ... In contrast to the homophobia Western homosexuals confront, the social pressure on Africans who desire same-sex relations is not concerned with their masculinity or femininity, their mental health, their sexual object preference and its causes, or the moral status of their preference – but primarily with their production of children, especially eligible heirs, and the maintenance of a conventional image of married life (Murray & Roscoe, 1998, pp. 272-273).

The authors note the politically bankrupt nature of this 'African' model, which, while preventing stigmatization, simultaneously hampers the construction of homosexual identity and subculture. Yet, it is increasingly clear that in our contemporary African societies, non-heterosexuality as an identity is a fact (Tamale 2003), albeit one that many African scholars appear reticent about addressing. The reasons behind this seeming reservation may have more to do with a resistance of the imposition of Western categories and 'naming' (see, for example, Oyewumi's (2003) argument regarding the 'culture of misrepresentation,' or Ajen (1998)) than with a mere denial of reality. For instance, 'woman marriages', a non-sexual institution in African societies, have been misinterpreted and labeled lesbian relationships (see Lorde, 1983). Some interpretations of close female friendships among the Efik/Ibibio as non-heterosexuality have been refuted by African scholars (see, for example, Amadiume, 1987; Blankson Ikpe, 2004). Blankson Ikpe, a culture-bearer of the region in question makes the following observation:

[B]onding between same sex as close friends should not be confused with homosexuality or lesbianism. Douglas seemed to have made that mistake when she assessed the oral evidence collected by Lorde from an Efik-Ibibio woman as a confession to lesbianism. According to the woman: *'I had a woman friend to whom I revealed my secrets. She was very fond of keeping secrets to herself.*

We acted as husband and wife. We always moved hand in glove and my husband and hers knew about our relationship. The villagers nicknamed us twin sisters (Lorde 1984: 49-50, quoted in Douglas 1999: 99). To a European a confession of going hand in glove and acting as husband and wife is a clear indication of lesbianism. But this sort of behaviour is normal in these parts between 'bosom friends.' Although there is an expression of love it does not necessarily connote sex. Indeed if they were engaged in lesbianism, the villagers would have found another name for them instead of 'twin sisters' (Blankson Ikpe, 2004: 29-30)!

Kendall's (1998) description of what would qualify as same-sex sexuality under the Western gaze, is thoughtfully interpreted as non-sexual from the emic perspective. Her investigation takes place among Basotho women of Lesotho in southern Africa. The author describes the intimate, erotic relationships enjoyed amongst women without any illusion of these liaisons being sexual. In other words, within this Lesotho context, 'sex' in the absence of a male organ is regarded as a misnomer. It is noteworthy that these relationships do not serve as an alternative to marriage. Rather, they appear to complement the marital relationships of Basotho women. It is, perhaps, the privileging of inapplicable epistemic standpoints to the neglect of context-specific, African conceptual schemes, that provokes the silence of African scholars (Mama, 1996).

Herdt's (1987) research on same-sex behaviors among the Sambia of New Guinea, gives further insight into some of the complexities and contradictions of non-heterosexuality found in various sub-Saharan African contexts. He, in fact, deliberately neglects to employ the term 'homosexual' in his review of this ritualized same-sex behavior among the Sambia of New Guinea (Okami & Pendleton, 1994), pointing out the potential the term has for misrepresenting what actually obtains in this particular culture. During initiation ceremonies customarily performed for Sambian boys, the latter are required to fellate older men, as the ingestion of semen is considered critical for the major transition to adulthood. Rather than universalize the experience of the Sambia in this context of ritual as 'homosexuality,' or divorce it completely from Western notions of the same, Herdt defines same sex-behaviors in the Sambia context as 'the fusing of a set of desires with an emphasis on growth and socialization of the young, a practice distinct to time and place' (*ibid.*, p. 90),

leaving room for comparison of this phenomenon with other cultures, provided cognizance of the limitations of such comparisons is maintained:

Because this behavior, founded as it is on the belief that insemination is essential for the boy's sexual growth and passage into adulthood and heterosexual marriage, emphasizes symbolic or biological reproduction, use of the term 'homosexual' to describe it may distort the meaning of the term as a categorical construct. Nevertheless, ... pleasure, lewdness, and lasciviousness are also involved in this ritual (*ibid.*).

Similarly, Gatter (2000: 8) points out that

[w]hat the African examples [of same-sex sexuality] lack is an identity and lifestyle in which homosexual relationships are primary and *not* based on gender difference. In other words, the African systems do not define people solely on the basis of sexual object choice. They do, however, universally expect heterosexual marriage and procreation, though not necessarily heterosexual desire, orientation or monogamy.

Questioning the centrality of sexual orientation to African models, he concludes by suggesting the de-centering this phenomenon as an organizing concept.

Nevertheless, the debates around sexual orientation in SSA are far from over. The emergence of a distinct non-heterosexual identity in contemporary African societies cannot be ignored. Research on homosexuality in Uganda (Tamale, 2003) and Kenya (Onyango-Ouma *et al.*, 2005) suggests that self-identifying homosexuals, or men who have sex with men (MSM) are often compelled to hide behind heterosexual relationships in order to avoid discrimination. But as S. Arnfred (personal communication, May 4, 2005) proposes, marriage in the MSM context may not always necessarily be a cover-up. The possibility that some MSM may develop and maintain marital relationships because they simply want to and, perhaps, enjoy being in both kinds of relationships simultaneously should not be ignored. Nonetheless, the assertion of a non-heterosexual identity appears to be taking on increasing importance in SSA. For instance, the large majority of the MSM interviewed in Onyango-Ouma *et al.*'s (2005) study, identified themselves as either 'gay,' 'homosexual,' or

‘bisexual.’ Whether the increasing importance of identity is due to external influences, as Gatter (2000) suggests,¹⁸ remains debatable. Homosexuals in Tamale’s (2003) study, many of whom are described as having minimal exposure to external influences, are also described as proud of their ‘straight *kuchu*’ identity, and as regarding bisexuals as ‘sell-outs’ of sorts.

Interestingly, Kendall suggests that the lack of a distinct identity – and, indeed, of a distinct homosexual category – serves as a protective factor for Basotho women’s same-sex relationships. Since lesbianism is not a social construct in the Basotho society, ‘it’ is neither pathologized, nor stigmatized. Says she:

The freedom, enjoyment, and mutual respect of Basotho women’s ways of loving each other, occurring in a context in which what women do together is not defined as ‘sexual,’ suggests a need to look freshly at the way Western constructions of sexuality and of homophobia are used to limit and oppress women. Having a (sexualized) ‘lesbian option’ may not be as liberating as many of us have thought (Kendall, 1998: 241).

Sexuality and language

Clearly, the issue of language is one that needs to be taken into account in investigations of sexuality. Manderson goes so far as to assert that ‘sexu-

¹⁸ According to Gatter (2001: 6), ‘Sexuality became a theme within globalization theory largely because of AIDS. Here was an epidemic of global proportions which linked infection (largely) with sexual behaviour. Many of the influential early campaigns for prevention and care, in the West, developed via community based groups often premised on shared

sexual identification (the epidemic was first noticed in gay men in San Francisco and New York - subsequent AIDS services and activism in America and Europe have retained large contributions by gay men and lesbians). Experience from the West has been taken up in sexual health campaigning elsewhere in the world, whether under the aegis of governments or donor AID programmes. Members of Western sexual minorities have been involved in these campaigns in non-Western countries. They have taken with them their own concerns and identities, which some analysts

now clearly see as contributing to the process of globalizing identities.’

ality is primarily a linguistic problem' (in Okami & Pendleton, 1994: 88). This contention finds echoes in Leclerc-Madlala's reflexive discussion regarding the limited linguistic repertoire for engaging sexuality in SSA. As she puts it:

'[W]e are greatly hampered by limited and inappropriate vocabulary that is the product of Victorian-era sexology' (Leclerc-Madlala 2004: 6).

While Manderson points to the importance of factoring the question of 'who' employs certain lexical items and 'how' they do so into our assessment of the meaning and effects of these items, Leclerc-Madlala calls specifically for African-centered conceptual frames to enhance our understanding of sexuality in SSA, as well as to ensure that we remain culturally sensitive.

Furthermore, while the literature gives an indication of how 'Others' label or 'name' sex and sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa, far less attention has been given to how Africans themselves talk about these issues. Moto (2004) does suggest that the Malawian society relies on indirect expressions, euphemisms, and idioms to talk about sex and HIV/AIDS. Regarding male and female genitalia specifically, Machera's (2004) findings in the urban Kenyan context are similar (see also Diallo (2004), for the Malian case). Her findings actually go further to suggest that while feelings of 'shame' are associated with verbal references to the vagina, this is much less so when the penis is discussed. The need for positive discourses around on women's sexual desire, who were noted to have rarely expressed their desire for, or enjoyment of, sexuality, is underscored by Shefer & Foster's (2001) South African-based study. Prazak (2000) notes connections between older men's notions of masculinity in rural Kenya's Kuria District and the view that sex should simply not be discussed. A clearer sense of what these findings really mean, in the diverse societies of SSA, is needed.

Conclusions

Gatter (2000: 7) calls our attention to the gap that arises in our understanding of sexuality as a result of having either ‘rather unanchored theoretical accounts [of sexuality]’ or ‘detailed [ethnographic] description which isn’t really theorized.’ Although his ensuing argument centers specifically on globalization and sexuality, we find it useful for our purposes here. According to Gatter (*ibid.*, p. 9), ‘Theories which assume homogenization ... are not borne out by empirical observation.’ Based on our review, we come to the same conclusion regarding theories of sexuality in sub-Saharan Africa. We nonetheless acknowledge (and, indeed, underscore) the critical need to enhance (rather than ‘move beyond’) theory and the accumulation of ethnographic accounts with action and concerted efforts to address the perpetual improvement of sexuality-related well-being in SSA. In our deconstruction of various sexuality concepts, it is critical not to ignore or oversimplify real, concrete problems pertinent to the sub-Saharan African region. We conclude this review by highlighting this important point. Issues such as gender-based violence (notably an under-researched area (Erulkar, 2004)), women’s disadvantaged economic position, and reproductive health concerns are very real in different SSA contexts. Resistance to essentializing views should not constitute an impediment to rigorous research into these areas. A major criticism of the social constructionism and its variants is, in fact, their often politically bankrupt response to critical issues (Weedon, 1999).

That young women in SSA are especially vulnerable to HIV infection seems clear (Jungar & Oinas, 2004). That there are manifestations of gender-based violence in the region is apparent (an entire issue of *Sexuality in Africa Magazine* was recently (2004) devoted to this issue; see also Tamale, 1992; Amoakohene, 2004). That strong male involvement in sexual and reproductive health matters would benefit both men and women is logical. Balancing these facts against the more positive realities of sexuality, which are equally a part of the SSA experience, is our challenge.

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Philosophy and Figures of the African Female

by Sanya Osha

Abstract. Philosophy and Figures of the African Female. In this study, the aim is (a) to trace the figure of woman within the specificity of African forms of discourse and to examine how she has been articulated and disarticulated and the ways through which she has reacted to these external mechanisms of power in both textual and existential terms; (b) to interrogate the contours of African feminist discourse in relation to patriarchal culture on the one hand, and forms of Western feminist theory on the other; (c) to give an indication of how terms such as sexuality, gender and the body can be rethought in the light of contemporary feminist theory and practice; (d) to indicate a new direction for African philosophy from the advances made by feminist discourse in general.

key words: Africa, feminism, sexuality, conceptualisation, socio-cultural institutions

Alienating Discourse and Alienated Beings¹

The birth of the mode of discourse known as African philosophy is quite an interesting one. A version of this species of discourse has its origins in a mix of racism and a specific form of its counter-discourse which is termed decolonization.² Western philosophy is a product of a civilization

¹ **Acknowledgement:** This essay was conceived and written during my tenure as a guest of the Five College African Scholars Program, Massachusetts, USA in the fall of 2003. I thank the organisers of the program for granting me this important opportunity. It was also presented at the Wits Institute for Social and Economic Research (WISER) hosted international conference on 'Sex and Secrecy' in Johannesburg in June, 2003. I thank Deborah Posel, Achille Mbembe and Graeme Reid for facilitating my participation at the conference.

² Kwasi Wiredu terms it conceptual decolonization (see his *Cultural Universals and*

and a disciplinary quest that is almost three thousand years old. And in the course of this long cultural and disciplinary development *textual inscription* has been a crucial factor. African philosophy, on the other hand, has no such history unless the arguments and conclusions of *Afrocentricism* are accepted in totality. But given the problematic ruptures and discontinuities between contemporary African realities and the undoubtedly impressive cultural and intellectual achievements of ancient Egypt it is difficult to sustain a continuous conceptual relationship between the two disparate contexts. However, for the sake of argument and for a manageable discursive structure let us begin the quest for the origins of African philosophy with its encounter with post-Enlightenment modernity which in the case of Africa and much of the third world entails the realities and the histories of the following events: slavery, apartheid, colonization and decolonization. It is from this painful existential matrix that one locates the birth of African philosophy in its *modern* and its contemporary formation.

Unquestionably, the birth of African philosophy was wrought from highly political circumstances which have continued to have profound implications. The first tendency within the discipline had to confront the need for liberation and as such was based on a discourse that emerged from polemic and overt political rhetoric. The second tendency strived for the discursive detachment and *theoreticism* of Western academic philosophy.³ The third tendency emerged from the sustained critique of ethnophilosophy. For our purposes, such are the circumstances from which African philosophy in its contemporary formation evolved. However, the origins of African philosophy are not our primary concern. Rather, in this study, the aim is

Particulars: An African Perspective, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), Anthony Kwame Appiah calls it ideological decolonization (see his *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

³ See Kwasi Wiredu, *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy: Four Essays* by Kwasi Wiredu Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1995. For an even more sustained account of this discursive history see also his *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996.

1. to trace the figure of woman within the specificity of African forms of discourse and to examine how she has been articulated and disarticulated and the ways through which she has reacted to these external mechanisms of power in both textual and existential terms;
2. to interrogate the contours of African feminist discourse in relation to patriarchal culture on the one hand, and forms of Western feminist theory on the other;
3. to give an indication of how terms such as sexuality, gender and the body can be rethought in the light of contemporary feminist theory and practice;
4. to indicate a new direction for African philosophy from the advances made by feminist discourse in general.

At this juncture, it can be claimed that modern African philosophy is a product of a patriarchal culture and hence a sexist one. To affirm that colonial and postcolonial African societies are sexist might not be saying very much. Perhaps it might be more appropriate to say that African philosophy inherited a heavy load of sexism in its encounter with Western philosophy. So the female African subject has to contend with layers of subjugation; first, at the stark existential level and second, at the metadiscursive level. Of course, other layers of oppression exist and are to be found in various ramifications.

It is perhaps not too much to claim that African philosophy had to undergo an abortion before its painful eventual birth. A series of paralyzing questions dogged the birth of the discipline; 'What is African philosophy? 'Does it exist?' 'What ought to be its foundational methodology?' etc. Rather than *doing* philosophy, these rather paralyzing questions and forays into unproductive ontology prevailed in the initial attempts to define the parameters of the discipline. Paulin Hountondji's view that 'philosophy is not a system but a history, essentially an open process, a restless, unfinished quest, not closed knowledge'⁴ did not ap-

⁴ Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Bloomington and

pear to have helped matters. Thus *the fear of birth* was an abiding problematic in the construction of African philosophy. Freudian and Lacanian readings of this fear of the symbolic, of the Law are most certainly instructive here⁵. The entry into the pantheon of White Male philosophical gods was not so smooth for the fathers of African philosophy. Instead of acquiring the much-valued 'secret' knowledge of the White Male Father the African philosopher emitted-at least at first-a wail of resistance. In other words, his adoption of the canon of an alienated literature was marked by violence and trauma. And his adoption of an alienating discourse signified the beginning of his production of a *discourse of alienation*.⁶ Indeed the literature on the birth of African philosophy is vast and quite remarkable.⁷ Furthermore, it can be argued that due to the *crises of delivery* that marred the progress of African philosophical discourse from

Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 71.

⁵ Judith Butler's psychoanalytical explanations of gender and subjectivities in general in her text, *The Psychic Life Of Power*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997 are undoubtedly useful.

⁶ Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, 1996. Also, the Heideggerian notion of alienation is somewhat applicable here. So it is possible to think in terms of 'temptation' and 'contentment' as states that would eventually lead to alienation, a notion Heidegger himself borrowed from Soren Kierkegaard. For more details, see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. Joan Stambaugh, New York: State University Press, 1996.

⁷ Apart from Hountondji's *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, see also, P.O. Bodunrin 'The Question of African Philosophy,' in R. A. Wright, ed., *African Philosophy: An Introduction* 3d ed. Lanham: University Press of America, 1984; Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997; D.A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994; V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984; see also his *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994; Oyekan Owomoyela, 'African and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Skeptical Reconsideration'. *African Studies Review* 30, 1; Olabiyi Yai, 'Theory and Practice in African Philosophy: The Poverty of Speculative Philosophy' *Second Order* 2, 2. 1977. Although these texts and articles on the nature and foundations of African philosophy are by no means exhaustive, they give an idea of the range of the spirited debates that have attended its gestation.

the very beginning, its true emancipatory potential has always been limited. African philosophy was produced within the context of an alienating canon and from that *structural dislocation*, from that unassimilated locus it went on to produce, in some respects, an alienated literature⁸.

Speech and *inscription* in whatever form were an overriding quest of African philosophy, the laborious quest to articulate *presence* in the infinite void of nothingness. The humiliating experiences of slavery, colonization and imperialism had eroded the self-worth of the African subject. And so the articulation of *presence* through philosophical discourse/speech (no matter how rudimentary) was a way of reclaiming a lost humanity. Also, it was a way of initiating a conversation with modernity. In constructing this rudimentary mode of discourse/speech the African philosopher could only grapple with a limited set of discursive concerns most of which were derived from the Western canon. Sex, gender and sexuality were the least of his concerns. From a dehumanizing existential and epistemic void, he had to construct a modern mode of subjecthood, he had to undertake a process of autogenesis after which all other things could follow. Thus the creation of a philosophical practice was also an effort at self-invention, the creation of masculine self straining against an abyss of nothingness. Thus, a certain impatience has marked the evolution of African philosophical discourse. V.Y. Mudimbe strongly suggests that patience is a cardinal virtue of a valid philosophical practice.⁹

⁸ Henry Louis Gates Jr., has produced a large body of work contesting the assumed primacy and universality of the Western canon. See for instance, his *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the 'Racial Self'* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, see also his *Loose Canons*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. Indeed a large part of his intellectual exertions has been to unearth and create a literary and theoretical canon that is more representative of the African-American experience. His latest academic effort, *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, New York: Warner, 2002 by Hannah Crafts [edited by Gates] falls within the tradition of his established academic pattern.

⁹ Consult his *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988.

This strain and this impatience are not as prominent in the Indian philosophical tradition for instance. Nagarjuna's seemingly unending appeal within the context of Western philosophy speaks volumes.¹⁰ Also, Buddhist thought and brahmanical intellectualism has a history that spans 2500 years. African philosophical discourse on the other hand had to (re)discover its being within the ethos of modernity (and its numerous concepts and discourses) amid often violent processes of reterritorialization and deterritorialization that are redrawing the geographical space of contemporary Africa.

Bodies of writing and the uses of ambiguity

*...it is not an oeuvre but a desoeuvre.*¹¹

The notion of alienation at the beginning of African philosophical writing, in fact, at the beginning of any kind of writing that attempts to transcend the masculinist/dominant canon/text, is quite important to the future of that writing/text. This is because through it we can trace the system(s) of exclusions, continuities and ruptures within a given text. This notion of alienation which is also connected with the ordeal of birth provides a crucial point of departure for understanding an abiding problematic of African philosophy. How does the text or philosophical utterance find its historical/contextual moorings without a body of preceding texts, without a preexisting Library? This engrossing problematic confronted a particular African philosopher, Anton-Wilhelm Amo, who lived and worked in eighteenth century Europe, Germany, to be precise. Anton-Wilhelm Amo who originally came from the Gold Coast wrote most of

¹⁰ Richard P. Hayes, 'Nagarjuna's Appeal', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 22, 1994. See also, Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

¹¹ Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, 'Introduction' *The Bataille Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd. p. 4.

his works in Latin. Some of these works include: *Dissertatio inauguralis de jure Maurorum in Europa* (The Rights of Africans Living in Europe), 1729; *Dissertatio de humanae mentis apatheia* (On the Impassitivity of the Human Mind), 1734; and *Tractatus de arte sobrie et accurate philosophandi* (On the Art of Philosophizing with Sobriety and Accuracy), 1738.

These various philosophical texts were produced within the context of the European academy and obviously for a Western audience. Paulin Hountondji comments on the status of the texts, ‘what does this work contain that can be called African? Disappointingly though it may be, the answer must be: nothing.’¹² He makes the suggestion that African philosophers ought to be capable ‘of freely seizing the whole existing philosophical and scientific heritage, assimilating and mastering it in order to transcend it.’¹³ This is necessary in order to avoid what he terms ‘intellectual asphyxia’. Hountondji’s commentary isolates two complementary and yet separate futures for the African philosophical text. First, it ought to strive to be ‘African’. Second, it ought to be free to avail itself of universal scientific and philosophical traditions. As for the second injunction, Amo obviously meets all the necessary criteria and for the first, his text, *Dissertatio inauguralis de jure Maurorum in Europa*, in a way, is concerned with an African issue. It is an attempt to formulate a discourse to deal with a transcontinental/transnational dimension of African identities of the time. It clearly has an Africa-centered problematic as its focus. In this sense, we are left with the problem of degree or scale.

Nonetheless, Amo in spite of his mastery of Western philosophical traditions experienced a profound sense of alienation within that canon. He eventually returned to the Gold Coast where he died as a hermit. Also worthy of note is the fact that his pioneering work could not have been appreciated in his colonized milieu in the Gold Coast for the reason that an enabling discursive context had not been created. Thus, his experience of alienation was multiple, to be precise, it had three major dimensions.

¹² Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, p. 128.

¹³ Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, p. 129.

First, he encountered alienation within the Western philosophical canon; second, within the existential context of Germany itself and finally within the transitory colonial space of the Gold Coast. Amo's life and work inaugurated the problematic of alienation that would attend the birth of African philosophy. In embracing the *logos* of the Western philosophical text as an essential gesture of birth, that is, in learning an alien mode of philosophical utterance, Amo received the *embrace of death*. The quest of African philosophy in its contemporary formulation has been to break away from this embrace of death and fear of birth in order to discover its true Father. However, it can be argued that African philosophy never discovered its true Father. Instead, it has to make do with a simulacrum of the real thing. It has had to create a concatenation of images, of false fathers, as it were, in order to lay claims to an origin. In a sense, the African philosophical text is still saddled with a problematic that the feminist text (with its espousal of play – *le jeu* – and *polysemy*) has been able to transcend. Perhaps a clarification regarding the African philosophical text is required. In availing itself of a multiplicity of false fathers and a series of simulated births, the African philosophical text has a semblance of authenticity. But what essentially conjoins the 'feminine text' and the African philosophical text is a problematic which can be termed the *crises of delivery*. That is, the problem of creating authentic speech / discourse from within the embrace of death, before the false figure of a tyrannical Father. In my view, the feminine text has been able to overcome this problematic admirably. And the history by which it accomplishes this is quite interesting.

In Heideggerian terms the key to authentic thinking lies at the root of language. In his view, the German language is closest to the spirit of the European civilization because it is the least corrupted of European languages and because it has the most unfettered access to the Greek ethos. But the point is, in order to create a genuine mode of signification, a self-sufficient text as it were, the origins from which the text in question evolves must be taken into account. The feminist text recognizes this crucial problematic and has been able to transcend it.

The patriarchal text has a number of immediately recognizable attributes. In other words, its preoccupations include 'representation, the unitary subject, stable meaning, linear narrative, paternal authority, Truth with a capital T.'¹⁴ Indeed it is arguable that the African philosophical text inherited most of these attributes from the Western Library without a sufficient series of problematizations regarding their ultimate usefulness and thus the essentially masculinist feature of its epistemic foundations. To be sure, there are moments within the history of the Western canon when elements that genuinely seek to undermine its sexist or its hegemonic basis are tolerated and accommodated. Movements in Western art such as Expressionism, Dadaism, Constructivism, New Objectivism and Brechtian realism may be said to fall into this category. The Western text has movements/moments that entertain ingredients that have a lot to do with 'heterogeneity, play, marginality, transgression, the unconscious, eroticism, excess.'¹⁵ These are quite interesting moments in which the emancipatory potential of the Western Text gets to be more boldly explored. We must not, however, be deceived for long by these ruptures within the text. This is because 'like modern capitalism, modern patriarchy has a way of assimilating any number of potentially subversive gestures into the mainstream, where whatever potentially subversive energy they may have possessed becomes neutralized.'¹⁶ However, the main point is that there are moments/movements of which this could be said:

The hallmark of these movements was a collective project [more or less explicitly defined and often shifting over time] that linked artistic experimentation and a critique of outmoded artistic practices with an ideological critique of bourgeois thought and a desire for social change, so that the activity of writing could also be seen as a genuine intervention in the social, cultural, and the

¹⁴ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990. p. 13.

¹⁵ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 13.

¹⁶ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 123.

political arena.¹⁷

Given these transgressive cultural conditions it was now up to the feminine text to discover a language that was in agreement with its ideological objectives and its being. There are indeed similarities between the histories of the feminist movement and African struggles against colonial domination. Essentially, these two historical trajectories (in which body and mind were forcefully appropriated) are often entangled with violent processes of *naming, breaking and sculpting, building (bauen)* as effected by White Male Reason. In the same vein, we ought to note as well, that ‘woman has been the name of the hole that threatens the constructions of reason, the dark continent that threatens the regions of light.’¹⁸ Similarly, Western academic discourse denigrated the colonial African subject employing more or less the same classificatory parameters. Africa was associated with ‘darkness’, ‘the dark continent’ filled with ‘dim minds.’¹⁹ By this singular classificatory grid, the white female and the African subject are united under the burden of White Male oppression and in speaking against that singular oppression they are saddled with a language that remains in itself problematic since it carries within its history and modes of circulation instruments for marginalization and exclusion.

Even within the annals of a largely phallogentric Western philosophical tradition, the question of language remains vital. At moments of exhaustion, original Western thinkers have frequently turned to the being of language and the question of being not only to generate new philosophical questions but also as a means discovering a new philosophical

¹⁷ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 13.

¹⁸ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 14.

¹⁹ See, J. L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, Vol. 1, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991 and *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*, Vol. 2, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997 for a wide-ranging account of how colonialism was not only a potent force of aggression but also widespread change and transformation.

course. For Heidegger, the concept of ‘clearing’ (*Lichtung*), is only one of his strategies for undermining Western metaphysics and reconstructing the entire problematic of Western philosophical discourse. Indeed, his quest for the nature of being took him to diverse fields of knowledge – Pre-Socratic thought (Thales, Anaximenes and Anaximander), Eastern thought (Buddhism and Taoism) and literature (Homer, Sophocles, Dante, Virgil, Shakespeare, Goethe, Rainer Maria Rilke and Stefan George). Philosophy had to recover, discover, unveil new gods in order to attend to the question of being.²⁰

Feminist theory realized this important conceptual need, the vital connections between language, identity, authenticity and freedom. For the female theorist, ‘in order to innovate, she has to invent her own position as subject and elaborate her own set of images – different from the image of the exposed female body’.²¹ To be sure, some male theorists were useful in this project. For instance, Roland Barthes conceptualizes the distinction between the readable and unreadable (*lisible/illisible*) text.²² Thus, ‘the readable is serious, fixed, closed, structured, constrained, authoritarian, and unitary; the writable is playful, fluid, open, triumphantly plural, and in its plurality impervious to the repressive rule of structure, grammar, or logic.’²³ Needless to add, the writable is representative of the feminine text. The eroticization of the text and metaphor entailed what has been termed a ‘*disfiguration of language*’. Indeed, it has been noted that the ‘homology between the modern text and the woman’s body was one of the bases on which French feminist theorists in the 1970s, notably

²⁰ See Martin Heidegger, *Existence and Being*, London: Vision Press, 1949 and also his *On the Way to Language*, New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

²¹ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 26.

²² See his *The Pleasures of the Text*, tr. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.

²³ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 37. See Also Roland Barthes, *The Pleasures of the Text*.

Luce Irigaray, elaborated their notion of *écriture féminine*'.²⁴ Also, while the male text is 'unitary, phallic, teleologically moving toward a single meaning, a single story, the feminine text, by contrast, was synonymous with the plural, the erotic, the experimental, the new'.²⁵ In addition to all these ingredients, the feminine text availed itself of elements pertaining to *bricolage*, *jouissance* and *glissement* and all these tools of transgression paved the way for autonomy.

And how has the African philosophical text fared? Arguably, there has not been a vigorous interrogation of the limits of transgressivity or liminality. The reign of the symbolic, the Law of the Father is mostly evident and mostly unquestioned. To leave the discursive foundations of African philosophy unquestioned is to shy away from the responsibility of its creation and the demands of philosophizing thereby legitimating paradigms whose histories are mostly hidden from us. Indeed, as Derrida argues, 'the transgression of rules of discourse implies the transgression of law in general, since discourse exists only positing the norm and value of meaning, and meaning in turn is the founding element of legality.'²⁶ Major African philosophical texts (especially from the anglophonic divide) in spite of the tendency to Africanize philosophical topics merely reinscribe the inherited hegemonies of Western textuality that the feminine text has done a lot to contest and undermine.²⁷ However, V. Y.

²⁴ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 39.

²⁵ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 40. For other theorizations see in particular, *The Helen Cixous Reader*, ed. Susan Sellers, London and New York: Routledge, 1994; *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997; and Toril Moi *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, London and New York: Routledge, 1985.

²⁶ Cited by Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, pp. 74-75.

²⁷ See for instance Kwame Gyekye's *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997 and Kwasi Wiredu's *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996 which are much influenced by the analytic tradition and which indicate virtually no concern for

Mudimbe's texts sometimes espouse quite remarkable elements of transgressivity. Let us now attempt to Mudimbe read in a way he is usually not read.

Mudimbe has consistently focused on the constitution of the African subject by dominant Eurocentric discourses of which anthropology remains a prime example, in other words, on traces of the African subject as articulated by secondary discourses which are essentially products of power.²⁸ Though his preoccupation with discourses of power in relation to the idea of Africa has been an overriding concern and is decidedly marked by a discourse of mastery, an equally consistent and at the same time paradoxical tendency toward rupture, discontinuity and transgression complicates (in a favorable sense) the nature of his texts and the ways by which they might be read. His texts not only depict multivalent portrayals of African subjectivities but also address the multiplicity of secondary discourses that mark these subjectivities. By employing elements that are akin to *bricolage*, *jouissance* and *glissement*, Mudimbe's enterprise at that level resembles the projects of Western avant-garde movements that strike out at bourgeois culture. Indeed, the hallmarks of heterogeneity, transgression and excess are often evident in his texts. And yet of his major texts, *The Invention of Africa* seems most unrepresentative of those values. In his words, the text attempts 'a sort of archaeology of African *gnosis* as a system of knowledge in which major philosophical questions recently have arisen: first, concerning the form, the content, and the style of 'Africanizing' knowledge; second, concerning the status of systems of

Heidegger's important critique of it. This observation regarding Gyekye and Wiredu also applies to D.A. Masolo's *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994.

²⁸ This discussion of Mudimbe does not focus on his text, *Tales of Faith* (1997) for two main reasons; it does not deal with issues of gender and African subjectivities as comprehensively as the other texts and secondly, it has been convincingly argued that it is a less fully realized work. See van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2005, '“An incomprehensible miracle” – Central African clerical intellectualism versus African historic religion: A close reading of Valentin Mudimbe's *Tales of Faith*', in: Kai Kresse, ed., *Reading Mudimbe*, special issue of the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 17, 1, June 2005: 11-65; also at: http://www.shikanda.net/african_religion/mudil0.htm.

thought and their possible relation to the normative genre of knowledge.²⁹ All the elements that give his other major texts their distinctive character are not granted unfettered reign here. What he does instead is to keep in sharp focus the construction, deconstruction and marginalization of the African subject within context of a vast discursive anthropological structure. Within that oppressive structure the African subject had not acquired the distinction of gender as the very question of her humanity had not yet been resolved. Also lacking is the power of agency since the articulation of subjectivity was not conducted at the primary level but at the secondary level; the discursive. In short, the text is an excursion into the Western anthropological library to discover and also recover the archaeological remains of the African subject. It is not primarily concerned (even though it deals with it) with the birth of speech in the African consciousness but the corpse of the African subject in the *morgue* of the Western anthropological library. It is about immense rites of death in equally immense catacombs. But even the dark solemnity of these preoccupations somewhat indicate the eventual directions of Mudimbe's larger project. The quest after lost and hidden mysteries may be construed as the furtive strike of darkness against the light of enlightenment reason, and also as feline, feminine sorties from a lost underground. Even with the absence of urgent living speech, *The Invention of Africa* reveals its ultimate discomfort with an unproblematized patriarchal culture and its sympathies for the rites of the dead, the dark and the feminine where dirges are orchestrated as lifeless symphonies.

Mudimbe's *Parables and Fables*, in a way, is a more evolved and also a more transgressive text even though it may not be as widely read as the previous book. Furthermore, in strictly discursive terms, it definitely covers more ground in terms of attempting to recuperate living forms of African speech and textuality. Here, employing mythological narratives, the text, gender and the body are problematized at loci where they become instruments of creation, agents of catharsis and also spaces of disso-

²⁹ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988, p. x.

lution. As heterogeneity and excess demand, the text keeps redefining the boundaries of its own limits which include; a rigorous contemplation of the aims, legitimacies and deceptions of anthropology; the status of deterritorialized, external academic discourse on the condition of the Other (and other intimations of heterology); a metaphilosophical critique of African philosophy; and a sustained poetics on gender and the body; and finally, an extended meditation on Marxist anthropology. Mudimbe accomplishes this and more within the space of a single text. In describing his existential and academic trajectory he writes, 'my experience would define itself somewhere between the practice of philosophy with its possible intercultural applications and the sociocultural and intersubjective space which made me possible'.³⁰ However, the essential transgressivity of the text and its disciplinary hybridity are announced unambiguously; 'What does this have to do with Africa? All or nothing. Or, to refer to my *Invention of Africa* (1988), it relates to the fact that *poiesis* is, generally, *mimesis*; and, specifically, to the tension between I and the other, the same and its negation, which belongs to metaphysics. In fact, in this book, one can read my own passion and doubts about such concepts as identity, sameness and otherness'.³¹ Consequently, the strictures of linearity and systematization are not a feature of his text and this development can be read in two distinct ways. First, by employing mimesis and poesis, he ends up disfiguring as well as displacing the authority of the patriarchal text in unexpected ways. Second, in splintering the unity of the patriarchal text, Mudimbe inaugurates a mode of silent androgyny. So in many ways, his text or rather his technology of textuality offers numerous margins of freedom that are yet to be fully explored.

One of these margins of freedom is conceptual. Mudimbe employs the most fashionable but also the most convincing methodological grids of his time; 'both Sartre and Levi- Strauss bear witness to the grandeur of

³⁰ V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991 p. 124-125.

³¹ V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. xxi.

the I thinking about itself vis- a- vis the other. And it is from the least phenomenological of existentialists, who happens to be also the most tolerant of existentialists, Simone de Beauvoir, that I draw the frame within which Sartre and Levi- Strauss can fit with their irreconcilable differences and their complementary ambiguities concerning Descartes' cogito. In the *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1980), de Beauvoir demonstrates that one's being should be grounded within freedom of choice as the means of constructing one's own existence vis- a vis the other who is always a mirror of one's own significance.³² Thus de Beauvoir is enlisted in resolving a major conceptual *aporia* which is quite novel for discourses on the African subject in relation to difference and the questions of otherness.³³ What this interesting methodological strategy does within the context of Mudimbe's discourse is to reposition the figure of woman in discursive terms, and to centralize her trace- even though the locus is still a delimiting one- in a locus where the quest for greater freedom can begin. To be sure, this disciplined pursuit of the trace, this fidelity to its mark, both invests his text with remarkable qualities (on a purely morphological level) and an almost limitless range of theoretical possibilities. Thus, in his discourse, the boundaries of the subject assume more possibilities than are often found in most texts of contemporary African critical theory. And as always, the mummified figure of the African subject within the *morgue* of Western anthropology is for him an important theoretical starting- point. At a point he focuses not only on the figure of African subject itself but the institution of her practices: 'They were part of a language (*langue*) whose arbitrariness seemed absurd and, consequently, pagan in both meanings of the word *paganus*: as marginal, someone living on the edges of 'civilization' and cut off from the culture of the cities; as someone whose beliefs, opinions, and behavior are un-

³² V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. xx.

³³ For another reading of de Beauvoir, see Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.

sound from the viewpoint of the dominant language'.³⁴ The project of colonialism (*mission civilisatrice*) sought not only to transform the consciousness of the African subject but also to upgrade (*oikodome*) the institutional basis of her sociocultural practices and in this respect, Christianity was a central instrument. For Mudimbe, the attempt to indigenize Christianity can also be read as 'a political generalization of the sign of the other'.³⁵ From this charged political and discursive site, Mudimbe also traces the origins of modern African philosophy, its various ideological orientations- ethnophilosophy for instance- and its articulations by means of geography. He concludes by stating that 'African philosophy (which is now thought, sought, defined, and affirmed by itself) is diverse and multiple'.³⁶ On the question of the multiplicity, Mudimbe may well have been speaking of his own texts since the ingredients of heterogeneity, play, excess and heterology are central to his textual practices. His texts articulate the theory and practice by which African philosophy can continually interrogate and hence redefine its own boundaries.

Just as he explores the boundaries of the subject in discourse he also traces the appearance of the body (in mythological narratives) in some of its more organic forms, that is, in the ways in which it assumes its own peculiar gift of agency even within the parameters of the text. An appearance of the body: 'The body of king incarnates the paradoxical encounter of endogamy and exogamy. It denounces itself as the symbolic locus in which nature espouses culture, the disorder of forests faces the conventional norms of a social order, the primacy of laws overflows in its own negation.'³⁷ Again, he writes, 'the ambiguous body of the king en-

³⁴ V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 11.

³⁵ V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 14.

³⁶ V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 51.

³⁷ V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 75.

compasses these two poles. One, the negative, is linked to the memory of beginnings and incestuous unions. In the royal ritual, its activity (the *bulopwe*, or the sacred blood of royalty) takes place outside the inhabited space, on the margins of the society, in 'the house of unhappiness'; it is 'a suffocating environment, without communication with the external world in the sociological sense, and without any opening in a formal sense'. The second (the *bufumu*, or political authority) and human survival.'³⁸ This passage accomplishes quite a number of things. First, it reinscribes the private/public distinction within the framework of a tribal culture and the various ways by which it can be problematized. Second, it suggests the ways in which the reality of gender mediates between these separate realms. Finally, it suggests that the mediations between private and public, nature and culture, dark and light, male and female can only be conceived in terms of flows, continuities and problematic ruptures and not by a grid of rigid dualisms. In this way, we are encouraged to think of the body in terms of a diverse range of variables that loom beyond its actual physical limits (employed as a mobile metaphor to include land and perhaps culture), that is, the ways in which it continuously reassembles itself within and beyond the limits of ideology. We are also compelled to rethink the multiple ways in which the body recuperates its organicity even under hideous conditions that ordinarily would discourage it. The body, Mudimbe's narrative suggests, is always on a perpetual quest to transcend its physical limits. This stance is essentially transgressive.

Before we examine how the figure of woman is articulated in his text, it is important to note how Mudimbe points out that the phenomenon of gender pervades the cosmological sphere. In his sub-chapter, 'Creation, History and the Sex of Beings', Mudimbe demonstrates how the elements – air, wind, water and earth - are all mediated by dynamics of gender. And this includes the forests, birds, trees, and animals. Beyond wo/man, gender exists giving the universe its myriad forms and investing the rhythms of life with its flows, transformations (*metanoia*) and its

³⁸ V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 75.

pulse. Thus, Maweja - the name of the Supreme Being- 'is simultaneously father and mother'.³⁹ What this means is that the Luba cosmological scheme is marked by an elemental hermaphroditism, an existential/cosmological condition that Mudimbe's texts are often able to draw from as signs depicting excess, heterogeneity and transgressivity. The articulation of these issues obviously creates a resonance within his discourse that we hardly find in other African philosophical texts.

Under the Luba cosmological scheme:

A female always includes a junior male side, and a male possesses in itself a discreeter female aspect. In sum, the body of Maweja's creatures is always hermaphroditic, or simultaneously male and female. Yet the male has precedence over the female by virtue of its intrinsic qualities. These are, in the tradition rendered in three categories: aggressiveness and imperiousness; fullness, toughness, and sharpness; violence and strength. The tradition opposes them to the order of the female's qualities: passivity and fecundity; roundness, hollowness, and welcoming; and mildness and beneficence.⁴⁰

Again, Mudimbe writes, 'man needs the woman in order to evolve from primitiveness to an agriculturalist culture. The woman, on the other hand, is from the outset depicted as dependent on the man, who appears as the master of a history in the making. She says to the man: Vidye sent me and told me, 'Go and give birth' summing up an essential vocation which is the very condition of human survival'.⁴¹ Finally, Mudimbe comments on the usual fate of a newly married woman which is in fact a poignant depiction of gender relations among the Luba:

She might be fourteen or fifteen years old, but with the consent of the two families, she will become automatically an adult and fully responsible for a husband, his home, his tradition, and the families hope, his children. Nobody invites her to become a subject of a possible history in the making. On the contrary, she has to promote the respectability of her original family by practicing an ordinary life which fits into a discourse of obedience. A master char-

³⁹ V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 111.

⁴⁰ V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 112.

⁴¹ V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 131.

ter is given to her as bride; it specifies and individualizes her major duties and his family and in so doing maintains the configuration of a patrilineal tradition.⁴²

Thus ends Mudimbe's discussion of the place and destiny and of woman among the Luba as revealed by constructs of mythology. Once situated within the patrilineal signifying economy she is cast as the junior partner and the discourse of cosmological hermaphroditism becomes muted if not completely silenced. As he seems to suggest, the banality of ordinary life disrupts the cosmic unity of the Supreme Being and inscribes an economy of gender based on a monologic form of binarization: male/female. *Parables and Fables* ends with an analysis of Peter Rigby's *Persistent Pastoralists: Nomadic Societies in Transition* (1985) which has very little to do with Mudimbe's previous preoccupations as some might be tempted to believe. But this incursion, in a way, sits well with the understanding of writing as an engagement with rupture and transgression. Mudimbe foregrounds a very novel issue; hermaphroditism and its reconfiguration of gender within the African context. Hermaphroditism, in this case, is a central motif in the myth of creation and the beings and organisms that are generated through it. And in tending to the trace of woman he ruptures a profound silence after which the figure of woman acquires a distinctive kind of circulatory power. This circulatory mobility submerges the subject, body and the text within a mode of signification that evolves in serial and continuous forms, in terms of eddies and flows.

The Idea of Africa, Mudimbe's other major text interrogates other borders of liminality using the techniques he had established in his two previous texts. In a sense, this text reads like a contemplation of the tracks explored by the two other texts as a means of attaining a kind of synthesis. This particular discursive trajectory includes the pursuit of the discourse of mastery on the one hand, and the celebration and accommodation of its deconstructive negative, on the other. These two divergent tendencies are part of what give Mudimbe's texts their exceedingly plural character. In the concluding segment of the text, he writes: 'To sum up

⁴² V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 139.

the essentials of the book, two things appear clear. The first is the complexity of the idea of Africa and the multiple and contradictory discursive practices it has suscitaded and which, I am afraid, are not all well and explicitly described, or even suggested, in this contribution. I would like to believe that my focus on perfectly unrepresentative texts (such as the fable on Hercules and Burton's treatise on melancholy) and on essentially theoretical issues (as in the case of cultural relativism and that of primitive art), despite its limitations, shows at least one possible way of filtering out an idea of Africa from an immense literature and complex debates.⁴³ But the initial tone of the text is far from the concluding sense of modesty. Indeed, it begins as a text consumed by a quest for mastery:

In this work, I proceed from a French translation by Blaise de Vigenere [1614] of the Greek Philostratus's *Icones* and from the Englishman Robert Burton's treatise on melancholy [1621] to a synthetic survey of the Greek contacts with the continent, to issues of relativism, to the Greek paradigm and its power, and finally to the politics of memory. I also consider the present-day reactivation of Greek texts by black scholars and discussions of 'ethnological reason,' primitivism, and colonial 'domestication.' Finally, I face a contemporary predicament: which idea of Africa does today's social science offer.⁴⁴

And then he states, '*The Idea of Africa* is both the product and the continuation of *The Invention of Africa* insofar as it asserts that there are natural features, cultural characteristics, and probably, values that contribute to the reality of Africa as a continent and its civilizations as constituting a totality different from those of, say, Asia and Europe.'⁴⁵ These various passages reveal the sympathies that influence the text; sympathies are formed by the trajectories that mark the divergent paths of both *The Invention of Africa* and *Parables and Fables*. The discursive concerns and constitution of *The Idea of Africa* are in turn shaped by these two

⁴³ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994 pp. 212-213.

⁴⁴ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. xii.

⁴⁵ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. xv.

different trajectories. In this way, the texts inaugurate varying degrees of hermaphroditism as a recurrent theme but *The Idea of Africa* exceeds the bounds of its singularity by inviting readings in relation to the two other texts and in so doing establishes a doubling of its hermaphroditism, and also a marked intensification of its celebration of excess.

In all of Mudimbe's anthropological and philosophical readings a preoccupation remains central; the figure, condition and fate of the savage, the colonized and the native. And this figure is usually exhumed by an archeological operation which involves a deep immersion in the colonial library. In *The Idea of Africa*, this excavatory mode of scholarship reaches its limits. For instance the dark Africanized figure of the Pygmie is re-presented thus;

‘the Pygmies, who are qualified as ‘children of the earth,’ that is, those who live according to the passions of the body, completely subservient to its pleasures and passions’ and who are ‘at the bottom of the human scale just before the apes.’⁴⁶

We are constantly reminded of the entrenched Western intellectual tradition that promoted

‘the theme and the insistent image of the African continent as a ‘refused place [...]: a hot piece of land on which pathetic beings live on roots, herbs, and camel's milk; a monstrous place and, therefore, [...] a place where madness and melancholia reign supreme.’⁴⁷

These intellectual and historical moorings are always for Mudimbe the essential starting-point to begin the recovery of the figure of the African subject even for an analysis of contemporary times and phenomena. Indeed the entire construction of the African subject in relation to the post-Enlightenment project of modernity has taken shape under a looming shadow, the figure of the savage;

‘The ‘savage’ [*Silvaticus*] is the one living in the bush, in the forest, indeed away from the *polis*, the *urbs*; and by extension, ‘savage’ can designate any

⁴⁶ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 4.

⁴⁷ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 9.

marginal being, foreigner, the unknown, whoever is different and who as such becomes the unthinkable, whose symbolic or real presence in the *polis*, or the *urbs* appears in itself as a cultural event.⁴⁸

But darkness connotes not only barbarity; it also has profound reverberations in the fields of gender and sexuality. Indeed: 'In Crete, young men were called *skotioi* because, by age-status, they belonged to the world of women, living 'inside' their quarters, and were thus defined as members of an 'inside' world as opposed to the 'open' world of adult citizens. The basic meaning of *skotioi* is 'dark' and the word is often found in expressions qualifying persons who are 'in the dark', living 'in secret,' in sum, 'in the margin' of the *politeia* or condition and rights of a full citizen.'⁴⁹

By focusing on the theme of sexual inversion, Mudimbe reconfigures the race/sex dynamic thereby introducing an interesting dimension and by employing references from classical scholarship he broadens the concept of darkness. The colonial body was a vulnerable site for colonial power (*mission civilisatrice*) and in this regard, it is useful to note that 'not only was colonial toponymy a radical reorganization of an ancient site and of its political makeup, but, more important, generally, it indicated the *invention* of a new site and body whose routes and movements reflected a new political economy.'⁵⁰ There is also a crippling phobia that lurks within the always problematic configuration of race and sex as expressed in the eighteenth century by a French Count, Arthur de Gobineau, summarised by Mudimbe as follows:

(a) there is a connection between the degeneration of a race and the decay of a civilization;

(b) in all mixed races, the lower race becomes dominant;

⁴⁸ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 15.

⁴⁹ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 80.

⁵⁰ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 134.

(c) the race of ‘princes’ of ‘Aryans’ is biologically in danger of extinction.’⁵¹

Mudimbe mentions the important race/sex configuration without fully developing it by exploring how it might relate to the constitution of the African subject and this an issue I intend to dwell upon during the later stages of this essay. But let us restate briefly his contributions to questions of gender (and perhaps of sexuality). Mudimbe’s texts establish an interesting tradition away from a dominant analytic tendency within the anglophonic divide of Africa which never fully interrogates the Law of the White Male Philosophical Father in ways that put the issue of gender in focus. Within this dominant anglophonic tradition, a number of its characteristics - the unitary subject, linear narrative, paternal authority, *eidos*, *arche*, *telos* and *aletheia*- often lead to the exclusion of a rigorous interrogation of topics on gender and sexuality. In fact, they are more flawed than Western texts that espouse the same characteristics since they are left uncritiqued by alternative / oppositional cultural traditions / movements. For instance, the language/consciousness relationship which was powerfully rearticulated by Heidegger and which is persuasively addressed by feminist theory and also contemporary African literature is not examined comprehensively by analytic traditions of African philosophical discourse.⁵² However, Mudimbe’s corpus signifies a break in mainstream African thought by

1. espousing an entirely different notion of, and relationship with language and textuality which rupture the authority of the phal-locentric text;

⁵¹ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 100.

⁵² For instance a recent publication, *The Third Way in African Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Kwasi Wiredu* ed. Olusegun Oladipo, Ibadan: Hope Publications Ltd., 2002, not only celebrates the work of the prominent figure of the school of logical positivism in Africa but also does not succeed in moving beyond the founding problematics of modern African philosophy. In short, new directions and issues are basically lacking in a text that claims to identify a ‘third way’ in contemporary African thought.

2. interrogating the figure of woman (most especially in *Parables and Fables* in its interrogations of Luba myths and cosmology) and how it contributes to processes of subjectivation in Africa in everyday life;
3. providing an analysis of hermaphroditism not only as a cosmological principle but by contributing to its doubling and its conceptual possibilities.
4. and finally, suggesting a historical framework by which the race/sex dynamic can be rearticulated.

These qualities endow Mudimbe's texts with a truly revolutionary aspect that is often ignored. As suggested, his text, *Parables and Fables*, not only avails itself of elements of non-linearity but also positions itself by upsetting the structure of the classic patriarchal text.

We can extend Mudimbe's analyses of the sex/race couplet even further. Several arguments demonstrate that 'the tropics provided a site for European pornographic fantasies long before conquest was on the way, with lurid descriptions of sexual license, promiscuity, gynecological aberrations, and general perversion marking the Otherness of the colonized for metropolitan consumption.'⁵³ In other words, colonized spaces in western lore, were both feminized and eroticized: 'Africa and the Americas had become what can be called a porno-tropics for the European imagination- a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears.'⁵⁴ With the colonial conquest, these fears and fantasies were explored on the land and body of the colonized. For instance, on getting to the New World, 'Vespucci and his crew simply indulged native women's desires by providing as much opportunity of copulating as they could muster.'⁵⁵ Thus

⁵³ Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, p. 43.

⁵⁴ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*, New York and London: Routledge, 1995, p. 22.

⁵⁵ Joane Nagel, *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden*

colonial domination was not just political and economic in its multiple dimensions, the political economy of sex and its management was also very crucial to the colonial quest and its functioning.

In the next section, the race/sex nexus will be explored in more detail thereby expanding the themes of blackness, feminization and femininity and heterology.

Anxious Moons: The Mesh of Race and Sex

Matriarchy (*thelukrates*) and darkness share a certain sort of metaphoricity. And so do race and sex. In the Greek *polis*, the Amazons existed away from the more dominant forms of public culture and so their mode of existence was associated with 'darkness' and 'barbarity' and this conceptual relationship can be traced to the black subject using a similar assortment of tropes. The metaphoricity between matriarchy and darkness becomes stronger when it is claimed that the Amazons originated in Africa.⁵⁶ In Africa, precolonial forms of matriarchy were said to be dominant until Judeo-Christian and Anglo-Saxon forms of marriage on the one hand, and Islamic culture on the other undermined those forms.⁵⁷ And as demonstrated by Count Arthur de Gobineau in his treatise, *Essai sur l'inegalite des races*, a profound anxiety marks the relationship between race and sex. For instance the Jewish program in the mid-twentieth century is just another horrendous reflection of this historic anxiety and phobia.⁵⁸ To return to the ancient fear that matriarchy breeds, it has been

Frontiers, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 66.

⁵⁶ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 87.

⁵⁷ See Nkiru Nzeogu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, *Hypatia* Vol. 1, [Winter 1996] for a recent exploration of the theme. See also, C. A. Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization*, [Mercer Cook trans.] Connecticut: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1974 and also his *Civilization and Barbarity: An Authentic Anthropology* [Yaa-Lengi Meema Ngemi, trans.].

⁵⁸ This anxiety and phobia continues to be reflected in a wide range of ways. For

noted that: 'The rule of women constitutes a problem. It can only exist on the margins of the Greek and Roman *politikon*, as could a city with Douloi (slaves) in power. There is well-known statement by Aristotle in his *Poetics*: 'Both a woman and a slave can also be good; but a woman is perhaps an inferior being- and a slave is utterly worthless.'⁵⁹ And the patriarchal order of the period sought to undermine matriarchy by subterfuge: 'The young men have been asked by their elders to encamp on the margins of the Amazons' area and to imitate carefully whatever the Amazons did. 'If the women pursued them, then not to fight, but to flee; and when the pursuit ceased, to come and encamp near them.' The young men have been asked to 'feminize' themselves, and the Amazons symbolize what in the *polis* is a normative 'masculinity' and here is a *thelukrates* or a women's rule and dominion.'⁶⁰ And then there is the classical coupling of sex/gender/race; 'the young men (*neotatoi*) are in a situation which is structurally similar to that of *skoitioi* (young men not yet adult, seen as still of the dark), the *azostoi* ('those who are without arms') or the *egdysmenoi* ('those who have no clothes') of Dreros.'⁶¹

Thus classical patriarchal culture devised elaborate schemes to subvert the rule of women (*thelukrates*) which it viewed as an unacceptable form of sociopolitical organization. Second, the young men enlisted to undermine the culture of matriarchy were relatively powerless within the context of the public culture of the Greek *polis*. Finally, matriarchy connoted 'darkness' and barbarity and the young men who are enlisted to

recent somewhat Afrocentric reflections of these attitudes see, Richard Poe, *Black Spark, White Fire*, C.A.: Prima Publishing, 1997. For an even more specific and more recent account, see Randall Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2003. Of course, racial phobia dates back to ancient Greece as Herodotus, *The Histories*, New York: Penguin Books, 1954 demonstrates.

⁵⁹ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 90.

⁶⁰ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 84.

⁶¹ V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. p. 84.

subvert it were equally devalued because they had not yet being initiated into the rituals of a masculine public culture. A devalued class of people was deployed to undermine a feared and devalued subculture.

This classical coupling of sex/gender/race has been carried over into contemporary times with particular virulence beginning with the enlightenment project of modernity which marked certain peoples of the globe (particularly in Africa, Asia and the Americas) as unfit for citizenship and modern existence. The denigration of the black subject became a vast, systematic project within the Western intellectual context; figures such as Kant, Hegel and Hume were indeed racists.⁶² But I would like to make some conceptual linkages at this juncture; to trace the rather interesting relationships between colonialism (and also imperialism), race, sexuality and gender and to suggest some of the ways in which they are patterned after varying social mosaics and specific historical conditions. Indeed, I would like to suggest that this triadic structure of sex/gender/race is built into powerful conceptions or narratives of socio-historical processes which only transform the complexion of those processes without disrupting their essential dynamics. In other words, as social processes become more complex so does the triadic structure which has remained in place.⁶³

The evolution of the figure of the African woman from the epistemologies of nativism and barbarity, epochs and processes of colonialism, through the enlightenment project and into processes of internal colonialism is quite remarkable. Also, this evolution can be linked to the con-

⁶² See Henry Louis Gates Jr. *Loose Canons*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992 p. 73. See also Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Writers in Politics*, Nairobi: Heinemann, 1981. Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996 has interesting accounts of how the Indian subject was refashioned through the coercive instrumentality of colonialism and modernity.

⁶³ Indeed there interesting accounts of this structure such as Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*, New York and London: Routledge, 1995 but we have to continue to refine our interpretations of this lingering structure.

struction of a global/general sexual economy. This interesting history is what I would now attempt to trace.

The figure or rather shadow of Sara Baartman⁶⁴ is a potent source to establish various kinds of conceptual relationships between the figure of the female African subject, race and sexuality for the understanding of a particular kind of sexual economy. By her figure, the feature known as *steatopygia* becomes instrumental in constructing a general economy of sexuality as Baartman's unusual physical attributes (in this sense, steatopygic) situate before the Western gaze a site upon which to formulate a series of discourses pertaining to black sexuality and to institute a binary model between the black subject and the white subject in terms of a human/animal dichotomy. Thus, it may be argued that racism and discourses on black sexuality developed jointly.⁶⁵ Similarly, imperialism gained tremendous momentum within the context of this human/animal dichotomy and hence renewed the urge to civilize a 'savage' people who were further bestialized by an unrestrained sexuality. Even when black men had gained a degree of assimilation into English society in the nineteenth century, the Eurocentric discourse that coupled race and sexuality assumed a more potent dimension as 'black men became the embodiment of the sexualized beast, which white, and particularly working-class, women could not resist. Black women, however, were more savage than the men, so bestial that their men would choose a white woman in preference to them. This was the genesis of a process that culminated in the

⁶⁴ 'Sara Bartman was a Khoisan woman, born in the Cape of present-day South Africa in the early 1790s. In 1810 she was brought to London, England, and there exhibited to the general public. The reason she was exhibited, that is, the primary object of interest to the general public was what was perceived to be the abnormal size of her buttocks'. See Yvette Abrahams, 'Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, Race and Gender in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain', Ruth Roach Pierson and Nurpur Chaudhuri eds. *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998, p. 220.

⁶⁵ Yvette Abrahams, 'Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, Race and Gender in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain', Ruth Roach Pierson and Nurpur Chaudhuri eds. *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998, p. 223.

ideal of white womanhood.’⁶⁶ More poignantly, ‘ the only alternative to the desexualized, domesticated gender role dictated for white women was to become the sexual savage made physical in the exhibition of Sara Baartman and the many ‘Venuses’ of color who succeeded her.’⁶⁷

The settler colonization that formed the basis of the American continental empire also featured the combustive tropes of race and sex and this conjuncture had a defining impact on its sexual economy. The colonizers engaged in a form of cultural mediation by dealing with ‘indigenous women whose knowledge, prestige, skills, and sexual services benefited the men.’⁶⁸ But both the social structure and the sexual economy were also constructed by class which eventually led to the social construction of gender roles. Thus:

Defined ideologically as the opposite of the ‘gentle tamer’ image of the settler woman, white prostitutes were featured as the ‘public’ woman, the ‘sexualized’ female in a sort of sexual market that valued women according to a ‘combination of race, ethnicity, education, sociability, sexual skill, and age’ and gave the greatest rewards to ‘attractive women, usually white, who dressed well, acted like ladies, and played the parts of companions as well as sexual partners.’ The majority, who lacked the most desirable attributes and who worked in shabby brothels, small cottages, or cribs, were often defined legally as something other than women, that is, as ‘lewd and dissolute female persons. As female outlaws, despite their ‘whiteness’ these women came close to occupying the discursive position occupied for ‘Black’ or ‘indigenous’ women in many colonial societies.’⁶⁹

Within this general sociosexual economy, the patriarchal mode of signification allocated the issues of domesticity and nurture to women while

⁶⁶ Yvette Abrahams, ‘Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, Race and Gender in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain’, p. 229.

⁶⁷ Yvette Abrahams, ‘Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, Race and Gender in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain’, p. 230.

⁶⁸ Dolores E. Janiewski, ‘Gendered Colonialism: The ‘Woman’ Question in Settler Society’ Ruth Roach Pierson and Nurpur Chaudhuri eds. *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998, p. 58.

⁶⁹ Dolores E. Janiewski, ‘Gendered Colonialism: The ‘Woman’ Question in Settler Society’ pp. 58-59.

men dominated the spheres of politics and the intellect. Also, 'propertyless men, African Americans of both sexes, and Native Americans were excluded from the masculine prerogatives of power and often from the 'respect' accorded white women as segregation, antimiscegenation laws, and discriminatory land-owning patterns 'institutionalized racial-sexual frontiers.'⁷⁰ In this manner, the social, racial and sexual economy was constructed in the American continental empire.

However, there are other nations and continents that experienced a similar pattern of racial/sexual economy with equally far-reaching consequences. In colonial Africa, the cruelty of the phallic economy operated beyond the bounds of all forms of constitutional rationality, in fact, it was particularly distinctive for its arbitrariness, grotesqueness and excessive violence. Indeed:

It is through the phallus that the colonizer is able to link up with the surrounding world. The lieutenant selects, among the virgin girls, the ones who have the lightest skin and the straightest nose. The interpreter orders that they be taken to the flood plain and thoroughly cleaned all over, especially beneath the *cache-sexe*. For are they not too dirty to be eaten raw? Without a phallus, the colonizer is nothing, has no fixed identity. Thanks to the phallus, the colonizer's cruelty can stand quite naked: erect. A sliver of flesh that dribbles endlessly, the colonizer's phallus can hardly hold back its spasms, even if alleging concern about tints and odors. Taut as a bow, it sniffs everywhere, uncovers itself, strikes out, grates, knocks, and moans. It never wilts until it has left its stream of milk, the ejaculation. To colonize is, then to, accomplish a sort of sparky clean act of coitus, with the characteristic feature of making pleasure and horror coincide.⁷¹

It is remarkable that the postcolonial state in Africa inherited the *violences* of the colonial regime and 'the poscolony is, par excellence, a hollow pretense, a regime of unreality (*regime du simulacra*).'⁷² But this total appropriation of the violence of the colonial structure by the post-

⁷⁰ Dolores E. Janiewski, 'Gendered Colonialism: The 'Woman' Question in Settler Society' p. 60.

⁷¹ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001 p. 175.

⁷² Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 108.

colonial state is also reflected within sexual field in which the phallic economy becomes even more lawless, mixing its forms of brutalization with strands from the precolonial world and developments from modernity.⁷³ In more precise terms: 'The male ruler's pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatized, through sexual rights over subordinates, the keeping of concubines, and so on. The unconditional subordination of women to the principle of male pleasure remains one pillar upholding the reproduction of the phallocratic system.'⁷⁴ In other words, 'pumping grease into the backsides of young girls.'⁷⁵ However, as mentioned earlier, the *violences* of the postcolony do not appropriate modern forms of rationality in any systematic manner and these account for its excessive theatricality, grotesqueness and Hobbesian brutality. In many respects, technologies of domination and abjection even in their crude forms pervade the sexual field, and are a legacy of the colonial modes of brutal subjectification.

There are other ways of exploring the race/sex dichotomy, for instance, the nation in its recent formation as a project of twentieth century modernity and within the context its supposed rationality employed a form of sexual politics that legitimated the oppression of women during the Second World War. The case of Korean women under Japanese oppression comes to mind. These women who were called 'comfort' women were forcefully conscripted by the Japanese military to provide sexual services to soldiers. In 1991, they brought a suit against the government seeking apologies and compensation for their ordeal during the war. This exploitative sexual economy was not a purely foreign affair as it was also encouraged at the domestic level as well so 'while all non-Japanese were

⁷³ The demonization of Africa in discourse has mostly certainly not abated; Paul Theroux's book, *Dark Star Safari: Over land from Cairo to Cape Town*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003 makes an attempt to outdo Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

⁷⁴ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 110.

⁷⁵ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 110.

treated as ethnic/racial inferiors, Japanese women themselves were discriminated against and sexually abused.⁷⁶ And 'today, Japanese men often go on 'sex tours' in Southeast Asian countries in order to buy sex from prostitutes. There have been reported cases of Japanese men who gone to the Philippines, impregnated the women and then simply left. In addition, there are many cases where Thai and Filipina women have been brought to Japan and forced into prostitution.'⁷⁷ Obviously, the plight of the Korean women broaches an important contemporary issue; the discourse of reparations which increasingly is framed in universalistic terms.⁷⁸

African women have had to confront all kinds of oppression as well. In both traditional and modern settings, there are formidable structures of repression in place. There is to begin with, the general demonization of the female; 'Vagabond', 'prostitute', 'wayward', 'unruly', 'indecent' and 'immoral' are just a few of the terms used to label and stigmatize women whose behavior in some way threatens other peoples expectations of the way things ought to be.'⁷⁹ So the levels of oppression are what ought to be demarcated next. The crisis of global capitalism has in some ways resulted in what has been termed the 'crisis of masculinity' which assumes quite interesting dimensions within the African conti-

⁷⁶ Sayoko Yoneda, 'Sexual and Racial Discrimination: A Historical Inquiry into the Japanese Military's 'Comfort' Women System of Enforced Prostitution,' *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998 p. 239.

⁷⁷ Sayoko Yoneda, 'Sexual and Racial Discrimination: A Historical Inquiry into the Japanese Military's 'Comfort' Women System of Enforced Prostitution,' p. 239.

⁷⁸ The discourse on reparations and related matters is getting more sophisticated in with the passage of time. See for instance, Elizabeth Spelman's book, *Repair: The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2002 where she explores the question of wo/man as *Homo reparans*.

⁷⁹ Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl A. McCurdy eds. '*Wicked' and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*, Introduction, Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001 p. 4.

ment.⁸⁰ Sheer economic necessity is changing the arrangements within the domestic space which in some cases has resulted in far greater economic power for women. For instance, in the Gambia, many women have become gardeners in order to confront harsh economic conditions. Thus, 'some men, when they are asked about their wives, they will say, 'She is no longer my wife; she has a new husband.' The phrase, 'She has gone to her husband' (*Mandika a taata a ke ya*), used by men to indicate that their wives were not at home, but working in their gardens became a shorthand expression marking women's neglect of marital responsibilities; it demonized gardeners as bad wives.'⁸¹ So in Gambia, in the semi-rural/traditional sector, women still confront serious discrimination in spite of their solid wealth gaining activities. In more traditional/colonial contexts, say colonial Asante, women were forced to marry often against their wishes to stem all kinds of moral panics, e.g. venereal disease and the shifting of the traditional bases of social and economic power.⁸² In contemporary times, the challenge of global capitalism not only transformed the character of the domestic space but also granted women far greater mobility in terms of seeking better means of survival. No where is this situation more evident than in Lesotho where labor migration severely ruptured the domestic space thereby forcing women to leave for the shanties, towns and mines of the Free State and Transvaal.⁸³ This

⁸⁰ See Jean and John L. Comaroff, 'Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming', *Public Culture* 12, no. 2, 2000.

⁸¹ Richard A. Schroeder, 'Gone to their Second Husbands': Marital Metaphors and Conjugal Contracts in the Gambia's Female Garden Sector', Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl A. McCurdy eds. *'Wicked' and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*, p. 88.

⁸² Jean Allman, 'Rounding Up Spinsters: Gender Chaos and Unmarried Women in Colonial Asante', Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl A. McCurdy eds. *'Wicked' and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*. See also Margot Lovett, 'She thinks like a Man': Marriage and [De]constructing Gender Identity in Colonial Buha, Western Tanzania' Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl A. McCurdy eds. *'Wicked' and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*, for another view of patriarchal oppression.

⁸³ David B. Coplan, 'You have left Wandering About: Basotho Women and the Culture of Mobility', Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl A. McCurdy eds. *'Wicked' and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*.

increased mobility also extended to the sexual domain and led to ‘the virtual institutionalization of not only male but also female adulterous relationships.’⁸⁴

Indeed, Africa exhibits a variety of sexist oppression which is defined by terms of geography, culture, economics, history and religion. But perhaps the most graphic and obviously the most disturbing of these are related to the stereotypes of the postcolony where one is forced to think in terms of ‘the Ministers who explore virgins on hotels beds, and the priests who turn somersaults over the ‘deep behinds’ of young girls and, while digging a ‘delicious void in their bellies, make them cry out the final ho-hi-hi.’ This not to mention the real ‘kings of the bush’- the prefects and sub-prefects, police officers and gendarmes- who have practically unlimited rights over those in their charge (*droits de cuissage*).⁸⁵ In regions of the continent plagued by war, genocide and poverty a most brutal economy of violence informs and perpetuates the phallogocentric regime which reigns with an equally brutal randomness. However, this disturbing situation must also be read against the practical and intellectual efforts of women to subvert various kinds of sexist oppression.

Gynocritical musings

As for gynocritical work, it began with the necessary task of gathering information...⁸⁶

The development of feminist thought and practice in Africa has been quite problematic and also interesting. To be sure, its history is marked by the usual antagonisms from patriarchal culture, all sorts of institutional

⁸⁴ David B. Coplan, ‘You have left Wandering About: Basotho Women and the Culture of Mobility’, Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl A. McCurdy eds. *‘Wicked’ and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*, p. 191.

⁸⁵ Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 126.

⁸⁶ Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 19.

and organizational problems and the problem (within the African feminist movement itself) of relating theory to practice. This set of problematics is the focus of this section. More specifically, how to create a vibrant feminist discourse within a context of contradictory development? In my view, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's work is symptomatic of this particular problem. The second approach relates to the problem of constructing a feminist discourse at the purely theoretical level. For this approach, a provocative essay by Nkiru Nzegwu will serve our purposes.⁸⁷

⁸⁷ There are quite a number of texts by feminists and various authors dealing the questions of female empowerment in Africa both at the practical and theoretical level and they include: Ifi Amaduime, *Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture*, London: Zed books, 1997; *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, London: Zed Books, 1987; C. O. Ogunyemi, *Wo/Man Palaver*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996; O. M. Larbi 'New Gender Perspectives for the Millennium: Challenges and Successful Models of North-South Collaboration' *West Africa Review*, vol. 2, no. 1 (August 2000) see <http://www.westafricareview.com/war/vol2.1/larbi.html>; Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Africa Women and the Fire Dance,' *West Africa Review*, vol.2 no. 1 (2000) <http://www.westafricareview.com/war/vol2.1/nzegwu1.html>.; Chasing Shadows: The Misplaced Search for Matriarchy,' *Canadian African Studies Association Journal*, (Fall 1999). Republished in *West African Review*, vol. 2, no. 1 (August 2000) <http://www.westafricareview.com/war/vol2.1/nzegwu2.html>.; 'Colonial Racism: Sweeping Out Africa with Europe's Broom,' *Philosophy and Racism*, eds., Susan Babbitt and Sue Campbell, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999; 'Transgressive Vision: Subverting the Power of Maculinity,' *Issues in Contemporary Art*, ed. Nkiru Nzegwu, Binghamton: ISSA, 1998; 'In Praise of Orishas: A Diasporic African Spirituality,' *Matriart: Contemporary Visual Art*, no. 3 (1997); 'Confronting Racism: Toward the Formation of a Female-Identified Consciousness,' *Canadian Journal for Women and the Law*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1994); L. A. Obiora, 'New Wine, Old Skin: (En)gaging Nationalism, Traditionalism & Gender Relations,' *Indiana Law Review*, 28, 3 (Symposium Issue); Oyeronke Oyewumi, 'DeConfounding Gender: Feminist Theorizing and Western Culture,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall 1997); 'Making History, Creating Gender: Some Methodological and Imperative Questions in the Writing of Yoruba Traditions,' *History in Africa*, vol. 25 (1997); *Inventing Gender: Making an African Sense of Western GenderDiscourses*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997; 'The Role of the Writing Class in Engendering Yoruba Discourse,' *International Journal and African Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1(1997); 'Inventing Gender: Questioning Gender in Pre-colonial,' *Problems in African History* ed. Robert O. Collins, New York: Marcus wiener Publishing Inc. 1993; Fatou Sow, Ayesha Iman and Amina Mama eds. *the Social Sciences*, Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997; Margaret Strobel, 'Gender, Race and Empire in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Africa and Asia' *Becoming Visible*, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Susan M. Stuard, and Merry E. Weisner, Boston: Houghton

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie states that her text is much-needed in the context of ‘African literature, women’s studies, literary studies in general, culture, politics, critical thought, social action.’⁸⁸ And in many respects, it recounts the issues involved in constructing an active women’s movement as part of the drive toward modernization in a postcolonial setting. As mentioned earlier, these issues and problems are present in entrenched phallogocentric practices and structures on the one hand, and the women’s movement itself on the other. Oftentimes, this situation creates a backlash against African feminisms. Sometimes, some African women feel they have to apologize for being feminists. For instance, what is one to make of the view, ‘I have since advocated the word ‘Stigwanism,’ instead of feminism, to bypass these concerns and to bypass the combative discourses that ensue whenever one raises the issue of feminism in Africa.’⁸⁹ The term is an acronym for *Social Transformation Including Women in Africa*. This particular effort, attempts to do many things of which two particularly stand out. First, at the intellectual level which is broader than it seems. An effort of decolonization is required which will entail

1. a rigorous questioning of the various phallogocentric regimes within the continent
2. and an equally spirited advocacy of counter-phallogocentric alternatives together with a demonstration of why they can turn out to be viable programs.

This approach is necessarily multi-faceted. Perhaps its multidimensionality vitiates its overall impact as an intellectual discourse. Of course this effort has to be made in relation to urgent practical concerns. The challenges of the African woman have been put in this manner; ‘One might

Mifflin, 1998; Aili Tripp, ‘Rethinking Difference: Comparative Perspectives from Africa’ *Signs* 25 (3) 2000. Of course this is not a totally exhaustive bibliography but hopefully it gives an idea of the issues, debates and orientation that motivate feminist discourse and practice in Africa and some of the figures central in this regard.

⁸⁸ Molara Ogundipe-Leslie *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994, p. xiv.

⁸⁹ Molara Ogundipe-Leslie *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, p. 229.

say that the African woman has six mountains on her back: one is oppression from outside (colonialism and neocolonialism?), the second is from traditional structures, feudal, slave-based, communal etc., the third is her backwardness (neo-colonialism?); the fourth is man, the fifth is her color, her race; and the sixth is herself.⁹⁰ Again this demanding multidimensionality is reflected; the conflation of theoretical matters together with the demands of praxis and the tensions that arise as a result are never completely resolved. The intellectual is required for unrelenting efforts of social activism and the activist must find a suitable intellectual frame from which to act.

Ogundipe-Leslie recognizes the key problems. But then, finding solutions for them is also a major problem. She recognizes ‘the need to ‘humanize the very language of discourse, to ‘de-masculinize’ it and find androgynous and generic terms to discuss what concerns and affects both men and women is society.’⁹¹ However, no sustained attempt to do this is demonstrated in the text. Indeed, as feminist theory and all kinds of decolonization/deconstructive projects have shown, language is an important site for the constitution of identity and also a locus of hegemonic power. The whole concept of *écriture féminine* is a bold and inventive response to this conception of language. Ogundipe-Leslie recognizes this but does not deal with it in a convincing and sustained way.

She also writes, ‘sexual orientation is certainly one area that has not been opened for research or discussion. In some countries of Africa, the death penalty awaits gay people; in others, the state does not persecute them. The experiences of sexual orientation in traditional arrangements require discovery still.’⁹² Again, she identifies a major problem

⁹⁰ Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, p. 28.

⁹¹ Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, p. 24.

⁹² Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, p. 15.

which until the present times lingers.⁹³ Ogundipe-Leslie's text identifies many problems women face in Africa but the level of conceptualization in relation to them is a different matter altogether. These problems are mentioned in a casual manner and left at that level instead of theorizing them or addressing them in a sustained way. We have noted how the issue of sexuality in Africa, although identified as crucial area of inquiry, is left largely unaddressed. Another important site of inquiry that is unexplored but mentioned is the female body. She writes 'it is not misogyny that causes African men especially, to fear women's menses, but a conceptualization of the female reproductive system and excretions and body parts as powerful and potent. Menstrual blood is believed to have the power to disrupt, interfere with, or cause to happen. Thus women's monthly blood is also considered very effective in making portions.'⁹⁴ But female bodies have to be discussed in relation to so many of the concerns of Ogundipe-Leslie's text: the patriarchal order, feminist theory and cultural practices- and they are indeed receiving all kinds of discursive attention.⁹⁵ In the final analysis, some of the important ingredients needed for a vibrant

⁹³ In fact, a recent publication, Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe eds. *Boy Wives and Female Husbands: Studies Of African Homosexualities*, New York: Palgrave, 2001 may be the first major collection devoted to African sexualities. It points out that there is still a lot to find out about female eroticism and same-sex relationships generally. Also it argues that sexuality among African females is still viewed in terms of the presence of the penis which somewhat delimits the scope of sexuality generally. See also, Signe Arnfred (ed.) *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa*, Uppsala: The Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004 and Francis Nyamnjoh, 'Fishing in Troubled Waters: *Disquettes and Thiofs* in Dakar' *Africa*, 75 (3), 2005. However, across the transatlantic divide, studies on same-sex erotic dynamics are becoming more visible and the trend is often related to significant cultural moments in the West where the counterculture was able to make an impact on mainstream culture. See for instance, Robert F. Reid- Pharr *Black Gay Man: Essays*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2001.

⁹⁴ Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, p. 214.

⁹⁵ For instance, see *Bodies out of Bound: Fatness and Transgression*, Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco eds. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001 which the trend of discursive appropriation of the body and its various manifestations and possibilities.

feminist discourse- a grounding in theory, a discourse on language and its possible reconfigurations, the boundaries of sexuality, the sites of the body and its various appropriations and finally a consistent interrogation of the relationships between theory and practice- are not utilized in a developed or in a strategic way. The text displays the various difficulties and challenges of evolving a feminist practice not only by mentioning them but also by its own very shortcomings.

Nkiru Nzegwu's essay, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*' needs to be read in a more theoretical way. Appiah's text has had a profound influence on African philosophical discourse, cultural studies and African studies generally.⁹⁶ And Nzegwu's essay can be regarded as a feminist critique of Appiah's text. She makes some general remarks about the overall intent of the book; 'one of the principal aim of the project is to articulate by means of various literary strategies a transnational, transracial *new* identity that is at home in the social and economic structures of dominance of the Western cultural and intellectual traditions.'⁹⁷ This is perhaps a fairer starting-point for a critique of what is generally a wide ranging text but instead, a matrilineal critique is directed at the book. Thus, 'the central problem of its preferred conception of family ignores the matrilineal implications of his father's Asante culture and the damaging consequences of that mode of family structure and organization for his assumed Asante culture.'⁹⁸ This point of entry serves as the basis of her critique of the text. Appiah is primarily concerned with the questions of race, transnational identity, postcolonialism, postmodernism, ideological decolonization and a number of other cultural/literary concerns. These

⁹⁶ See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

⁹⁷ Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, *Hypatia*, Vol. 11, No. 1, (Winter) 1996, p. 175.

⁹⁸ Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, 176.

are the central concerns of the text. Instead, the details of the afterword are made to be the pivot of an extensive critique of the entire text.

In other words, an epilogue serves as the basis for an extended discourse on matrilineality which was never a preoccupation in the main text. But the operation by which what can hardly be termed marginal gets centralized as a method of reading the entire text is quite intriguing.⁹⁹ Nzegwu makes several accusations regarding Appiah's text; for instance, 'the crack in his façade provides valuable clues to Appiah's less than intimate knowledge of Asante culture, of his uneasy stance to the Akan world-sense, and his determined aim to recast Asante culture in the name of 'progress'.¹⁰⁰ Again, she writes, 'epistemologically, the value of his description lies in its disclosure of Appiah's imperialist attitude toward Asante culture and his limited knowledge of Asante family dynamics.'¹⁰¹ Finally, 'I hope to expose some of Appiah's errors of misrepresentation of matrilineity and show that these derive from a conceptual bias, and an imperialist construction of knowledge of which he seems unaware.'¹⁰² In view of these misrepresentations, it is her aim to demonstrate how Appiah not only has 'a hidden agenda' but also a plan to replace Asante forms of kinship with foreign ones. On that basis, she proceeds on an extended explanation of matrilineity within the Asante context. When she finally refers to Appiah's text, it is to fault its title: 'In choosing the title *In My Father's House*, as if it were unproblematic, as if patrilineity is the norm in Akan culture, Appiah overwrites the explosive issue of patrilinealization in Asante society.'¹⁰³ Perhaps this is open to legitimate debate. But she does

⁹⁹ See p. 178 of her essay, where she writes, '... in the epilogue, the most interesting and revealing part of the book'.

¹⁰⁰ Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, p. 178.

¹⁰¹ Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, p. 178- 179.

¹⁰² Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, p. 179.

¹⁰³ Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review to of

not go on to demonstrate how this accusation works within the body of the text. However, the accusations continue: 'Playing the patrilineal card to global readers through the title had enabled Appiah to succeed.'¹⁰⁴

Nzegwu's discussion of nativism is also quite baffling. She writes; 'Appiah's disregard for Akan matrilineal ethos comes from deep-seated reservation of nativism.'¹⁰⁵ She does not quite indicate the notion of nativism she is applying and this somewhat limits the scope of her critique.¹⁰⁶ In the first page of her essay, she claims that one of the aims of Appiah's project is to fabricate 'a transnational, transracial *new Africanist* identity.' But then she writes, 'twentieth century hybridity of Africans is problematic for Appiah.'¹⁰⁷ Finally, she ends the essay by stating; 'American, European, African, African-American, and other readers of *In My Father's House* need to gain a deeper appreciation of the subtle myriad ways in which neocolonialism and neoimperialism currently thrive in Africa to supplant its traditions with 'europhonic' ones.'¹⁰⁸

Just as our reading of Ogun-dipe-Leslie revealed, Nzegwu's text demonstrates the problem of constructing a theory and the problematic nature of some theoretical terms: transnational, transracial identities, nativism and hybridity. These are terms that are somewhat pivotal in Nzegwu's essay. The technology of reading Nzegwu adopts deserves

Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, p. 184.

¹⁰⁴ Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, p. 185.

¹⁰⁵ Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, p. 187.

¹⁰⁶ Conceptions of nativism vary not only in terms of definition but also across academic disciplines. Paulin Hountondji has a searing critique of it (known as ethnophilosophy in African philosophy) in his book, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. Recently, Achille Mbembe has been in the forefront of the debates against nativism. See for instance his introduction to the *African Studies Review*, 'Ways of Seeing: Beyond the New Nativism.' Special Issue, vol. 44, no. 2.

¹⁰⁷ Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, p. 188.

¹⁰⁸ Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, p. 199.

some attention.¹⁰⁹ She makes the margins (an incident in the epilogue) of Appiah's text her central concern but there are hardly any references to the essays that make up the collection. She also faults the implications of the text's title. Indeed, she is at liberty to carry out such a reading but it is the operation, the *techne*, by which she reinscribes the margins of the text, a very wide-ranging one at that, as the entire structure of the text itself that deserves greater explanation. Hers is what one might call an isogetical reading. She takes the question of matriliney as her main focus and point of departure. She also offers a traditional or perhaps even a nativist interpretation of matriliney in the Asante context. In order to explore the various meanings and limits of the concept we require interpretations that take into account the transfigurative processes of colonialism and decolonization as part of the greater project of modernity. If she were able to do so, she may in fact end up closer to Appiah's position that she might have imagined. However, this is a problem (*theoria*) that is common with decolonizing regions and continents. In a not too dissimilar context, part of this problem was framed thus:

There was one version of this argument in Edmund Husserl's Vienna lecture of 1935, in which he proposed that the fundamental difference between 'oriental philosophies' (more specifically, Indian and Chinese) and 'Greek-European science' (or as he added, 'universally speaking: philosophy') was the capacity of the latter to produce 'absolute theoretical insights,' that is, '*theoria*' (universal science), while the former retained a 'practical universal' and hence 'mythical-religious,' character. This 'practical-universal,' philosophy was directed to the world in a 'naïve' and 'straightforward' manner, while the world presented as a 'thematic' to *theoria*, making possible a praxis 'whose aim is to elevate mankind through universal scientific reason.'¹¹⁰

But in spite of these kinds of intellectual prejudices, third world and decolonizing regions have been able to crack the problem of *theoria* and the

¹⁰⁹ See Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. Peggy Kamuf New York: Schocken, 1985 on the politics of reading.

¹¹⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for the 'Indian' Pasts?', *A Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986-1995* ed. Ranjit Guha, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 226.

theorizations of the same. It is often affirmed that there isn't an absence of *theoria* in the ancient Indian intellectual context. For one, 'the Indian Buddhist tradition was for the most part insistent on sound argumentation'.¹¹¹ Also, numerous philosophically interesting concepts abound within the annals of classical Buddhist thought; e.g. all things exist (*sarvam asti*), nothing exists (*sarvam nasti*), true (*sat*), false (*asat*), good (*punya*), evil (*papa*), virtue (*dharma*), vice (*adharma*), discontent (*duhkha*), contentment (*sukha*) etc.¹¹² Let us examine how the Indian nation handled the woman's question at the theoretical level.

The 'women's question' in India was crafted into the discourse of nationalism as part of the counter-discourse to the colonialist project which sought to recast the Indian subject as 'degenerate and barbaric.' The patriarchal order which controlled the nationalist discourse encouraged a system of binarisms not only to restore Indian dignity but also to facilitate the process of decolonization. These dichotomies include inner/outer, spiritual/material, home/world and feminine/masculine distinctions and the figure of woman played an important role within this schema. Woman, thus was the repository of specific virtues, for instance, modesty and godlike qualities which are not traits associated with animal nature. It was believed that 'women cultivate and cherish these godlike qualities far more than men do. Protected to a certain extent from the purely material pursuits of securing a livelihood in the external world, women express in their appearance and behavior the spiritual qualities which are characteristic of civilized and refined society.'¹¹³ And in oppo-

¹¹¹ Richard P. Hayes, 'Nagarjuna's Appeal' *Journal of Indian Philosophy*.

¹¹² Classical Indian metaphysics and epistemology has consistently been found to be very developed by a number of Western scholars; see Richard P. Hayes, 'Nagarjuna's Appeal' *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 22, 1994; Jay L. Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995 and also his *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002; and Richard H. Robinson, 'Some logical aspects of Nagarjuna's system', *Philosophy East and West* 6 [4], 1957.

¹¹³ Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nation and Its Women', *A Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986-1995* ed. Ranjit Guha, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 250.

sition to this image of idealized woman was the figure of woman in a fallen or undeveloped state; ‘the ‘common’ woman, who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, and subjected to brutal physical oppression by males.’¹¹⁴ This patriarchal *apportioning, defining* and *constructing* of roles for woman is similar to other patriarchal regimes in the West.¹¹⁵ Africa had regimes for the construction of gender roles but what needs to be studied is how the discourse of modernity, nation-building or decolonization constituted the figure of woman as counter-discourse. Indeed, such a configuration must be rare. In fact, it has been argued the patriarchal order in a large part of Africa has no time for the ‘woman question’ since it has endured all kinds of assaults; slavery, colonialism and imperialism and as such all its energies must be directed at fighting these ills.¹¹⁶

This is not to suggest that patriarchal regimes that configured the ‘woman question’ into various projects of nation-building or decolonizing were particularly less oppressive. However, the framing of the question within the public sphere also meant concepts such democracy and civil rights had to be enlarged and reframed. The move from the purely domestic realm into the public domain was a significant gain for the feminist movement. It is difficult to think of a nation-building project in Africa

¹¹⁴ Chatterjee, ‘The Nation and Its Women’, *A Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986-1995* ed. Ranjit Guha, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 253.

¹¹⁵ See Dolores E. Janiewski, ‘Gendered Colonialism: The ‘Woman Question’ in Settler Society’, Ruth Roach Pierson and Nurpur Chaudhuri eds. *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998 and Yvette Abrahams, ‘Images of Sarah Bartman: Sexuality, Race, and Gender in Early-Nineteenth –Century Britain’ Ruth Roach Pierson and Nurpur Chaudhuri eds. *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998.

¹¹⁶ Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994 p. 71. bell hooks on her part writes: ‘Often brilliant thinkers have had such blind spots. Men like Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Paulo Freire, and Aime Cesaire, who works teach us much about the nature of colonization, racism, classism, and revolutionary struggle, often ignore issues of sexist oppression in their own writing,’ *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Cambridge MA: South End Press, 2000 p. 41.

that consistently framed the woman question as part of collective rejuvenation on the one hand, and as a central feature of the counter-discourse to colonialism on the other, as is the case with India.

However, there are other ways to read the genealogy of feminism in India. 'India', we are told 'is sometimes a lid on an immense and equally unacknowledged subaltern heterogeneity.'¹¹⁷ And obviously this heterogeneity would affect any reading of the woman question in India. In fact, there are readings of the issue which reflect a number of crises and which are in turn influenced by them; the breakdown of the family and its affective symbolizations and the spectralization of global capital.¹¹⁸ Under these circumstances, 'in modern 'India,' there is a 'society' of bonded labor where the only means of repaying a loan at extortionate rates of interest is hereditary bond-slavery. Family life is still possible here, the affects taking the entire burden of survival. Below this is bonded prostitution, where the girls women abducted from bonded labor or *kamiya* households are thrust as bodies for absolute sexual and economic exploitation.'¹¹⁹ This sociosexual economy not only appropriates the female body and wrecks upon it untold violence, it also deflects the very meaning of democracy in its contemporary usage. Thus a situation arises 'where everything works by the ruthless and visible calculus of superexploitation by caste-class domination, the logic of democracy is thoroughly counterintuitive, its rituals absurd.'¹²⁰ This angle, undoubtedly presents a picture of woman far removed from the noble aspirations of the discourse of Indian nationalism in its heyday in favour of one that is more attuned with millennial capitalism. But in spite of the realities of Indian heteroge-

¹¹⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, New York and London: Routledge, 1993 p. 73.

¹¹⁸ Arjun Appadurai, Spectral Housing And Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai', Carol Breckenridge *et al* eds. *Cosmopolitanism*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002.

¹¹⁹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 82.

¹²⁰ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 87.

neity, class-caste superexploitation and the spectralization of the logic of capital ‘the scramble for legitimacy in the house of theory’¹²¹ continues.

The Indian experience demonstrates the various ways in which we can reconfigure the woman question in Africa, that is, to relate it to the discourses of nationalism and decolonization. This gesture is supposed to enlarge our notion of the public domain not only in terms of civic participation but also in terms of its conditions of conceptuality. Second, we must begin to rethink the ways in which the figure of the African female is being deflected and reconstituted by global capitalism on the one hand, and the emerging scenarios of ‘abnormal’ territoriality, state collapse and various forms of informalization in Africa on the other.¹²² There would be a lot of work in the house of theory in this regard.

Renegotiations

What forms does the figure of the African female assume in contemporary times?¹²³ Perhaps T. K. Biaya’s essay, ‘ ‘Crushing the Pistachio’: Eroticism in Senegal and the Art of Ousmane Ndiaye Dago’ is a good point to begin and also end this discussion since it attempts to locate the constructions of the female figure within the context of discourses of Islamization and modernity both of which are also structured by an entrenched patriarchal order. Also, these constructions occur in multimedia: text and image which offer multiple ways of reading the figure.¹²⁴ First of

¹²¹ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 137.

¹²² See Achille Mbembe ‘At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa’, Crawford Young and Mark Beissinger eds., *Beyond State Crisis? Postcolonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press and The Woodrow Wilson Center, 2001.

¹²³ There are very few studies dealing with sexuality and eroticism in Africa but perhaps this may change with the publication of issues such as the volume 3-4 of *CODESRIA Bulletin*, 1999, which has an extended segment on sexual transformations in contemporary Africa. In fact, one can assert the situation is really changing for the better.

¹²⁴ The female figure under late capitalism continues to generate various kinds of

all, we begin by pondering the implications of this contradictory remark; ‘the body is erotically valued in African societies on the condition that it is not naked but accessoried, properly prepared. The body’s beauty and erotic value are achieved not when it is stripped bare but when it is worked or denatured- for example, by excision, scarification, elongation of the clitoris, and so on.’¹²⁵ On the basis of these remarks, the female body is still held in place by the injunctions of African tribal cultures that are more or less unmarked by the intrusions of modernity and technology. To be sure, it is increasingly difficult to conceptualize the female African body’s physicality on the basis of the Western conception of eroticism. In other words, the definition of eroticism employed is somewhat imprecise since it conflates a non-Western sense of eroticism with Western conceptual and artistic conventions. It draws heavily from Western conceptions without quite adopting their preoccupation with the sacred, the profane and excess. We must bear in mind that within the Western context eroticism ‘connotes a tearing, an opening on to something entirely other, the abjection of being before an experience which appears sovereign.’¹²⁶ Ousmane Ndiaye Dago takes photographs of nude African women as part of an effort to create a tradition of eroticism in Senegal thus following in the footsteps of a Western photographer, U. Ommer. But this kind of

debates and interest: The American artist, Robert Crumb has made a career of drawing full-bodied female figures which also serve as some sort of commentary on postindustrial culture and therapies of desire. In an interview, he says ‘all the magazines show those bony, anorexic women. They’re bulimic. They vomit up their food. They all feel bad about their bodies.’ He goes on to say, ‘I wonder when the idea of American beauty changed and women got skinny.’ Finally, he says ‘they want to keep women in a state of discontent- constantly going out and buying more shoes and never being fully satisfied with the shoes they buy.’ See *The New York Times Magazine* March 30, 2003 p. 48. These remarks reveal a lot about the power structures that control the female figure not only in the United States alone but also in a very large part of the world as a whole.

¹²⁵ T. K. Biaya, ‘“Crushing the Pistachio”’: Eroticism in Senegal and the Art of Ousmane Ndiaye Dago’, Carol Breckenridge *et al* eds. *Cosmopolitanism*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002, p. 138.

¹²⁶ Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, ‘Introduction’ *The Bataille Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd. p. 13.

project is very problematic on a number of levels; What informs the morality of the regarding eye? Whose tastes are being served by this activity? By which technologies of power are those sexual objects created? What is the relationship of these images to pornography?¹²⁷ These set of problematics are not addressed but beneath a veneer of clinical evasion, the silenced figure of the African female is glaringly evident. In the African postcolony, we are reminded, ‘sex, belly, mouth, and violence remain the ingredients of the *episteme* of command.’¹²⁸ Power exercises its dominance, its barbaric orgy of excess without a self-critical mechanism while its victims are left virtually helpless. This brutal economy of sexuality which he discusses at length also works effectively within the modern context where even the colonial urban woman is supposed to exhibit qualities of ‘submission, good housekeeping, acceptance of the husband’s polygamy or infidelity, and motherhood.’¹²⁹

In both Dago’s photographs and Biaya’s commentary, the female voice is silenced, her figure does not participate in the creative process, she cannot interfere in her own representation (*hypotyposis*). She simply rendered voiceless and powerless. Both image and text thus enforce their specific technologies of exclusion through processes of silencing. Nor is she quite allowed to evolve a mode of sexuality outside the phallic masculine structure. An important concept associated with eroticism is sovereignty. In this context, the regarding male eye assumes it is sovereign but it is in truth disabled by its own narrow limits. ‘Sovereignty involves the ‘un-knowing’ that leaves behind, in contempt, the system of value and all its commodified riches, an un-knowing linked to laughter as it detaches

¹²⁷ See Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003 on the ambiguities of the photographic image.

¹²⁸ T. K. Biaya, ‘“Crushing the Pistachio”’: Eroticism in Senegal and the Art of Ousmane Ndiaye Dago’, Carol Breckenridge *et al.* eds. *Cosmopolitanism*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002 p. 140.

¹²⁹ T. K. Biaya, ‘“Crushing the Pistachio”’: Eroticism in Senegal and the Art of Ousmane Ndiaye Dago’, Carol Breckenridge *et al.* eds. *Cosmopolitanism*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002 p. 151.

consciousness'¹³⁰ and the loss of itself in excess. Even the regarding eye is impoverished because it loses all metaphoricity and becomes frozen within its own immobile discourse. Its desire imprisons the eroticized female figure but also delimits and devalues the possibilities of desire itself. The oppression begins and ends with sex. Both Dago and Biaya are not particularly concerned with the condition of woman even though she is at their centre of their concerns. The battles for freedom are indeed many and 'sexual freedom can only exist when individuals are no longer oppressed by a socially constructed sexuality based on biologically determined definitions of sexuality: repression, guilt, shame, dominance, conquest, and exploitation.'¹³¹ And what is the meaning of all this? Indeed, 'men have a tremendous contribution to make to feminist struggle in the area of exposing, confronting, opposing, and transforming the sexism of their male peers.'¹³² The crises of traditional structures of power should be apparent enough. We require new definitions of power in order to enhance mutuality, co-operation and alternative conceptions and invocations of power itself.

¹³⁰ Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, 'Introduction' *The Bataille Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd. p. 27.

¹³¹ bell hooks *Feminist Theory: From Margins to Center*, Cambridge MA: South End Press, 2000 p. 151.

¹³² bell hooks *Feminist Theory: From Margins to Center*, Cambridge MA: South End Press, 2000 p. 83.

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