

# 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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