

ideologies are being introduced that re-frame gender roles. Then the seemingly unproblematic relationship between women and the environment that informs many policy measures may become blurred. Who in the end decides what the future of these women should be and under which conditions?

To return now to the Millennium Development Goals Report (2005) and the discouraging conclusions about developments in Africa. It is difficult to explain social change and what direction should be taken to develop policies that would lead to the eradication of poverty. The model being used so far by important development institutions sees women as the motors of change and as central to food

production: 'women should have access to agricultural credit and loans, marketing facilities, appropriate technology and equal treatment in land and agrarian reform as well as in land resettlement schemes'. This may be correct, but the economic and political contexts in which these women have to make a living are constantly changing. Improving their lives cannot be achieved within the schemes already developed in the PRSPs of countries like Chad and Mali, where women as producers of food are not even mentioned.

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## Engendering Gender Studies in Africa

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A fascinating and stimulating domain of scholarship that has provoked considerable debate in African studies is the question of gender. An oft-heard appeal or observation in African studies and the social sciences in general is the need to integrate gender analysis in contemporary scholarship granting the pervasive sway of gendered identities and subjectivities. Evidently, many scholars, Amina Mama (2001) for instance, are hard put to understand why some postcolonial theorists ignore the relevance of gender for our understanding of issues such as national identity and nationalism. However, many African scholars are equally cautious not to legitimise the use of borrowed concepts, perceived to be hegemonic intellectual tools in explaining African social realities. Gender and feminism rank amongst some of these contentious concepts granting the claim that gender was not an organising principle in many African societies prior to Africa's colonial encounter. But in a postcolonial, indeed globalising context, the relevance of gender in analysing the totality of African subjectivities and varied experiences cannot be overemphasised. This essay, based on an anthology edited by Oyeronke Oyewumi entitled *African Gender Studies: A Reader* (2005), examines the contributions made by both African and Africanist scholars towards the pedagogy of raising analytical consciousness in the area of gender studies.

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This volume provides the African and Africanist reader with informed scholarship on gender studies aimed at correcting 'the longstanding problem of Western dominance in the interpretation of African realities' (p. xiv). The topics covered include feminism, women's agency, human rights, social identities, globalisation, development, the politics of knowledge and representation, and social transformation. At the outset, Oyeronke Oyewumi asserts that the book aspires to deconstruct the predominant notion in the West which equates gender studies with women's studies, granting that 'in many African societies social roles are not necessarily biological roles...' (p. xiii). However, this claim is belied by the anthology's front cover photo, which pictures a woman, probably an African woman, dressed in African-style with a prominent head scarf. That this volume could be described as one whose predominant subject matter is the African woman is not misleading. The conspicuous absence, indeed dismissive way, with which men and masculinities are omitted gives the volume a minus and in doing so partly contributes to some of the erroneous assumptions of gender studies which the book sets out to challenge. Indeed,

as Oyegun (1998) succinctly points out, focussing on women and excluding men from analyses of this nature results in an isolation of women which goes on to re-tain them in 'victimhood problem mode' (p. 13). The omission of men and masculinities notwithstanding, the book makes a profound contribution to African studies by interrogating the foundational assumptions that underpin prevailing hegemonic intellectual tools utilised by scholars to interpret African realities.

The book consists of twenty-two chapters divided into seven sections. Each section is preceded by an overview of the contributions made in the section. This organisational principle facilitates reading and renders the thematic outline palatable. The first section interrogates the universal claims of gender by demonstrating that gender is not only socially constructed but also that its history, constitution, and expression are rooted in Western culture. Oyewumi provides a cautionary assertion in this regard by stating that 'when scholars say that gender is socially constructed, we have to not only locate what it is that is being constructed but also identify who (singular and plural) is doing the constructing' (p. 116). Her article in this section introduces the concept of 'world-sense' which she contrasts to world view, that is, the West's way of experiencing the cultural world. According to Oyewumi, the West privileges the sense

of 'sight', that is, the visual and other qualities associated with viewing, over other senses. 'The reason that the body has so much presence in the West is that the world is primarily perceived by sight', goes her argument, hence the 'differentiation of human bodies in terms of sex, skin color, and cranium size', which testify to the 'powers attributed to "seeing"' (p. 4). 'In the West', continues her argument, 'so long as the issue is difference and social hierarchy, then the body is constantly positioned, posed, exposed, and re-exposed as their cause, (p. 9).

In other words, one's position in the hierarchy of credibility in the West depends on how one is perceived or viewed. Thus, in the West, society is seen as a veritable reflection of 'genetic endowment' whereby those who occupy superior social positions are also seen to be biologically superior. Her preference for world-sense provides an alternative concept through which African social realities could be explained. This is applicable in the realm of gender studies where we are drawn into the powerful assertion which questions the exportability or transferability of Western conceptual categories to other cultures that have a different cultural logic. Oyewumi substantiates her argument by demonstrating that in Yoruba society, the nature of one's anatomy does not define one's social position. She argues that the operational logic of Yoruba society is not rooted on a gender map that takes biology or the visual as the foundation for the social. In Yoruba society, one cannot rank persons just by looking at them. Contrary to the West, she argues, social hierarchy in Yoruba society is determined by social relations whereby the cultural model is grounded on 'seniority' based on chronological age. In Yoruba society, as argued later in her chapter on 'Articulating the Yoruba World-Sense', 'seniority is not just a matter of privilege in everyday life. It is also responsibility' (p. 108). She contends further that Yoruba kinship terms do not denote gender and that non-familial social categories are not gender-specific. The implication is that 'the body is not always in view and on view for categorization'. Oyewumi's insightful observations notwithstanding, she has been criticised for her claims that gender did not exist in Yoruba society prior to colonial rule. In fact, her claims in this regard have been described as attempts to invent an imaginary pre-colonial African community in which gender did not

exist. Furthermore, the Yoruba ethnic group does not represent broader experiences in Africa, granted that gender has been one of the central organising principles in African societies, past and present (Mama 2001).

Emmanuel Akyeampong and Pashington Obeng's article pursues a similar thread of argument as Oyewumi but draws on the notion of spirituality. According to these writers, 'spirituality acknowledged the reality of a non-material world, as the material world was seen as incapable of explaining the totality of human experience' (p. 24). The authors ground their analysis on another African society, the Asante in Ghana, whose universe is said to contain various participants such as spirits, humans, animals and plants. In this universe, not all participants are visible - again, a deconstruction of the 'West's privileging of sight over other senses and experiences'. In Asante society, we are told, it is believed that Onyame (the Supreme Being) created a universe suffused with power which could be tapped into by persons irrespective of gender and that such powers could be used for good or evil. Thus, 'power had no gender or age delineations' (p. 25) in Asante society, given that various actors, whether spiritual or human, were believed to be able to tap into the powers of Onyame and utilise them to bring about change in human society. However, this chapter goes beyond these initial assertions and investigates the ways in which gerontocracy and patriarchy structures emerged in Asante society, drawing on colonial influences and the interplay of cultural beliefs.

The second section contains two chapters that interrogate the Western assumptions that inform Western feminisms. Entitled 'Decolonizing Feminisms', this section questions the ways in which the feminist movement belies its goal of achieving 'a global sisterhood'. Obioma Nnaemeka poses a crucial question which qualifies this concern - 'How do the ways in which we construct, teach, and disseminate knowledge of the Other undermine or promote alliances between women?' (p. 51). In response to this question, she demonstrates convincingly that 'trivializing other cultures encourages the type of mis-education that leads to further trivializing of such cultures, (p. 57). She expresses her disgust with the West's one-dimensional pattern of constructing the African woman - often presented as poor and powerless.

We African women have witnessed repeatedly the activities of our overzealous foreign sisters, mostly feminists who appropriate our wars in the name of fighting the oppression of women in the so-called third world. We watch with chagrin and in painful sisterhood these avatars of the proverbial mourner who wails more than the owners of the corpse. In their enthusiasm, our sisters usurp our wars and fight them badly - very badly (p. 57).

Nnaemeka points out that these constructions of the African woman by many Western feminists objectify African women and undercut 'the agency necessary for forging true global sisterhood'. While this view expresses genuine concerns, Nnaemeka makes use of the notion of agency on the presupposition that African women's experiences are homogeneous whereas stark differences are apparent, and it is also evident that different kinds of agencies are contingent on different positionalities. Similarly, Marnia Lazreg's contribution questions the use of the label, 'women of color' in referring to Third World women. She is hard put to understand why Third World women have adopted the term as a liberating means to assert their difference. Lazreg contends that by 'using this label they accept its referent and bow to the social group that gives it currency' (p. 69) 'Who', she asks, 'is subsumed under the awkwardly expressed and marginally grammatical expression "women of color"? Does it include women who are pink, pasty or sallow-skinned?' (p.70). Thus emerges the tragic irony of feminism's well-meaning objective of liberating so-called oppressed women but ends up re-inscribing relations of domination. In fact Wairimu Ngaruiya Njambi and William E. O'Brien address this concern in their chapter on woman-woman marriage among the Gikuyu in Kenya when they contend that the characterisation of African or Third World women as a problematic category 'ignores what in many cases are long histories of women's empowerment and resistance, demonstrated ... by woman-woman marriages' (p. 162). According to them, woman-woman marriage represents a radical disruption of 'male domination' experienced by many women whose lives as well are filled with stories of love, commitment, children, sexual freedom, vulnerability, and empowerment.

In section three, Ifi Amadiume, widely known for her work *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987), examines the position of gender in African kinship structures. Amadiume critiques male colonial anthropologists' failure to interpret African data appropriately owing to their ethnocentric background which made them keep 'looking for man as father or man as the axis around which all rotated, or man as the owner and the controller of everyone and everything' (p. 91). Amadiume makes a strong case for the 'structural presence of a basic matriarchal system in the social structures of traditional African societies' (p. 93) by making use of four ethnographic cases from different regions of Africa. From her reading of the anthropological material on kinship systems in Africa, she contends that there is the strong presence of two gendered systems of kinship. To her, the presence of 'matriarchal systems' in Africa provided balance and served as a 'constraint on the patriarchal structure, checking the development of totalitarian patriarchy and monolithism which are typical of the Indo-European legacy' (p. 96).

The critique of male bias in the constitution of historical knowledge is the focus of section four of the volume. It draws attention to the invisibility of women in historical writings and the need to rewrite history taking into account the need to incorporate gender. As a matter of fact, this concern is somehow reminiscent of Sir Robert Walpole's remark about history to his son who offered to read to him. 'Anything but history, for history must be false', he is quoted as having told his son. African history 'must be false' in the sense that it leaves out, regrettably, an important category of human actors – women. But there is more to this, as Oyewumi forcefully observes, namely that African history since the colonial encounter has been a process of inventing gendered traditions. In writing Yoruba history, for example, Oyewumi contends that 'men and women have been invented as social categories, and history is presented as being dominated by male actors. Female actors are virtually absent and where they are recognized, they are reduced to exceptions' (p. 170). Paul Zeleza is similarly concerned about this omission and provides a thorough review of eight sets of general African histories authored by both African and Africanist scholars, none of whom is a woman. His finding – the general invisibility of women in these

textbooks. However, Zeleza applauds the emergence of a growing body of literature devoted to restoring African women to history. He contends that some of the nuanced 'accounts reveal that while the position of most women declined during the colonial era, women also took initiatives that reshaped their lives and challenged the colonial order' (p. 221). Babacar Fall's chapter on 'Senegalese Women in Politics' is an example of the sort of nuanced historical account Zeleza refers to. Fall details the lives of two female Senegalese politicians, Arame Diène and Thioumbé Samb, both of whom were active politicians between 1945 and 1996. The history of African female politicians is sparse, especially women who entered politics during the colonial era. This paucity of literature places the burden on feminist historians to devise specific courses on women's history as well as gender history. Zeleza cautions that taking 'gender seriously as a conceptual tool for understanding the human past challenges the conventional periodizations based on political events and cultural and religious shifts in which men were preponderantly involved...' (p. 227). He calls on feminist historians to make women's history visible by organising different kinds of activities, especially by penetrating the councils that design syllabuses and publishing new materials. Zeleza observes that a genuine agenda to promote women's history consists in not only understanding women for their own sake but also 'to probe and capture our shared, but varied, diverse and unequal, historical experiences and relations as human beings' (p. 229).

Not only are feminist historians preoccupied with the glaring absence of women from historical texts. In fact, if we turn the spotlight to colonial literary texts, an almost dreary darkness stares us back as once again, we face up to the painful reality of women's absence as colonial subjects in literary representations. This issue is the object of critique in section five which consists of three chapters that explore the representation of African women by others, their own self-presentation, and the role of gender in African women's writings. In this section, Abena Busia is concerned with the position of the distressed 'black woman' in Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness*. This black woman, Busia observes, is the very symbol of 'frenzied passion, agitated, uncontrollable, powerless, inaudible, and cer-

tainly functionally inarticulate' (p. 245). This inaudible and functionally inarticulate woman's presence is not problematic, insofar as the colonial novel's object is to 'encode in the popular mind the superiority of the white male dominant class', and that even when authored by women, colonial fiction is 'primarily about men' (p. 247). On the contrary, when women feature in such fiction, particularly the African woman, she is painted as a potential source of danger, to be sure, a path to moral degradation for the white male. According to Busia, African women are represented as 'tempting, reproductive sex objects, who both allure and repel' (p. 249). In fact she is further presented as harbouring the promiscuity of the African continent which pervades her 'luscious and uncontrollable fertility' (p. 249) which in turn affects the Europeans, especially the men who dare to cross their paths. Busia notes that whereas colonial fiction carries two kinds of white women, there is only one sort of black woman – often seen as sex objects – and even more revealing is the claim that black women seldom have names and in fact, are hardly present as players on the stage or when they do, they hardly speak. Thus, Busia observes that a reading of the colonial and imperial novel presents the black woman as an 'unvoiced object, most often to be found prone, legs spread, lurking in the shadows of a bedroom' (p. 250).

Hence, theorising gender issues in literary texts especially colonial and postcolonial literature remains a crucial concern for both African and Africanist feminists. Juliana Nfah-Abbenyi points out that although the institutions of 'motherhood and heterosexuality have become central to feminist analysis of gender and sexuality' (p. 265), these concerns are far from universal as some theorists would want us to believe. Her contribution to this section offers a rethinking of feminist theory in postcolonial women's writing. In this vein of thought, she contends that indeed motherhood remains a theme that 'runs through the writings of many African women writers, and they question whether women are merely forced mothers and/or sexual objects' (p. 265). She goes on to argue that whereas many Western women may view multiple childbirth as both oppressive and restrictive (to their work, careers, economic well-being etc.), most African women find empowerment in their children and families. Granting this, it is ap-

parent that many African women use their status as 'mothers to challenge some of the demands their cultures place on them' (p. 267) or to make demands and obtain concrete concessions for themselves. What seems to me most instructive about her argument is that the theoretical preoccupations of Western feminists might not be the same concerns for African feminist writers. In fact, Nfah-Abbenyi is at pains to understand why 'Western feminists tend to zero in on specific issues concerning women in the "Third World", and then sensationalize those hand-picked issues for Western consumption' (p. 268).

A case in point is Western feminists' obsession with what is popularly referred to as 'female circumcision' in Africa. Nfah-Abbenyi insists that the fact that this practice is 'limited to certain areas in Africa, and that the vast majority of African women have not been victims of this awful ritual, does not seem to matter...' (p. 268) to the so-called concerned Western sisters. She is equally perplexed by the fact that many of the feminists who write about this practice hardly explore the reasons why it happens nor do they propose viable solutions that can be helpful to the lives of women who are presented as the victims of it. Whereas sisters in the West seemed determined to fight other people's wars, they remain oblivious to their own problems, as pointed out by Filomina Steady when she notes that equally harmful plastic surgeries are carried out to 'reconstruct healthy vaginas, breasts and other body parts' (p. 318) which, in her opinion, could be perceived as responses to cultural dictates that define the ideology of womanhood.

Audrey Gadzekpo supplements the literature on women's exclusion from historical writing by filling the gap on the history of women in Ghanaian print culture. Her chapter deconstructs Ghanaian press history by making use of gender analysis in charting women's contributions to journalism and print culture, in particular in the Gold Coast during the colonial era. Her research reveals that contrary to the silence of history of Ghanaian newspapers on the role of women, there is overwhelming evidence that 'women were engaged with the press as readers, as occasional contributors, as paid and unpaid journalists, journalists and editors' (p. 279). However, what seems to have contributed to their perceived absence was their choice of anonymity. She ob-

serves that the prevailing socio-political conditions in colonial Gold Coast required that certain kinds of authors maintained their anonymity in order to diffuse responsibility, 'deflect liability from individual authors of text, and to present a unified front to readers' (p. 287). In particular, she notes that there could have been gendered reasons for female anonymity, with writers often opting for feminine pseudonyms such as 'Elena', 'Joyce', 'Gloria', etc. This choice, convenient as it might have been at the time, proved deleterious in the long run because of the historical price women had to pay for concealing their identities. This contributed obviously to the perpetuation of their invisibility in the history of the Gold Coast press.

The authors of section six focus on women and development, attempting to unravel 'what development would look like from the perspective of Africans, especially African women' (p. 297). Filomina Steady approaches this theme by exploring the framework for gender research in Africa and how this can contribute to sustainable development. At issue is the claim that 'external concepts, methodologies and paradigms in the study of gender in Africa' (p. 314) constitute supporting academic structures that validate the exploitation of Africa. An instructive question worth posing against this background is: 'how relevant is the Eurocentric search for universal women's oppression when other forms of oppression based on race, nationalism, ethnicity, class and so forth and by the global economy of whole nations and peoples threaten the very existence of most Africans' (p. 329)? Steady argues for a scholarship whose conceptual tools and paradigms are relevant to the lot of Africans. She points out for instance that 'gender' can mean different things to different people since it carries the ideologies of the socio-cultural context in which it is constructed. In search of a panacea, she proposes African-centred approaches based on a thorough understanding of African socio-cultural realities, feminist traditions and philosophies. An example in this light is Bertrade Banoum's contribution on 'The Yum', a form of indigenous community mobilising and organising rooted in the ancestral culture of solidarity among the Bogso people in southern Cameroon. The Yum constitute a women's labour collective whereby peasant women move from farm to farm, helping one another to tend their land and crops in an organised

pattern that allows them to be at the forefront of people's mobilisation for collective action aimed at alleviating poverty and securing sustainable livelihoods. This indigenous model of organising food production rooted in solidarity has lessons for alternative developmental strategies in Africa as well as the global stage.

The last section, entitled 'Critical Conversations', addresses the questions of identity, kinship, lineage and gender. Drawing on Kwame Appiah's celebrated work, *In My Father's House*, Nkiru Nzegwu provides a fresh critique of Appiah's rewriting of history in which he attempts to justify his demonisation of matriliney and to replace it with patriliney as the proper model of family in Asante. Among the Asante of Ghana, matriliney privileges the mother's line and family over that of the father, and offers it as the legitimate arena for nurturing a child's cultural and personal identity. However, Appiah attempts to project himself as a genuine Asante, oblivious of the deleterious effect his tacit preference for the patrilineal model has for his claims of attachment and identity to the patrikin. It is against this background that Nzegwu contends that Appiah's failure to embrace his father's matrilineal culture amounts to a rejection or destruction of his father. For Nzegwu, contrary to what Appiah purports to achieve, the outcome of his project is tantamount to the despoiling and mutilating of Asante identity and the memory of his father. In conclusion, Nzegwu laments the fact that it is through 'Africa's own leaders, statesmen, and children who most loudly profess to work for Africa's interest that the continent's subjugation occurs' (p. 377).

This volume provides an eclectic and rich variety of articles that address the ambiguous and sometimes controversial position of gender in Africa. What is instructive about this volume is that it pulls together both previously published and freshly written materials which tease out questions of representation, identity, inequality and assumed culture universals, especially as these pertain to the social realities and experiences of African women. That the authors include scholars of different academic backgrounds and positionalities, both men and women, makes this volume a veritable success in bringing together scholarship that integrates multi-disciplinarity without sacrificing focus. In fact, the volume successfully deconstructs the Western concep-

tual biases that underpin the notion of gender and in turn brings out African perspectives and cultural models to bear on this concept. In this light the volume achieves its stated objectives of interrogating the foundational assumptions that inform Western epistemologies of African studies, especially African gender studies. In the wake of its dismantling, we are offered alternative organising principles, models and conceptual tools with which

to digest the multiple understandings of gender and its diverse implications for social transformation in Africa. Regrettably, for a volume that purports to be an anthology of African gender studies, the conspicuous invisibility of men and masculinity studies in the volume means this turns out to be an anthology of women's studies in Africa. In doing so, the book misses an opportunity to open up in a

serious way African gender studies to gendered studies of both men and women.

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## Women Writing Africa

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**W**omen Writing Africa: West Africa and the Sahel, edited by Esi Sutherland-Addy and Aminata Diaw and published in 2005 by Feminist Press at the University of New York, is the second volume of the acclaimed Women Writing Africa project. The idea for this ambitious and far-reaching project arose from the editors' desire to restore African women's voices to the public sphere, an area where up until now women's voices have been largely marginalised. This volume will serve as a welcome resource for students and scholars or indeed anyone interested in West African culture, particularly given the informative headers before each text which provide the historical and social context of each piece, rendering the book extremely accessible.

The completion of this book took over ten years and the collaboration of one hundred and fifty researchers, translators and editors working in twenty-five different languages, which is an indication of the breadth and scope of this amazing project that covers the history and culture of twelve countries. As well as serving as an anthology and a celebration of African women's writing, this work offers a detailed and fascinating historical and sociological perspective on the role and place of women in West African society.

The huge variety of texts and diverse voices present in this volume are one of its most laudable aspects. The texts covered here range from traditional lullabies, marriage songs and folk tales to political and historical writings. For example, Anne-Marie Raggi recounts the 1949 women's uprising in protest against French colonial rule in the Côte d'Ivoire. Although work from established writers such as

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Mariama Bâ and Tanella Boni is present there are also testimonies from 'unknown', 'ordinary' women such as Binta Bojang, a Gambian woman who testifies to the efficacy of traditional rituals (specifically the Kanyeleng ritual) in curing her barrenness. This text therefore allows the reader an in-depth insight into the everyday reality of West African women's lives.

Furthermore, this volume draws together texts from all sectors of society. Thus we find letters from Sarah Forbes Bonetta, who was born of royal African birth and became Queen Victoria's protégée, alongside those of Malinda Rex, a liberated slave who writes from America to complain of the conditions she is living in. This complexity and richness of voices and experiences reflects the diversity of the West African and Sahel region. Clearly, as the publishers point out, in such a huge area women's individual experience varies enormously. However, it can nonetheless be linked through common tropes and themes, such as the definition of women through their sexuality and their experiences under colonialism.

Throughout history African women have often been subjected to negative stereotypes. Courageous, independent and beautiful African women such as Cleopatra and Nefertiti have been transmogrified into white women so as not to disrupt stereotyped western conceptions of African women. As one writer in the book mentions, the image commonly repre-

sented of African women by western media is of a woman 'old beyond her years, she is half-naked, her drooping and withered breasts are well exposed; there are flies buzzing around her face; and she has a permanent begging bowl in her hand'. It seems, therefore, that although the West may have moved on from the sexualised, erotic construction of African women favoured by colonialists, little progress has been made in conveying the actual, multi-faceted, complex reality of West African women today. This book consequently plays a key role in readdressing the representation of African women by challenging the aforementioned stereotype of the docile, mendicant African woman. For example, we read about the powerful 'Queenmothers' who led movements of resistance on the Gold Coast thereby demonstrating the early political and social importance held by women. Further examples of the power women often wield in West African society are to be found in texts such as 'The Aba Women's War' in which one woman's testimony indicates the feminist nature of a protest against taxes imposed on women by a warrant chief in Owerri province, eastern Nigeria during the 1920s.

Another salient issue that this work addresses is the importance of oral texts in allowing subordinated and oppressed members of society, here women, to have a voice. The number of spoken texts in the volume far outnumbers the written pieces, a stark reminder of the lack of access to official forms of communication for women. Often oral texts are wrongly dismissed as unreliable and invalid historical sources. However, this collection illustrates what a rich resource they represent. If women's voices are to be restored to the public domain it is essential to bring