

# **African Gender Scholarship: Concepts, Methodologies and Paradigms**

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Conceptualising Gender:  
Eurocentric Foundations  
of Feminist Concepts and the Challenge  
of African Epistemologies

Oyeronke Oyewumi

The last five centuries, described as the age of modernity, have been defined by a number of historical processes. These include the Atlantic Slave Trade and attendant institutions as well as European colonisation of Africa, Asia and Latin America. The idea of modernity evokes the development of capitalism and industrialisation, the establishment of nation states, and the growth of regional disparities in the World system. The period has witnessed a host of social and cultural transformations. Significantly, gender and racial categories emerged during this epoch as two fundamental axes for exploiting people and stratifying societies.

A hallmark of the modern era is the expansion of Europe and the establishment of Euro/American cultural hegemony throughout the world. Nowhere is this more profound than in the production of knowledge about human behaviour, history, societies, and cultures. Consequently, interests, concerns, predilections, neuroses, prejudices, social institutions and social categories of Euro/Americans have dominated the writing of human history. One effect of this Eurocentrism is the radicalisation of knowledge: Europe is represented as the source of knowledge and Europeans as knowers. In addition, male gender privilege as an essential part of European ethos became enshrined in the culture of modernity. This global context for knowledge production must be taken into account in our quest to comprehend African realities and indeed the human condition.

In this paper, I interrogate gender and allied concepts based on African cultural experiences and epistemologies. I focus on the nuclear family system, a specifically European form that is also the original source of many of the concepts used universally in gender research. My goal is to discover how African research can be more informed by local concerns and interpretations and African experiences incorporated into general theory building, the structural racism of the global system notwithstanding.

### Gender and the Politics of Feminist knowledge

Any serious scholarship on the place of 'gender' in African realities must necessarily question prevailing concepts and theoretical approaches. This is because the architecture and furnishings of gender research have by and large been distilled from European and American experiences. Today, feminist scholars are the most important gender-focused constituency, the source of much knowledge on women and gender hierarchies. Due to their efforts, gender has become one of the most important analytic categories in the academic enterprise of describing the world and the political business of prescribing solutions. Thus, while our quest for understanding cannot ignore the role of western feminists, we must question the social identity, interests, and concerns of the purveyors of such knowledge. In accordance with this 'sociology of knowledge' approach, Karl Mannheim stated that:

Persons bound together into groups strive in accordance with the character and position of the groups to which they belong to change the surrounding world of nature and society or attempt to maintain it in a given condition. It is the direction of this will to change or to maintain, of this collective activity, which produces the guiding thread for the emergence of their problems, their concepts and their forms of thought. (1936: 4)

As one such group, feminists have used their newly acquired power in Western societies to turn what were formerly perceived as the private troubles of women into public issues. They have shown how women's personal troubles in the private sphere are in fact public issues constituted by the gender inequality of the social structure. It is clear that Euro/American women's experiences and the desire for transformation have provided the basis for the questions, concepts, theories, and concerns that have produced gender research. Feminist researchers use gender as the model for explaining women's subordination and oppression worldwide. In one fell swoop, they assume both the category 'woman' and her subordination as universals. However, gender is first and foremost a socio-cultural construct. We cannot take as given what indeed we need to investigate.

If gender looms so large in the lives of white women to the exclusion of other factors, we have to ask, why gender? Why not some other category like race, for example, which African Americans consider fundamental. Because gen-

der is socially constructed, the social category 'woman' is not universal. Additionally, because other forms of oppression and inequality are present in society, further questions must be asked: Why gender? To what extent does a gender analysis reveal or occlude other forms of oppression? Which women's situation does feminist scholarship theorise well? Which particular groups of women are well theorised? To what extent does such gender foregrounding facilitate women's wishes, and their desire to understand themselves more clearly?

Many scholars have critiqued this universalisation of gender. They have also shown the extent to which it is particular to Anglophone/American and white women's politics in the United States, especially. Perhaps the most important critique of feminist articulations of gender is that made by a host of African American scholars insisting that, at least in the United States, gender cannot be considered outside of race and class. This position led to emphasis on the differences amongst women and the need to theorise multiple forms of oppression particularly where inequalities of race, gender, and class are evident. Outside the United States, discussions have focused on the need to highlight imperialism, colonisation, and other local and global forms of stratification. These controversies substantiate the assertion that gender cannot be abstracted from the social context and other systems of hierarchy.

In this paper, I want to add another dimension to the reasons why gender must not be taken at face value and, specifically, articulate an African critique. First I will explore the original sources of feminist concepts that are the mainstay of gender research. I wish to suggest that feminist concepts are rooted in the nuclear family. This social institution constitutes the very basis of feminist theory and represents the vehicle for the articulation of feminist values. This is in spite of the widespread belief among feminists that their goal is to subvert this male-dominant institution and the belief amongst feminism's detractors that feminism is anti-family. Although feminism has become globalised, much of feminist theory is grounded on the Western nuclear family. Thus the three central concepts that have been the mainstay of feminism: woman, gender, and sisterhood are only intelligible with careful attention to the nuclear family from which they emerged.

Furthermore, some of the most important questions and debates to animate gender research in the last three decades make more sense once we appreciate the degree to which they are entrenched in the nuclear family (which is both an institutional and spatial configuration). What is the nuclear family? The nuclear family is a gendered family par excellence. As a single-family household, it is centred on a subordinated wife, a patriarchal husband, and children. This structure, with a conjugal unit at the centre, encourages the promotion of gender as a natural and inevitable category. There are no crosscutting categories devoid of gender within this family. In a gendered, male-headed two-parent household, the male head is conceived as the breadwinner and the female is associated with home and nurture.

Feminist sociologist Nancy Chodorow provides an account of how such division of labour in a family sets up different developmental and psychological trajectories for sons and daughters and ultimately produces gendered beings and societies. According to Chodorow, 'the family division of labour in which women mother gives socially and historically specific meaning to gender itself. The engendering of men and women with particular personalities, needs, defences, and capacities creates conditions for and contributes to the reproduction of this same division of labour. Thus the fact that women mother inadvertently and inevitably reproduces itself' (Chodorow 1978:12).

Gender distinctions are foundational to the establishment and functioning of this family type and the primary source of hierarchy and oppression within it. By the same token, gender sameness is the primary source of identification and solidarity. Thus, while daughters self-identify, as females, with their mother and sisters, sons self-identify with their father and brothers. In Haraway's words, 'marriage encapsulated and reproduced antagonistic relation of the two coherent social groups, men and women' (Haraway 1991:138).

The spatial configuration of the nuclear family household as an isolated space is critical to understanding feminist conceptual categories. In much of white feminist theory, society is represented as a nuclear family, composed of a couple and their children. There is no place for other adults. It is not surprising that the notion of womanhood that emerges from Euro-American feminism, rooted in the nuclear family, is the concept of wife. As Miriam Johnson puts it, [In Western societies] 'the marriage relationship tends to be the core adult solidarity relationship and as such makes the very definition of woman become that of wife'. (19:40) Because the category 'wife' is rooted in the nuclear family, the wife identity is totally defining; other relationships are at best secondary. In addition, because race and class are not normally variable in the family, it makes sense that white feminism, which is trapped in the family, does not see race or class.

Thus the fundamental category of difference, which appears as a universal from the confines of the nuclear family, is gender. The woman at the heart of feminist theory, the wife, never gets out of the household. Like a snail she carries the house around with her. Consequently, wherever woman is present becomes the private sphere of women's subordination. Her very presence defines it as such. The problem is not that feminist conceptualisation starts with the family. The issue is that it never transcends the narrow confines of the nuclear family.

Theorising from the limited space of the nuclear family automatically accentuates issues of sexuality in any discussion of gender. Even a category such as mother is only intelligible in white feminist thought when the mother is defined first as the wife of the patriarch. Since mothers are first and foremost wives, there seems to be no understanding of the mother independent of her sexual ties to a father. This is the only explanation for the popularity of that oxymoron: single mother. Whereas in most cultures, motherhood is defined as a relationship

to progeny, not as a sexual relationship to a man, within feminist literature, motherhood, the dominant identity of women, is subsumed under wife-hood. Because woman is a synonym for wife, procreation and lactation in the gender literature (traditional and feminist) are presented as part of the sexual division of labour. Marital coupling is thus constituted as the base of societal division of labour.

This can be seen in the work of feminist sociologist Nancy Chodorow. She argues that an infant even experiences his or her mother as a gendered being – wife of the father – with deep implications for the differential psychosocial development of sons and daughters. Chodorow universalises the experience of nuclear motherhood and takes it as a human given, thereby extending the boundaries of this very limited Euro/American form to other cultures that have different family organisations.

### The Non-gendered Yoruba Family

Thus far I have shown that feminist concepts emerged out of the logic of the patriarchal nuclear family, a family form that is inappropriately universalised. More specifically, the nuclear family remains an alien form in Africa despite its promotion by both the colonial and neo-colonial state, international (under) development agencies, feminist organisations, contemporary non-governmental organisations (NGOs) among others.

In this section, drawing from my own research on Yoruba society of south-western Nigeria, I present a different kind of family organisation – the traditional Yoruba family. This family can be described as non-gendered because kinship roles and categories are not gender-differentiated. Power centres within the family are diffused and not gender-specific. The fundamental organising principle within this family is seniority based on relative age, and not gender. Consequently, kinship categories encode seniority rather than gender. Seniority socially ranks persons according to their chronological ages. Hence the words *egbon* refers to the older sibling and *aburo* to the younger sibling of the speaker regardless of gender. Unlike gender, which is rigid or static, the seniority principle is dynamic and fluid.

Within the Yoruba family, *omo*, the word for child is best translated as offspring. There are no single words denoting girl or boy in the first instance. With regard to the categories 'husband' and 'wife', *oko*, which is usually glossed as the English husband, is non-gender-specific because it encompasses both males and females. *Iyawo*, glossed as wife in English, refers to in-marrying females. The distinction between *oko* and *iyawo* is not one of gender. It is based on lineage, which distinguishes between those who are birth members of the family and those who enter by marriage. The differentiation expresses a hierarchy in which the *oko* position is superior to the *iyawo*. This hierarchy is not a gender hierarchy because even female *oko* are superior to the female *iyawo*. In the same way, the category of

*iyawo* includes both men and women. Devotees of the Orisa (deities), for example, are called *iyawo Orisa* irrespective of their biological sex. Thus relationships are fluid and social roles are situational continuously placing individuals in context-dependent hierarchical and non-hierarchical roles.

The work of social anthropologist Niara Sudarkasa on the contrasting characteristics of African-based family systems and European-based forms is especially illuminating. She points out that the nuclear family is a conjugally based family in that it is built around the couple – the conjugal core. In West Africa (of which the Yoruba are a part), it is the lineage that is regarded as the family. The lineage is a consanguinally-based family system built around a core of brothers and sisters – blood relations. She explicates:

Upon marriage, couples did not normally establish separate households, but rather joined the compound of either the bride or groom, depending on the prevailing rules of descent. In a society in which descent is patrilineal, the core group of the compound consisted of a group of brothers, some sisters, their adult sons, and grandchildren. The core of the co-residential unit was composed of blood relatives. The spouses are considered outsiders and therefore not part of the family (1996: 81).

In the Yoruba case, all the members of the lineage as a group are called *omo-ile* and are individually ranked by birth order. All the in-marrying females are as a group known as *iyawo-ile* and are ranked by order of marriage. Individually, an *omo-ile* occupies the position of *oko* in relation to the in-coming *iyawo*. This insider-outsider relationship is classified, with the insider as the privileged senior. The mode of recruitment into the lineage is the crucial difference – birth for the *oko* and marriage for the *iyawo*.

If there was one role-identity that defined females, it was the position of mother. Within the household, members are grouped around different mother-child units described as *omoya*, literally 'children of one mother' or womb-sibling. Because of the matrifocality of many African family systems, the mother is the pivot around which familial relationships are delineated and organised. Consequently, *omoya* is the comparable category in Yoruba culture to the nuclear sister in white American culture. The relationship among womb-siblings, like that of sisters in a nuclear family, is based on an understanding of common interests and borne out of a shared experience. The defining shared experience that binds *omoya* in loyalty and unconditional love is the mother's womb. Therefore, the category '*omoya*', unlike 'sister', transcends gender.

*Omoya* also transcends households; because matrilateral cousins are regarded as womb-siblings and perceived to be closer to one another than siblings who share the same father and who may even live in the same household. *Omoya* locates a person within a socially recognised grouping and underscores the signifi-

cance of the mother-child connection in delineating and anchoring a child's place in the family. Thus, these relationships are primary, privileged and should be protected above all others. In addition, *omoya* underscores the importance of motherhood as institution and as experience in the culture.

### The Challenge of African Conceptualisations

Applying feminist concepts to express and analyse African realities is the central challenge of African gender studies. The oppositional male/female, man/woman duality and its attendant male privileging in western gender categories is particularly alien to many African cultures. Interpreting African realities based on these Western claims often produces distortions, obfuscations in language and a total lack of comprehension since the social categories and institutions are incommensurable. In fact, the two basic categories of woman and gender demand rethinking, given the Yoruba case presented above, and as I argued in my book *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses* (1997).

Writings from other African societies suggest similar problems. In her 1987 book, social anthropologist, Ifi Amadiume discussed the concept of male daughters, female husbands, and the institution of woman marriage in Igbo society: concepts which confound the Western mind imprisoned within the feminist framework. In the novel, *Nervous Conditions* (1989), Tsitsi Dangarembga, writing in a Shona context, discusses the privileged 'patriarchal status' of Aunt Tete, a character in the story: 'Now this kind of work was women's work, and of the thirteen women there, my mother and Lucia were incapacitated a little – Tete, having patriarchal status, was not expected to do much.' (1989: 133). We gather that aunt Tete is a woman, but she has 'patriarchal status,' which exempts her from women's work. The question that arises then is: how is the category 'woman' constituted in Shona society? Who then is the woman who does women's work? What does it all mean within the social organisation of the society? Similarly, in her memoir, *Songs from an African Sunset* (1997), Sekai Nzenza Shand, describes her Shona mother's superior relationship to the *varoora* thus: In her maiden village, my mother was looked on as the great aunt, or an honorary man; the *varoora* gave her respect due to a father and my mother could command them as she wished. They therefore came to their 'husband's' village to support her in bereavement (19). Is Nzenza Shand's mother a man (albeit an honorary man)? What does it mean?

In his monograph on the *Okyeame* (spokesperson for Akan chiefs in West Africa) Ghanaian linguist, Kwesi Yankah observed: an *Okyeame* is traditionally referred to as the *ohene yere*, the chief's wife – it is generally applied to all *Okyeame* whether in appointive or hereditary positions.... even in cases where a chief is female and her *Okyeame* is male, the *akyeame* is still a wife and the chief a husband (1995: 89). This understanding clearly confounds the Western gendered understanding that the social role 'wife' is inherent in the female body. Finally,

historian Edna Bay, writing on the kingdom of Dahomey, states: The king also married men. Prominent artisans and talented leaders from newly conquered areas were integrated into Dahomey through ties based on the idiom of marriage. Along with eunuchs and women of the palace, such men were called *abosi*. Male *abosi* brought families with them or were granted women and slaves to establish a line (1998: 20).

The category 'women of the palace' mentioned in the quote, does not include daughters of the lineage. Females born into the lineage belong with their brothers in the category of lineage members, a grouping that derives from birthplace. These facts underscore the need to subject the category 'woman' to further analysis and to privilege the categories and interpretations of these African societies.

These African examples present several challenges to the unwarranted universalisms of feminist gender discourses. The cases presented show African social categories as fluid, highly situational and not determined by body type. Furthermore, the idiom used for socially classifying marriage is not gender-based, as feminist interpretations of family ideology and organisation would suggest. Elsewhere (Oyewumi 1997) I have argued that the marriage/family idiom in many African cultures is a way of describing patron/client relationships that have little to do with the nature of human bodies. Therefore analyses and interpretations of Africa must start with Africa. They should reflect specific cultural and local contexts, not imported, often colonial, ideas and concepts.

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## 2

### Decolonising Gender Studies in Africa

Edward Namisiko Waswa Kisiang'ani

#### Introduction

The onset of the new millennium has coincided with the continuing crisis of modernity in Africa. Through colonial imperialism, modernity introduced the imposing culture of the Western European Enlightenment to Africa, with a deliberate attempt to explain human existence through certain all-inclusive paradigms. The belief in scientific rationalism, universal culture, universal truth, order and even religion forms the spinal cord of the modernist scheme. In the colonial era, Africans were trained to perceive things only from a Western European standpoint, often universalised to embrace all humanity. Effectively then, Western ideals informed all intellectual discourse about African people, while concurrently criminalizing and atomizing the culture and values of the African.

This intellectual propensity, it seems to me, has tended to influence how African people confront the many problems facing the continent. As Mahmood Mamdani observes, Africa remains entrapped in 'history by analogy' whereby Africa is either exoticised or simply represented as part of European history (Mamdani 1996: 8-11). In both extremes, Africa's specificity is denied. Post-structuralism has undertaken the task of questioning the Universalist prescriptions in European forms of knowledge. However, the notion of the colonial subject, central to post-colonial theory, affects the manner in which colonized peoples come to terms with the conditions which entrap them. Their perception of conditions of domination is vital to their ability to develop strategies for resistance (Ahlwalia 1999: 314).

One crucial field dominated by European-centred discourses but potentially becoming an attractive platform for counter-hegemonic resistance is the field of African Gender Studies. But what are Gender Studies? In a broad perspective, Gender Studies represent a body of debates, which interrogate the various ways