

## Western Gender Paradigm: Historicizing the Appropriation of African Women

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*Scholarly documentation of the history of the emergence and shifts in the construction of gender categories in Europe presents a picture that presupposes the existence of women as a social category that has always been perceived and understood to be powerless, disadvantaged, controlled and defined by men. Western historical experience is rooted on the perception of the world as a man's world. Under such a world, gender is treated as a biologically pre-determined divide and social categorisation of humans into 'man' or 'woman'. Biological determinism have often been so compelling in Western gender discourse to an extent that social categories have over the years derive their legitimacy and power from biology. Biological determinism inherent in Western articulation of social difference cannot however be presented as a universally acceptable paradigm. This is because feminism debate on what roles and which identities are natural and what aspects are socially constructed, can only have meaning in culture. It is through culture that social categories are conceived. It is within the foregoing context that African 'protest scholarship' (Adésinà: 2010; Ampofo: 2008; Zeleza: 2006; Mukonyora: 2006; Oyewùmi: 2005 a&b, 1997; Nnaneka: 2005; Mire: 2001, Taiwo: 1999; Amadiume: 1997, 1987; Afonja: 2007 a&b; Arnfred: et al.: 2004; Memmi: 2003) submits that social categories do not have independent existence or logic of their own. The contestations over the concept 'gender' developed out of this challenge. This paper argues that Western gender constructions and concepts do not automatically apply to non Western societies. Examples from Africa present what Oyewùmi (2004: 8) describes as "several challenges to the unwarranted universalisms of feminist gender discourses" because African social categories are "fluid, highly situational and not determined by body type". The paper concludes that such constructs can only be use for comparative purposes. Given that this paper adopts a historical and theoretical review of the subject matter under investigation, the method of study used is content analysis.*

### Introduction

In discussing African studies or any other field, it is important to note that the economies and cultures of knowledge production are integral part of complex and sometimes contradictory, but always changing, institutional, intellectual and ideological processes and practices that occur, simultaneously, at national and transnational, or local and global levels (Zeleza: 2006: 195)

At the start of the second phase of feminist movement in Europe and North America, sex was

conceptualised as the biological physical bodies of male and female and gender was on the other hand understood to be the social by products of these biological bodies (Adésinà: 2010, 2008, 2006a&b, Riley: 1988, Rubin: 1975). Oyewumi (1997: 12) posits that consequent on this pattern of conception, sex and gender were then seen to be inextricably linked and that "each society was assumed to have a sex/gender system". She maintains that with the passage of time, sex began to be seen not just as "the base and gender as the superstructure", but that "even sex was interpreted as socially constructed".

At the threshold of the 21st Century, African Gender Scholarship continues to align with the myth that Africa has been a historically male dominated society. This paper joins the debate (Chilisa and Ntseane: 2010; Longman: 2010; Gandu: 2011a&b) on the need to excavate 'local African libraries' (Zezeza: 2006) and 'indigenise' (Adésinà: 2010) African Gender Scholarship. In trying to re-validate the specificity of the African gender social history, the paper is driven by three broad objectives. First, it seeks to x-ray Western male-centred gender epistemic discourse and the ways in which male specific prerogative was deployed by colonialism to undermined African women. Second, the paper draws attention to the pitfalls associated with Western interpretations and impositions of gender constructs on Africa.

Thirdly, at the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century; Western gender perceptions still drive African gender scholarship and thought process (Ampofo, et al.: 2008). The influence of Western conceptual framework is so widespread that African scholarship continues to cultivate it without questions (Oyewùmí: 1997: x). In recognition of the material circumstances and historical context of the colonization of Africa by Western Europe, this paper is part in of 'protest scholarship' (Adésinà: 2010, 2006, 2008, Chilisa and Ntseane: 2010). 'Protest Scholarship' seeks to do what Oyewùmí (2005a: xiii-xiv) describes as the need to take "Africa seriously" by deconstructing Western concepts as "part of the efforts to correct the long standing problem of Western dominance in the interpretation of African realities." This is a call to challenge Western received paradigms (Ampofo, et al.: 2008) and "conceptual frameworks" because "they reinforce rather than alter the terms of international division of intellectual labour" (Adésinà: 2010: 4). Adésinà succinctly captures the heart of the debate thus:

Protest scholarship seeks to negate the terms of the international division of intellectual labour- in which Africa and Africans supply the data and their Euro- American counterparts supply the theory. Often these may generate a lot of materials but do not necessarily generate new *epistemic insights that march the distinctness of the local ethnographic data on*

*which they stand.* By contrast, endogeneity requires that we treat local ethnographic data not simply as items of scholarly narratives but explore the extent to which they instigate distinct epistemic insights or lead to epistemic rupture (Adésinà: 2010: 4).

This paper is therefore part of the efforts to bring African knowledge production experience to bear on the ongoing global debate on gender, power, and socio-economic challenges confronting African women (Chilisa and Ntseane: 2010, Longman: 2010). The paper holds that the epistemology of gender in Africa should and must endeavour to undertake twofold epistemic measures. The first is to ensure that Africa can be studied on her own terms. The second is that African knowledge production must be factor into the formulation of social theory. We are not lamenting the imposition of Western gender constructs on Africa. Rather, this paper seeks to provide a critical review of Western-invented gender discourse and the effects it has had on African gender relations, thought process and implications on the livelihood challenges of African women.

### **Re-Visiting Western Gender Discourse: Roots of Biological Determinism**

The Idea that biology – or, better still, destiny is biology – has been a staple of Western thought for centuries. Whether the issue is who is who in Aristotle's polis or who is poor in the late twentieth-century United States, the notion that difference and hierarchy in society are biologically determined continues to enjoy credence even among social scientists who purport to explain human society in other than genetic terms. In the West, biological explanations appear to be especially privileged over other ways of explaining differences of gender, race, or class... The notion of society that emerges from this conception is that society is constituted by bodies and as bodies - male bodies, female bodies, Jewish bodies, Aryan bodies, black bodies, white bodies, rich bodies, poor

bodies. I am using the word “body” in two ways: first, as a metonymy for biology and second, to draw attention to the sheer physicality that seems to attend being in Western culture. I refer to the corporeal body as well as to metaphors of the body... It is believed that just by looking at it one can tell a persons’ beliefs and social position or lack thereof (Oyewùmí: 1997: 1).

Oyewùmí (1997: 9) states that “due to imperialism”, Western gender constructs have “been universalised to other cultures, and its immediate effect is to inject Western problems” into non Western societies “where such issues originally did not exist”. She stresses further that “even then, this debate does not take us very far in societies where social roles and identities are not conceived to be rooted in biology”. Although Western feminists like Lloyd (2004) made concerted efforts to deconstruct the male-female bio-logic gender distinctions; African’s historiography on gender has greatly been marginalised over time. The situation is such that Africa’s epistemic history of ideas on social reality is consistently made to exist only with reference to European thought. The debate over gender and sexuality in African economies and societies rests on the contest between Africa’s self-definition against social constructs imposed on Africa by Europeans. Rodney (1972), Mutiso and Rohio (1975: 266) adequately placed the debate in context when they echoed Memmi’s (2003) contention that to be colonized is to be removed from history thus:

The Most serious blow suffered by the colonised is being removed from history and from the community. Colonisation usurps any free role in either war or peace, every decision contributing to his destiny and that of the world and all cultural and responsibility (Memmi: 2003: 135).

Amadiume (1987: 64) argues that this removal from own self-history is further compounded by “the continuous presentation of Africans as a people with no philosophical history”.

Interrogating the changes in symbol and the shifts in meaning of sex from classical Greece to

contemporary times, Laqueur (1990) observes that the human body has not only been central but persistence in the construction of social categories in general and gender in particular. In a figurative use of the human biological body to interrogate Western conceptions and thought on gender and social reality, Oyewùmí (1997: 1-30) visualises the human body as mirror-image of Western thought process. Like Gould (1981), she reveals the racist trappings in Western gender epistemology and biological determinism and discredits them as such. Western philosophy of biological determinism perceives society as inhabited by human bodies. This theoretical context gives the human body a social logic of its own. Within this logic, the human body is seen and presented as a stark physical attributes on which gender categories are socially constructed and differentiated. Connell (1995: 53) submits thus: “...in our [Western] culture, at least, the physical sense of maleness and femaleness is central to the cultural interpretation of gender. Masculine gender is (among other things) a certain feel to the skin, certain possibilities in sex”.

Studies by Gould (1981: 103); Spelman (1988); Okin (1979) and Lloyd (2004) drives down the point that despite the much-acclaimed history of Western democratic values and institutions, the category of the citizen that formed the cornerstone of Western political theory, reason and democracy was male. In the “Mismeasure of Man”, Gould (1981: 21) uncovers what he describes as the scientific weakness and political contexts of determinist arguments thus:

Even so, I do not intend to contrast evil determinists who stray from the path of scientific objectivity with enlightened anti-determinists who approach data with an open mind and therefore see truth. Rather, I criticize the myth that science itself is an objective enterprise, done properly only when scientists can shuck the constraints of their culture and view the world as it really is.

In Aristotelian time, gender categorization was such that a woman was defined as a “female who is free”; and a man as “a male who is a citizen” (Spelman: 1988). Women were excluded from the category of citizenship because penis possession was one of the

legal qualifications for citizenship (Oyewùmí: 1997: 6-7). The paradoxical flaw in this way of reasoning is succinctly highlighted by Oyewùmí: (1997: 6) thus:

“...in European thought, despite the fact that society was seen to be inhabited by bodies, only women were perceived to be embodied; men had no bodies – they were walking minds. Two social categories that emanated from this construction were the “man of reason” (the thinker) and the “woman of the body,” and they were oppositionally constructed. The idea that the man of reason often had the woman of the body on his mind was clearly not entertained.”

Like Lloyd (2004), Schiebinger (1989: 162) interrogates the origins of modern science and its specific exclusion of women from European scientific institutions. She questioned the male-female dualistic distinction and the contention that gender differences between male and female is a scientific reflection of the dualistic principles that penetrates the cosmos as well as the bodies of men and women. **Oyewùmí:** (1997: 7) contends thus: “Differences and hierarchy, then, are enshrined on bodies, and bodies enshrine differences and hierarchy. Hence, dualisms like nature/culture, public/private, and visible/invisible are variations on the theme of male/female bodies hierarchically ordered, differently placed in relation to power, and spatially distance one from the other”.

Gould (1981: 19-20) detest Socrates and Plato’s classification of citizens and their attempt to hoist pseudo-science or “biological determinism” to explain that “shared behavioural norms, and the social and economic differences between human groups—primarily races, classes, and sexes arise from inherited, inborn distinctions and that society, in this sense, is an accurate reflection of biology”. His rejection of biological determinism is based on two broad principles. First, it is “anathema to many practicing scientists” and cannot “be accepted by nearly every historian of science” (Gould: 1981: 22). Second, biological determinism has over the years been manipulated and utilised by groups in power. This was the case in Nazi Germany and the white-racists in Apartheid South Africa.

The constant thing in Western narrative of biological determinism is the centrality of the human body which is presented in two bodies or two sexes. Within this elaborate and unwavering biological deterministic narrative, two scenarios emerge. The first is that the human body becomes both a site of biological difference through which hierarchies between men and women is constructed. Second, the human body also becomes the foundation on which the cause of socio-economic hierarchies or differences in society is constructed or can be traced to. Within this context, all differences in society are rationalised and traced to biology. In other words, human bodies are constantly being positioned in hierarchical manners to justify pre-supposed differences constructed. Given that difference in human bodies forms the bases for the construction of hierarchy; human society is perceived as “accurate reflections of genetic endowment – those with a superior biology inevitably are those in superior social positions” (Oyewùmí: 1997: 8).

Sigmund Freud’s authoritative pronouncement that ‘anatomy is destiny’ (Laqueur: 1990: 25-62) holds that one’s gender determines one’s main personality traits. Richards (1999: 1213-1214) study on ‘Freud and feminism: a critical appraisal’, describe Sigmund Freud as “an equality feminist” and paid tributes to him for his support for women particularly his “encouragement and support for their careers and with a theory that was instrumental in freeing women from both domestic bondage and fantasies of inferiority, but which was used by ‘later Freudians’ as justification for returning women to an exclusively domestic life”. Kluckhohn and Mowrer (1944: 4-5) early struggle with this debate concedes thus:

“The universal determinants of personality arise out of four facts: (a) man is an animal of distinctive physical appearance and with somewhat distinctive biological equipment, (b) man is a social animal, (c) man is a cultural animal, (d) man lives in a physical world which obeys certain natural laws. All human beings normally have two hands and two feet at birth (not four feet and only most

exceptionally one hand or three hands)".

Using the result of their research on the characterisation of Japanese as 'collectivists' and Americans as 'individualists', Oyserman (et. al.: 2002) questioned the stereotype of universality of culture and personality typologies. Caprara and Cervone (2000: 2) argue that the study of personality cannot just be sum up in biology because "the personality psychologist cannot be content with studying isolated aspects of psychological functioning". Rather the personality psychologist "must tackle the entire beast" because the subject matter addresses "the whole person", the "human universals and cultural variability".

Despite the fact that the emergence of Western feminists scholarship was largely driven by the pre-eminence of social constructionist and social deterministic discourse of society; biological reductionism continued to be at the epic centre of gender debate in Western Europe. Linda Nicholson (1994: 79) sum up challenges brought about by the pervasiveness of biological determinism thus:

Gender is a strange word within feminism. While many of us assume it has a clear and commonly understood meaning, it is actually used in at least two very different and, indeed, somewhat contradictory ways. On the one hand, gender was developed and is still often used as a contrasting term to sex, to depict that which is socially constructed as opposed to that which is biologically given. On this usage, gender is typically thought to refer to personality traits and behaviour in distinction from the body. Here, gender and sex are understood as distinct. On the other hand, gender has increasingly become used to refer to any social construction having to do with the male/female distinction, including those constructions that separate "female" bodies from "male" bodies (Nicholson: 1994: 79).

Within the foregoing context, sex and gender are categories that have been over the years conceived and assumed to be biological as well as social, and that both are separate and can be universally applied to all societies and cultures of the world outside Europe

and North America. Within this trajectory, sex is accorded a natural or biological category while gender represents the social construction of the sex (the natural or biological). As the debate continues it became apparent that sex (the natural or biological) also has elements of social construction. By the time "*Gender and Kinship: Essays toward a Unified Analysis*" (Collier and Yanagisako: 1987) was published; it became very obvious to Western feminist scholarship that "sex has served as the based and gender as the superstructure" (Oyewùmí: 1997: 9). **Consequently, considerable attempts made to separate and create distinctions between sex and gender did not yield. In Western scholarly parlance, gender cannot exist without sex since the human body forms the base of the two categories. Oyewùmí (1997: 9) countered by stating that in non Western cultures "where the visual sense is not privileged, and the body is not read as a blueprint of society, invocations of biology are less likely to occur because such explanations do not carry much weight in the social realm".**

Discussing what she considers as "confounding gender", Hawkesworth (1997: 649) states that common sense attitude toward gender "encompasses a series of "un-questionable" axioms which include "the beliefs that there are two and only two genders; gender is invariant; genitals are the essential signs of gender; the male/female dichotomy is natural; being masculine or feminine is natural and not a matter of choice; all individuals can (and must) be classified as masculine or feminine - any deviation from such a classification being either a joke or a pathology". Making reference to Garfinkel (1967: 122-28), she notes that "the beliefs constituting the natural attitude are "incorrigible" in that they are held with such conviction that it is nearly impossible to challenge their validity". She states further that "while the nature of gender remains a matter of pure self-evidence for those within the grips of the natural attitude, it has become a highly contested concept within feminist theory" (Hawkesworth: 1997: 649-650). Placing Hawkesworth's position in perspectives, Oyewùmí (1997: 10) states:

"The universality attributed to gender asymmetry suggests a biological basis rather than a cultural one, given that the human anatomy is universal whereas cultures speak in myriad voices. That gender is socially constructed is said to mean that the

criteria that make up male and female categories vary in different cultures. If this is so, then it challenges the notion that there is a biological imperative at work. From this standpoint, the gender categories are mutable, and as such, gender then is denaturalised”.

The challenge we are presented with is that there are many categories of difference that are socially constructed. This is what Oyewùmí (1997: 9) refers to as “the mutability of categories” and the “invitation to endless constructions of biology – in that there is no limit to what can be explained by the body-appeal”. Oyewùmí notes further that although “biology is hardly mutable; it is much more a combination of the Hydra and the Phoenix of Greek mythology”. She also states that “biology is forever mutating, not mutable”, and cautioned that “the most important point is not that gender is socially constructed but the extent to which biology itself is socially constructed and therefore inseparable from the social” (Oyewùmí: 1997: 9).

From the foregoing, there is no gain saying that gender is socially constructed. The difference between male and female are squarely located in human social practices and societal value orientation, and not determined by biological constituents. This position heralded the emergence of the strongest challenge to biological determinism in gender and racist scholarship. In all historical epochs, when biological interpretations become compelling, social categories then derive their legitimacy and power from biology with relative ease. Kessler and McKenna (1978) posit that the use of biological determinism to create and rationalise gender and race, is a mere reflection of the extent to which biological explanations became dominant in Western social thought and practices.

It has been extremely difficult for Western thought to separate sex and gender, because biology is often deployed as an ideological tool to map the social world. It is in this context that essentially synonymous terms “sex” and “gender” have been put to use. In Western constructions, physical bodies are always social bodies; there is really no distinction between sex and gender. In contrast to Africa, Oyewùmí (1997: 12) states that in Yoruba society, “social relations derive their legitimacy from social facts, not biology”. She submits that “the bare

biological facts of pregnancy and parturition count only in regard to procreation” because “biological facts do not determine who can become the monarch or who can trade in the market”. She further drew attention to the fact that “the nature of one’s anatomy did not define one’s social position”. She concludes that “the Yoruba social order requires a different kind of map, not a gender map that assumes biology as the foundation for the social”.

Among the early scholars to propagate the social constructionist paradigm of gender were Kessler and McKenna (1978: 7). They reject the dualism of the sex and gender distinction and took a social constructionist approach. They state that the term ‘gender’ “has traditionally been used to designate psychological, social, and cultural aspects of maleness and femaleness”. For them, ‘Sex’ “designates the biological components of maleness and femaleness”, and that “given this perspective, there are two sexes, male and female, and, correspondingly, there are two genders, masculine and feminine”. They insist: “we will use gender, rather than sex, even when referring to those aspects of being a woman (girl) or man (boy) that have traditionally been viewed as biological. They argue that “this will serve to emphasize our position that the element of social construction is primary in all aspects of being female or male”.

Kessler and McKenna (1978: 6) note that “gender attribution is complex, interactive process involving the person making the attribution and the person she/he is making the attribution about”. They posit that “gender is an anchor, and once people decide what you are they interpret everything you do in light of that”. They also observe that “the element of social construction is primary in all aspects of being female or male” (Kessler and McKenna: 1978: 7). They use the word ‘sex’ to refer to reproductive activities. With the exception of a few unfortunate people who may likely be abnormal, Kessler and McKenna reject the contention that there exist two sexes. Rather, they argue that sex is a continuum as much as gender. On that basis, it makes no sociological sense to try to separate the two even linguistically.

The constructionist paradigm is better understood when placed vis-à-vis the fact that each historical epoch always constructs its new *biologies* to rationalise the disadvantage(s) or subordination of women. In Western experience and thought, social

construction and biological determinism have always been two sides of the same coin. Over time and space, both the social and biological have tended to feed on each other, and have continued to reinforce each other. This has not stop even at the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. From ancients to the moderns, gender has been a foundation category upon which social categories have been erected. To that extent, Butler (1990: 7) highlights thus:

It would make no sense, then to define gender as the cultural interpretation of sex, if sex itself is a gendered category. Gender ought not to be conceived merely as cultural inscription of meaning on a pre-given surface (a juridical); gender must also designate the very apparatus of production where by the sexes are established. As a result, gender is culture as sex is to nature; gender is also the discursive/cultural means by which “sexed nature” or “a natural sex” is produced.

What is of sociological relevance to us in the case of Europe is that historically the ideology of gender has always been constructed to give women a generally lower gender role in society. As mentioned elsewhere, the history and ideology of gender differentiation in Europe presents politics as a man’s game (Welch: 1977: 713). Gould (1981: 103-112) provides a brilliant critique of Western biological articulation of gender difference. He disagreed with claims that nature or biological characteristics such as women’s low brain capacity and physical muscles best explain why women occupy the lower echelon of Western gender hierarchy. This is because it is neither grounded in natural scientific nor in sociological disposition. Oakley (1972: 79) discounts the contention that “the smaller size of the female brain was proof of woman’s inferior intelligence”. While she agrees that “the average circumference of male heads exceeds that of female heads at all ages”, she states that “head circumference has no known intellectual correlates”.

Oyewùmí (1997: 8) argues that as a social construction; the concept of gender is at the nucleus of feminist discourse because gender differences are

not ordained by nature but are “mutable and therefore changeable”. It is from this context that opposition between social constructionist and biological determinism emerged. On a similarly vein, Crawford (2000: 9) recounts the twofold importance of Kessler and McKenna’s contributions to the constructionist paradigm of gender which she states thus:

...compelling, lived examples of the social construction of gender in interaction. This sort of evidence is still very much needed; while social constructionist theoretical frameworks are widely used outside US psychology, they remain marginalized within it. Instead of providing a new theoretical framework for the study of gender, the potentially radical concept of social construction has been assimilated into a synonym for socialization, just as the once-useful term ‘gender’ has been assimilated into a synonym for sex differences... The second reason for the continuing importance of Kessler and McKenna’s work ...is the current multiplicity of theoretical positions on gender mutability, coupled with the increased visibility of transgendered and intersex people( Crawford: 2000: 9).

Despite the foregoing obvious material fact, Western philosophy of biological determinism have made several efforts to ideologies and foist a pseudo-science on gender categorisation; if only to justify gender distinctions base on body type. Yet, the meaning of gender and gender categorisation has not remained at the biological deterministic level. Gender and its social boundaries continue to witness dynamic social construction and reconstruction. In the words of Oyewùmí (1997: 7), “the boundaries are shifting and the content of each category may change, the two categories have remained hierarchical and in binary opposition”. The emergence of Western feminist scholarship began a new process of thought in which women as an embodied category began to receive relative attention in consonance with the explication of European history and thought process (Grosz: 1994).

**Labelling and Gender Assigning of ‘Boy’ or ‘Girl’**

Western culture have continue to attach gender identities to all social engagements no matter how such activities or undertakings may be remotely removed from issues of reproduction (Jonas: 1966, Lowe: 1982). This is the case with labelling or assigning of 'boy' or 'girl'. For instance; it took European and North American women many years to be granted voting rights or participate in active politics because they were women. In the case of North America, Welch (1977: 711) argues that from childhood, the political socialisation process discourages European women from playing active roles in politics. Similarly, some professions were engendered and preserve for men. Women could not freely take to such professions because they had the human body type of females. One of such professions in which women were initially denied participation in Europe and North America until the early twentieth century, was the participation of women in the armed forces or in active combat warfare (Gandu: 2009). Oyewùmí (1997: xiii) regards this as the *genderisation of professions*. This is a situation in which gender distinction between men and women are constructed in professional lexicons. This gave rise to gender phrases such as "*Women Pilot*", "*Woman President*", and "*Professor Emeriti*". Gender entrepreneurs in Europe and North America created the impression that whatever women do is different from what men do even if it is within the same professional calling. Yet; rather than biology, the *genderisation of professions* is socially constructed.

The constructionist theory of gender is rooted on a cross-cultural paradigm. Kessler and McKenna (1978) point out that by conceptualising gender as a social construction, it makes it possible for two things to happen. The first is that we are able to see the descriptions of others' cultures as evidence for alternative to ours. Secondly, we are then better placed to comparatively appreciate the conceptions of what it means to be woman or man across societies, cultures and economies in the world. They also argued that gender "is a product of social interaction in everyday life and that gender in everyday life provides the basis for all scientific work on gender and sex" (Kessler and McKenna, 1978: vii).

To drive home their point, Kessler and McKenna interrogate gender labels of 'boy' and 'girl'. This is what they refer to as *gender assignment* which is usually done at birth to infants. They regard *gender*

*assignment* or labelling as a special event which takes place once in a life time. But in our world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century gender re-assignment now takes place. This is the case with transgender and inter-gender cases. While interrogating the process of 'gender assignment'; Kessler and McKenna (1978: 8) paid theoretical attention to the medical management of intersex infants. Pitching with Kessler and McKenna, Smith (1992: 55) asserts that "gender is an a priori qualifying of one's intending, affecting not merely what one perceives but what one is, partly as a fact of one's life and partly as an issue dominating the meaning of one's life".

The social processes of gender classification of individuals as female or male may differ from society-to-society and culture-to-culture, it still remains that gender assignment is like any social construction process. Both Lorber (1994: 13) and Foucault (1990: 69) argue that this crucial point is always taken for granted and often unacknowledged. For instance, the emergence of the transgender movement in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century can partly be attributed to the influence of both the theoretical and practical power of social constructionism.

At the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Western hegemonic control of Africa's knowledge production is not just ongoing but entrenched. It is in this context that Western gender epistemology continues to create and impose gender categories that are not indigenous to Africa. Oyewùmí (2005a: xi) contend that in some case, gender categories are presented and "often expressed in a biblical tone, as if to suggest that in the beginning there was gender". Despite attempts by feminists to distinguish the two, there has also been the assumption in Western societies that "physical bodies are always social bodies," and "as a consequence, there is really no distinction between sex and gender" (Oyewùmí: 2005a: xii). The experience and history of the concept of 'woman' or 'womanhood' derived through Western thought process cannot absolutely be applied to Africa because it is not indigenous to Africa. With specific reference to the Yoruba society of South Western Nigeria, Oyewùmí (1997: ix) has this to say:

The so-called woman question... is a Western-derived issue – a legacy of the aged-old somato-centricity in Western thought... the fundamental category "woman" – which is foundational in Western



gender discourses – simply did not exist in Yoruba land prior to its sustained contact with the West. There was no such pre-existing group characterized by shared interests, or social position. The cultural logic of Western social categories is based on an ideology of biological determinism: the conception that biology provides the rationale for the organisation of the social world. Thus this cultural logic is actually a “bio-logic”. Social categories like “woman” are based on body-type and are elaborated in relation to and in opposition to another category: man; the presence or absence of certain organs determines social position (Oyewùmí: 1997: ix).

Still drawing from Yoruba historiography to counter Western gender conceptual hegemony, Oyewùmí (1997: xii) argues that: “the Yoruba case provides one such different scenario” that “shows that the human body need to be constituted as gendered or be seen as evidence for social classification at all times”. She strongly submits that in pre-colonial Yoruba society, “body-type was not the basis of social hierarchy: males and females were not ranked according to anatomic distinction”. Instead, “the social order required a different kind of map, not a gender map that assumed biology as the foundation for social ranking”. Consequently, pre-colonial African economies and societies did not use the human body as the basis for social ranking and gender assignment. There was no situation or socio-economic circumstances in pre-colonial African society in which a man, by virtue of his body-type was inherently superior to a woman. She authoritatively states thus:

“Yoruba society was hierarchically organised, from slaves to rulers. The ranking of individuals depended first and foremost on seniority, which was usually defined by relative age. Another fundamental difference between Yoruba and Western social categories involves the highly situational nature of Yoruba social identity. In Yoruba society before the sustained infusion of Western categories, social position of people shifted constantly in relation to those with whom they were interacting; consequently, social identity was relational and was not essentialised. In many European societies, in contrast,

males and females have gender identities derived from the elaboration of anatomic types; therefore, man and woman are essentialised (Oyewùmí: 1997: xiii).

One other flaw in the attempt to universalise Western gender thought system has been the persistent attempt to categorise women as homogeneous, bio-anatomically determined group which is always powerless and victimised. The tendency in this thought process is that it distorts the fact that gender relations are social not biological. Gender relations are also grounded in history and cultural relativity. The fact that gender is socially constructed means that it cannot behave in the same way, have the same meaning and logical conclusions across time, space, geographic locations and socio-economic contexts.

If we accept that gender is socially constructed, it is then the responsibility of scholars to undertake critical examination of societal cultures which are indeed the socio-architects on which gender categories and their meanings are constructed. This also means that we must also take into cognisance the aggregate role played by political ideology, economic class interests and sectarian orientation in the construction of gender categories. In essence, gender categories and their meanings are usually constructed by people within a given time, history, socioeconomic and socio-cultural circumstances. Gender categories do not emerge in universal biology. It is not scientifically correct or sociologically possible to use the cultural traits or experiences of one given society as universal tool to interpret or explain others. Oyewùmí (1997: 10) sums it up thus: “the constructedness of gender does suggest its mutability”.

#### **Gender Paradigms: A Synthesis**

At the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Western feminist scholarship continue to use, analyse and interpret cross cultural data in ways that have little or no regard to the fact that differing cultures may construct social categories differently. A very good example is contained in the distortions in the collection of essays by Fortes (1987). Fortes constructed and imposed a masculinised system on the Tallensi and downplayed any form of structural significance of female ancestress or spirits. Fortes (1987: 264) submits that Tallensi women of Northern Ghana “remain all their lives in a status of jural and ritual minority”, because “they can never attain the complete

personhood that a male can attain” (Fortes (1987: 264). His distorts Tallensi’s ideal of the complete person by stating that an adult male who reached old age and lineage eldership will automatically become worshiped as ancestor. Fortes analysis is driven by Eurocentric biological ideology of the dominance of maleness. He masculinises the data and blurred both the historical and contemporary presence of matriarchal system in Tallensi kinship system.

The foregoing prompts Amadiume (1997: 33) to argue that while matrilineal ancestor worship existed in pre-colonial Africa, its practice “affects sibling relations and has significance in determining the status of women, the female gender and the moral system – indeed, the totality of Tallensi society”. Amadiume continued by stating that “instead of producing a comprehensive analysis of what is obviously a complete new system” to him, Fortes “imposes European gender prejudices on Africans by claiming that women do not take part in ancestor worship”. It is pertinent to note that the European nuclear family in which Fortes draws his *Oedipus paradigm* (Fortes: 1987: 244-246) is fundamentally different from the African complex family structure.

Africa has unique gendered and separate matricentric units. For instance Amadiume (1997: 35) argues that in most African societies, “the son is also classified as a husband and his mother addresses him as such”. She also notes that the son “does not need to kill his father to become husband”. Contrary to Fortes’ general distortive analysis, Amadiume observe that “in the matrilineal household, the father is not part of the residential arrangement; it is the uncle who acts as ‘farther’. And that in the case of ‘male daughters’, or in a situation of ‘woman-to-woman marriage’, the ‘father’ is completely invisible or irrelevant”. What we are dealing with in Fortes’ analysis is a Eurocentric patriarchal construct which perceives African women within the limit of their role as wives and mothers. This way, wives and mothers are seen as mere objects to be dominated. Within that Western thought process, the autonomy of motherhood and the matricentric unit of production that is central to Africa and African women is denied. We disagree with Fortes’ psychological speculations. What we are dealing with in Fortes’ research findings is what Amadiume (1997: 35) refers to as “a conflict between sovereign/autonomous motherhood/matriarchy and appropriation by patriarchy”.

Western feminist thought have always had a tendency to appropriate, impose or graft Western biological categorisation of gender on non-Western cultures (Oyewùmi: 1997: 11). It should also be stated that unlike Europe, pre-colonial Africa was largely a matriarchal society. Europeans were historically a patriarchal people who “had moved from hunting straight to nomadism, thus generating the sort of belief system or moral philosophy that would justify their consequent violent socio-cultural formation” (Amadiume: 1997: 55). In Africa there was female rule, female transmit property and descent. Making reference to Diop (1987: 199), Amadiume (1997: 55) hold that man was the mobile element in marriage or sexual union. However, fundamental disruptions of the equilibrium of matri-focal social structure in pre-colonial Africa first began with ‘Arabo-Islamic’ invasions of the Africa continent. European imperial conquest later wrought far-reaching disruptions on pre-colonial matri-focal social structure (Diop: 1989).

Diop (1991: 212) contend that “the erasing, the destruction of the historical conscience also has been since time began part of the techniques of colonization, enslavement, and debasement of people”. Western anthropologists (Schneider and Gough: 1961, Fox: 1967, and Schlegel: 1972) dismissed any form of link between gender and a particular type of descent in Africa. This comes close to Judith Lorber’s ‘*paradoxes of gender*’ (Lorber: 1994: 17-18), in which she interrogates how Western feminism creates and imposes new gender categories and labels such as the ‘*third gender*’ or ‘*alternative gender*’ on non-Western cultures.

The problem with the coinage of the concept of a ‘*third gender*’ for non Western cultures is that Western gender constructs it is appropriates, routinise and present non Western cultures as extension of Western biological gender framework. By appropriating and taking non Western gender constructs outside their historical origins, socio-cultural contexts and meanings; Western thought process tries to undermine the cultural authenticity of non Western societies (Reiter: 1975). This prompts Oyewumi (1997: 11-12) to question thus:

Are these social categories seen a gendered in the cultures in questions?  
From whose perspective are they gendered?  
In fact, even the

appropriateness of naming them “third gender” is questionable since the Western cultural system, which uses biology to map the social world, precludes the possibility of more than two genders because gender is the elaboration of the perceived sexual dimorphism of the human body into the social realm. The trajectory of feminist discourse in the last twenty-five years has been determined by the West cultural environment of its founding development.

### **Africa’s Practice of ‘Woman-to-Woman Marriage’ is not Synonymous to Homosexuality**

Western feminist discourse has persistently refused to acknowledge the socio-economic settings of non-Western cultures that run counter (Adésínà: 2006a&b; Ampofo: 2008; Reiter: 1975). An example is Africa’s practice of ‘Woman-to-Woman Marriage’ which the West perceives as synonymous to homosexuality (Adésínà: 2010). ‘Woman-to-woman marriage’ or ‘female husband’ in Africa seems anomalous to Western societies because their world view is Euro-centric. History has however shown that the concept and praxis of ‘woman-to-woman marriage’ or ‘female husband’ was widespread in pre-colonial African-wide (Adésínà: 2010, 2006a&b; Ampofo: 2008; Cadigan: 1998, Amadiume: 1987; Krige: 1974; Obbo: 1976; Bledsoe: 1976; O’Brien: 1977; Obler: 1980).

Amadiume’s (1987) study of gender and sex; *Male Daughters, Female husbands* in Igbo society of South Eastern Nigeria, brought in the concept of ‘gender flexibility’ and or separability of gender. Oyewùmí (1997: 184) criticised the coinage of the concept: ‘gender flexibility’ or ‘third gender’ for non Western societies and cultures. She states that ‘*woman-to-woman marriage*’ in Igboland is an invitation to “a more radical interrogation of the concept of gender”. Her submission is anchored on two factors. First, is on ‘gender flexibility’ and second is the concept of ‘third gender’.

Herskovits (1937) acknowledged that *woman-to-woman marriage* as practiced from northern and southern Nigeria, the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, and the Union of South Africa “indicate the possibility that

there may be other instances of this institution that have gone unrecorded”. Yet, he distorts thus:

“This fact does not imply a homosexual relationship between ‘husband’ and ‘wife’, though it is not to be doubted that occasionally homosexual women who have inherited wealth or have prospered economically establish compounds of their own and at the same time utilize the relationship in which they stand to the women whom they ‘marry’ to satisfy themselves” (Herskovits: 1937: 338).

Herskovits’ analysis is part of Western illusions and falsification of the history and culture of non Europeans because it ignores the relevance of cross-cultural perspectives (Brettell and Sargent 2001). Krige (1974: 11) took time to explain that *woman-to-woman marriage*, found in many African societies, has not been given the adequate analytical framework it deserves and that “is still imperfectly understood” by the Western feminism. Krige shows concern that Western apologist like Herskovits continue to impute “sexual overtones that are foreign to the institution” of *woman-to-woman marriage* in Africa. It is more worrisome because according to Krige; these marriage practices had no content of homosexual relationships. She notes that “in actual fact it is usually married women with children of their own who contract such marriages” (Krige: 1974: 11).

In ‘Female Husbands in Southern Bantu Societies’, O’Brien (1977: 109) highlights the extent to which “the term female husband seems inherently contradictory” to the West. She took time though to explain how the concept and practice of female husband in Africa does not mean the same thing with Western concept and practice of homosexuality. O’Brien submits that in Africa, the term female husband: “refers to a woman who takes on the legal and social roles of husband and father by marrying another woman according to the approved rules and ceremonies of her society”. He states thus:

“...a female husband does not engage in sexual interaction with her wife; indeed, nowhere do the African data suggest any homosexual connotations in such marriages”. She indeed acknowledges that “rather, the wife

of a female husband chooses or is assigned one or more males who become her sexual partners and the biological fathers of her children” O’Brien (1977: 109).

Concerted efforts were put in place by colonial anthropologist and ideologues to lay the foundation for the distortion of African social and cultural realities. For instance, Meek (1931) quoted in Herskovits (1937), was part of the ideologues who constructed the colonial thought system in Nigeria. Meek describes the institution of *woman-to-woman marriage* in central Nigeria in the most un-contextual manner thus:

“There is a curious and ancient custom found among some of the Yoruba, Yagba, Akoko, Nupe, and Gana-Gana communities-that of a woman going through a regular form of matrimony with other women. In the Osi district a barren woman will formally marry a young girl and hand her over to her husband with a view to bearing children-as Hagar was given by Sarah to Abraham. But a more striking example of this type of marriage is where a wealthy woman, who may or may not be normally married to a man, contracts a marriage with a young girl to whom she subsequently allows a *cicisbeo* to have access, the resultant children belonging to the female “husband “. This is a common practice among the Yoruba, Nupe, Akoko, and Gana-Gana, and the female “husband” will even pay men to have connection with her young “wife “. In some cases she exacts gifts of farm-service from the *cicisbei*” (Meek: 1931: 209-210, quoted in Herskovits: 1937: 335)

Worried about the intensity of falsifications, Krige again attempt to explain what *woman-to-woman marriage* means. According to her, it means “the institution by which it is possible for a woman to give bride wealth for, and marry, a woman, over whom and whose offspring she has full control, delegating to a male genitor the duties of procreation” (Krige: 1974:

11). One common practice across Western feminist thought is the general tendency to ignore the dialectical movement of history in non western societies by the refusal to critically substantiate their assertions and claims. For instance, in her eloquently articulated book on *marriage*, Mair (1971) did appreciate the dynamism of marriage as an important social institution in Africa. But she became derogatory when she asserts thus: “according to Evans-Pritchard’s account of the Nuer it is usually barren women who” engage in the marriage of woman-to-woman and that “indeed it is hard to imagine a woman who had her own children doing so” (Mair: 1971: 60). History has however shown that these practices which date back to the early eighteenth century were neither homosexual relationship nor prompted by bareness. Other examples outside Africa include the Native American “berdache” (Kessler and McKenna: 1978: 24-36) and the South Asian “hijra” (Nanda: 2001).

In response to the denial of the possession of power and authority by African women in matrilineal descent, Diop points out that the centrality of motherhood in African societies is located in women’s role in production and reproduction. To show the economic, political and religious importance of matriarchy in pre-colonial Africa, Diop (1991), drew heavily from the history of Egypt. He holds that like it was in Egypt, queen mothers in Nubia and the rest of black Africa were very important, because they were regarded as the true sovereigns, land owners, keepers of the royalty, and guardians of the purity of the lineage. Through marriage, queens transmitted their crowns to their husbands, who acted only as their executive agents. This very act also marked the beginning of the demise of matriarchal rule and the emergence of patriarchy in some parts of Africa including the Egyptian Pharaohs.

African women have been the root of family and household building from which other relationships like the next generation take their bearing (James: 1978). From the historical examples of the Ashanti society in West Africa “where women traditionally enjoyed relative high status” (Smock: 1977: 193), James (1978: 149-151) acknowledged the centrality of “matrifocality” as “an indigenous view of the moral primacy of... motherhood in the definition of social relations”. She also concurred that among the Ashanti, men trace status, rank and rights through their mother and not their mother’s brother. She further contends

that the premise of matrifocality among the Akan people as a whole underlines “property holding and transmitting” (James: 1978: 150). Yet, she shy away from drawing the dialectical linkages between the primacy role played by matrifocal institutions and African economies and societies. That way, James is unable to provide a convincingly analysis of the nucleic role that metricentric units play in production and reproduction in Africa.

Matrifocality is therefore both a concrete material reality as it is an ideological construct and conduit for the transmission of property and property rights in pre-colonial Africa. This partly explains why Adesina (2010: 2) submits that “the concept of matrifocality has wider heuristic value” in Africa to the extent that when African gender scholarship thinks and re-thinks “identity beyond the prevailing patricentric framing” by the West, it allows “us to make sense of contemporary African data”.

There is failure on the part of Western scholarship to understand the structurally connection between motherhood and its matriarchal ideology in African social formations. Amadiume (1997: 80) contend that “the invisible, transitory or distant role of man as a father in African kinship was extremely difficult for the European mind to accept”. She adds that because they “assumed male dominance, citizenship traced through women was a strange phenomenon”. European men were to some extent perplexed to imagined male domination on the one hand and citizenship traced through women. The perplexity in their minds was to the extent that they assume that the seizure of political control by African women would contribute in transforming matriliney to matriarchy. Amadiume (1997: 80) also posits that given that artificial insemination had gained ground in Europe, Europeans thought that matriarchy would make things very different. But they failed to realise that matriarchy in Africa is culturally constructed and that the invisibility of the father’s role is a cultural reality that has nothing to do with the practice of artificial insemination.

### **Gender Anthropology and the Appropriation of African Women**

It is in this juncture that we need to draw heavily from Cheikh Anta Diop’s interrogation of the philosophical foundation of gender and race. He

reconstructed African identity and re-appropriated the centrality of matriarchy as the nucleus of production and reproduction in pre-colonial Africa. In “*The Invention of Africa*”, Mudimbe (1988) engages this old discourse on the critical synthesis of research on knowledge production and power in post colonial Africa. Mudimbe set to interrogate and provide answers to questions dealing with identity construction and imposition on Africa by Europeans. But at the end, he could not quite succeed. He came under heavy criticism. For example, Amadiume (1997: 2- 4) contends that he trivialised an important discourse by focusing on race, but could not critically interrogate the subject matter of racism. She submits that Mudimbe’s critique of Western thought took him to nowhere, because he absolutely depended “on a Western epistemological order” (Amadiume: 1997: 3). She concluded on Mudimbe thus: “I have argued that it is not enough to be critical of European-invented Africa if we ourselves remain uncritical of the European gender structure of the language...and its effects on our thought process and gender relations” (Amadiume: 1997: 24).

Diop (1989) shifts the analytical understanding of matriarchy/matriliny away from familiar Eurocentric anthropological framework which focuses on man as the controller of all social, economic, political and religious activities primarily engage by women either as mothers or sisters. Rather than being buck down by a “humiliating racist assumption that meaning and self-awareness in Africa only began with European contact, or exist only in reference to European standards” (Amadiume (1997: 64), Diop’s broad epistemic spectrum gives us the elasticity to place our discourses in context.

Given that European anthropologists had no parallel material history and experience of mother focused systems to draw their analysis from, their propagation of a patriarchal paradigm emanates from “the fixed point of the father” (Amadiume: 1997: 80). In the process, they “kept looking for man as father or man as the axis around which all rotated, or man as the owner and controller of everyone and everything (Amadiume: 1997: 80). This is at the heart of their distortion of African gender reality. Describing how colonised sedentary groups were distorted by Europe, Diop (1991: 20) succinctly describes the Kurgan Indo-Europeans as:

“...a patriarchal, nomadic group that surprised a sedentary society and introduced patriarchy and its entire corollary practices by force. This shows also that neither matriarchy nor patriarchy hinges on race but stems from the material conditions of life, as we have always maintained. This does not minimize the fact that patriarchy became solidly established in the Indo-European societies at the end of the Iron Age, with the arrival of the Dorians in Greece. This occurred in Rome, Persian, Arian India, Greece, etc.; and it is inconceivable to project a matriarchal past onto the very people who were the vehicles of patriarchy, particularly the Dorians. All evidence suggests that these were people who went from hunting to nomadic life without ever experiencing the sedentary phase. It was only afterwards, with the conquest of the agricultural regions, that they became sedentary”.

Several efforts have been made by scholars to deconstruct Western gender epistemic discourse and its appropriation of African women's livelihood challenges. Afonja (2007a: 2, 4) complained that the subordination of African women “persists and gender gaps are wide in all spheres”. She contends that the difficulties emanate from “unfriendly intellectual environment, our Western intellectual foundations, the division between feminist intellectuals and activists and our alienation from the people and history we portend to represent”. The consequences have been that African women at the grassroots have been excluded, neglected and or omitted at both the level of theorising and policy formulation (Gandu: 2011b). This result in a “wide gap between our imaginations as theorists and the realities of these women” (Afonja: 2007a: 3).

In the attempt to deconstruct Western gender discourse, two questions must be asked thus: Why should Western epistemologies be decolonized and deconstructed? Why should there be a paradigm shift on issues of gender and development in Africa? These questions have generated different reactions from within and outside Africa. In the first instance, the West appropriated knowledge and set the epistemic

parameters within which gender discourse became an integral part of the colonial project (Adésinà: 2010, Ampofo: 2008). **Oyewùmí (2005a&b)**; Nnameka (2005); and Lazreg (2005); have argued that because Western gender theories misinterpreted African social realities, there is therefore a strong justification for alternative theories to deconstruct Western gender epistemology. That would enable us understand the extent to which Western gender discourses and practices appropriated and undermined African women's lives, their voices and visions. Amadiume (1997: 1) laments thus:

One of the dangers of having our feet suck in Western-produced literature is the tendency to use European terms and expressions un-critical when addressing non-European cultures and experiences. The history of European imperialism and racism means that the language which aided the project is loaded with generalised terms which do not necessarily have a general meaning, but serve a particularistic interest.

It has been argued that African scholarship in the humanities and social sciences is still characterised with misrepresentation, falsehoods and half-truths; and this has over the years undermined theory building (Taiwo: 2003). Afonja (2007a: 13) asserts that “the poverty of theory still pervades African feminism in spite of the years of struggle”. By the refusal to recognize the historical and contemporary role play by women and importance of matriarchal in pre-colonial Africa, Eurocentric gender discourse deliberately distorts Africa's gender reality and appropriates African women. Such distortions served long-term strategic social economic interest of global capitalism. This dialectics explains why Boserup (1970: 53-54) blames African women's “loss of status” on European rule”. She states that “European settlers, colonial administrators and technical advisers are largely responsible for the deterioration in the status of women in the agricultural sectors in developing countries,” because they neglected “female agricultural labour force when they helped to introduce modern commercial agriculture to the overseas world and promoted the productivity of male labour”. According

to her, they showed little or no sympathy for the “female farming systems which they found in many of their colonies and in those independent countries where they settled”. She holds European in contempt for accepting that “cultivation is naturally a job for men”, because this was the single factor that “persuaded them to believe that men could become far better farmers than women, if only they would abandon their customary laziness”.

Europeans did everything necessary to put their biological deterministic gender theory into practice in the agricultural sector of African economies. The propaganda then became that agricultural cultivation with the rudimentary hoe was a masculine task that could only be done effectively by a man and not a woman. Baumann (1928) cited in Boserup (1970: 54) argued that “cultivation with the hoe was very superficial when undertaken by women, and the intensity of the hoe culture increased in proportion to the men’s share in it”. Boserup (1970: 54) also drew inference from Forde (1946) that “a higher standard of yam cultivation was achieved where men worked with women and supervised them”. Contributing to the debate Martin (1984: 413), points to the contrary that; “between 1900 and 1930 women did most of the work in food farming and cash crop production in the Ngwa region”, and that by the time female labour became scarcity oil palm production could not be expanded.

Shifts in the sexual division of labour in Africa was therefore more of a colonial function and “appear to be more closely related to changes in control over farm produce than to pressures on productive resources” (Martin: 1984: 413). Martin states further that the pattern of diversification under colonial rule by which farmers adopted new cash crops and entered into export trade in such crops was meant to serve the economic interest of the colonial export economy; and not to achieve “a more varied diet and a more secure food supply” for Nigerians. Despite all efforts by the colonial system to distort and downplay the contributions of African women, Susan Martin report that “by the early twentieth century, the Ngwa had developed a complex sexual division of labour within which women did the bulk of the farm work”. She also note that “the Ngwa people whom I interviewed say that, in the 1920s, both women and men engaged in food farming, head-loaded transport and petty trade” (Martin: 1984: 416-417)

On the basis of the foregoing, Boserup set herself a task to demystify the Eurocentric biological-deterministic contention that higher intensity agricultural cultivation and better yield could only be obtained “where men help the women” (Boserup: 1970: 54). She strongly submits that the so called superior physical or muscular attributes, or strength of men is not responsible for higher agricultural productivity and yield but a synthesis of many factors of which physical labour is only a fraction. Beside raw physical muscular power in rudimentary hoe farming systems, other factors include farming techniques; availability of agricultural inputs and the fertility of the soil. All these factors play crucial importance in determining crop yield. Boserup contend that rather than biological-masculine attributes of men being responsible for higher yield, the determining factors can simply be explained thus:

“...men take part in cultivation where population is dense and where, therefore, relatively intensive methods are needed, while women work alone where fertile land is abundant and there is no need to apply labour-intensive methods. In any case, virtually all Europeans shared the opinion that men are superior to women in the art of farming; and it then seemed to follow that for the development of agriculture male farming ought to be promoted to replace female farming. Many Europeans did all they could to achieve this” (Boserup: 1970: 54).

Powesland (1952: 20-22) shows vividly the extent to which colonial Uganda represents a classical example of how and why concerted colonial policies were put in place to suppress women in the Agricultural sector. While men were trained on new agricultural rules techniques, women were not. The disadvantages for women became more acute when new agricultural extension rules were extended only to men’s farms and estates. Despite the fact that women played important role in agricultural production, they were not accorded same agricultural extension services as their male counterparts.

Colonialism perpetuates the control and circulation of women's agricultural labour so as to sustain the supremacy of patriarchy (Terry: 1972: 164). The material history of patriarchy in Africa can be said to be rooted on European colonial appropriation of women, who have been the direct agricultural producers in a matriarchal pre-colonial African. This appropriation of women and their labour was meant to benefit a patriarchal construct as opposed to a matriarchal one. Boserup succinctly captures the thrust of the anti-women agricultural policy in this way:

"In Ugandan women began the cultivation of cotton, yet in 1923 the European director of agriculture in the territory had stated that 'cotton growing could not be left to the women and old people, and one decade later most of the men were growing cotton and coffee, and importing hired labour from other tribes to do most of the work. In those parts of Uganda where cultivation continued to be done mainly by women, the Europeans neglected to instruct the female cultivators when they introduced new agricultural methods, teaching only men in an agricultural setting of traditional female farming, with particularly unfortunate results" (1970: 54-55)

### **Concluding Remarks**

The foregoing articulates the extent to which Western gender discourse has been driven by dualistic male and female epistemology. It was especially so during the colonial era, when European scientists, philosophers, and literary figures projected their views on colonized peoples through male prerogative lenses. From Plato, Aristotle and to enlightenment scholars like Thomas Hobbes and Rousseau (O'Brien: 2009), Western gender discourse and epistemic framework (Sydie: 1994; O'Brien:1989) has been largely influenced by western paradigm of a male centred trajectory. This theoretical framework excluded women from active participation in the public sphere.

Like women in Europe (O'Brien: 2009), the colonized people of Africa were excluded from the "ethical and moral considerations on similar

ontological grounds" (Mire: 2001: 4). European men represents "the sole agents with moral standing while denying such moral standing to colonized men and women who were considered to lack the capacity for rational and moral judgments" Mire (2001: 4). The lack of capacity by Africans, explains why they were rendered sub-persons (Mills: 1998). Expanding the debate, Taiwo (1999: 168, 170) posits that "the African world", as apprehended by Lugard (1929) and other architects of colonialism, "was not a human world", but a "world peopled by primitive savages". In the eyes of Hegel (1991) Africans represent the children of the human race.

This paper shows that while considerable attempts have been made to deconstruct colonial historiography on Africa; the same amount of energy has not been put in place to extricate the varying ways through which western gender discourse; its epistemologies; methodologies and philosophies impacted on African gender thought system. It is in this context that the paper recommends that more efforts still need to be put in place by African gender scholarship to challenge Western gender paradigms. This can be done by a way of what Adésinà (2010) describes as "Re-appropriating Matrifocality" or as Mire (2001: 4) put it:

"European imposed African colonial rule in Africa had been founded on four closely related themes: dualist epistemology; white male prerogative; denigration and dehumanization of the African female body and feminization and colonization of the African space. In order to envision progressive African political theories and practices, we must first trace the history of the twin precepts of dualist epistemology and masculinist prerogative central to western history of ideas and practice and their colonizing impact on African cultures, modes of knowledge production and political institutions. But, we must first identify some of the specific characteristics of western notions dualistic epistemology and masculinist prerogative" (Mire: 2001: 4).



In conclusion, this paper submits that gender discourse in general and its African contextualisation will continue to generate sharp opposing views. This paper is a testimony to the fact that the imposition of Eurocentric gender theories on the African continent is responsible for the appropriation of African women. The concluding objective of this paper is to advocate for more scholarly attention to continue to interrogate the extent to which Western gender paradigm appropriates African Women. This paper is a historical; theoretical and practical call for African gender scholars to continue to unveil the socio-economic and cultural significance of pre-colonial matricentric Africa. The paper call for the continue deconstruction of Western gender theoretical models because of their ethnocentric approaches as well as the absent of cross-cultural perspective in their analyses and contents. Given that “matrifocality in African gender scholarship has heuristic value beyond western “biological determinism or bio-logic” (Adésinà: 2010: 15); this approach provides an analytical framework to make sense of the contextual undertone of African gender scholarship. This approach will enable us to understand gender relations beyond ‘western given’

The paper provides a critical interrogation of the tendency by Western gender discourse to promote the ideological objectives of empire. This paper calls for a robust matricentric perspective of gender discourse in Africa. It analysed the extent to which matriarchal roots of Africa serves as a transforming force in culture and in social movements. The paper concludes that African women were not only neglected but appropriated by the colonial project. The paper submits that African knowledge production can only possible if we continue to decolonise our history. The paper concludes that African women do not need to copy western feminist rhetoric or event new feminisms; because Africa already has a matriarchal history and a legacy of a women’s culture.

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