

**AFRICAN WOMEN AND  
FEMINISM:  
REFLECTING  
ON THE  
POLITICS OF SISTERHOOD**

**EDITED BY  
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## "SISTERHOOD"

white sister told me  
all women are one  
united in de face  
of chau'vism.  
(pa'don my engilis)

I smiled

pa...paa  
pa..tri..archy is the cross  
women carry, she charged  
we must unite  
to fight it  
with all our might.

I laughed ...

racked by spasm  
my head jerked back  
and crazily wobbled  
from side to side.  
pampered sister  
titillates herself  
to frenzy  
with quixotic tales  
of male 'xploitation.

I ...

"dumb" black woman  
laughed mirthlessly on  
flicking away tears  
of pain from eyes.

I looked up  
from my chore  
on the kitchen floor  
where, new found sister  
had ordered me to be  
on knees

to scrub the floor clean  
for the pittance she paid:  
on knees  
to scrub the floor clean  
for sisterarchy.

NKIRU NZEGWU

28/7/90

1.

INTRODUCTION:

Feminism, Sisterhood, and *Other* Foreign  
Relations



Oyèrónké Oyewùní

C urrently, feminism as an ideology if not as a social movement, is subject to many qualifications. Thus scholars differentiate between white feminism, black feminism, Western feminism, Third world Feminism, and African feminism. These distinctions reflect the contestations that have become very much a part of the history and worldwide development of feminist ideas. This book focuses on the contentious relationship between feminism and African women. As its title indicates, African women and feminism are at odds because despite the adjectives used to qualify feminism, it is Western feminism that inevitably dominates even when it is not explicitly the subject under consideration. This feminism usually travels without any qualifications but with a lot of baggage.

The volume engages with Western feminism as it has been articulated in Europe and America and subsequently carried forward in an imperial march across the globe. A distinction must be made between the noun *feminism* and the adjective *feminist*. The term *feminism* usually refers to a historically recent Europe and American social movements founded to struggle for female equality. *Feminism* by this designation has become a global political project. But the adjective *feminist* has a broader reach in that it need not be confined by history; in fact it describes a range of behavior indicating female agency and self-determination. In many traditional African societies, a certain measure of self-determination was a value, and practiced as a matter of course and as a way of life for all adults, male and female. In the 1980s, Filomina Steady called attention to this African value when she wrote about Africa as the

- Black Woman Cross-Culturally*. Cambridge, Mass.: Schenkman Pub. Co., 1981.
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2.

**THE WHITE WOMAN'S BURDEN<sup>1</sup>:  
African Women in Western<sup>2</sup> Feminist  
Discourse**



**Oyèrónké Oyewùní**

By persistent reiteration, a manner of speaking can become the substance of what is said.

-*The Africa That Never Was*, (Hammond and Jablow 1970:14)

— Travelers with closed minds can tell us little except about themselves.

-"An Image of Africa" Chinua Achebe (Achebe 1978:12)

There is no question that in order to investigate the construction of gender in any contemporary African society, the role and impact of the West must be examined, not only because most African societies came under European rule by the end of the nineteenth century, but also because of the continued dominance of the West in the production of knowledge. In African studies, historically and currently, the creation, constitution, and production of knowledge remains the privilege of the West. In the last three decades, feminism has played a significant role in perpetuating certain myths about Africa. However, unlike the previous four centuries of Africanist scholarship, which focused on men, contemporary feminist discourse centers on African women.

From the outset, it should be made clear that feminism is one of the most important approaches to the interpretation of Western society that has been developed in recent times. It is invaluable to a total comprehension of Euro-American societies; and as such it expands our understanding of colonization and other processes unleashed by the West on Africa. Feminism without doubt elucidates the European world view and the socio-political organizations and processes that flow from it. Nevertheless, with regard to Africa,

feminist scholarship in the main has not provided any serious departures from the "Othering" of Africa which has characterized Western writings on Africa. Therefore, my concern in this paper is not with feminism in its land of origins *per se*, but with feminism as it engages Africa and its peoples.

Predating feminist scholarship is the centuries-old Africanist discourse which has been well documented by a number of researchers, including Winthrop Jordan (1968), Hammond and Jablow (1970), Philip Curtin (1974), and Christopher Miller (1985). The consensus among these scholars is that Western writings on Africa have been racist and ethnocentric, projecting Africans, among other things, as savage, subhuman, primitive, and hyper-sexed. I contend that such images are re-presented in feminist discourse on Africa today. Thus, parallels can be drawn between the images of Africa in traditional Africanist discourse and those in the more recent feminist writings. In fact, there is a marked continuity of themes, images, and declared motivations of the scholars participating in these two phases of Africanist discourse. I am suggesting that despite the professed epistemologically "radical" shift that feminism represented in Western thought, with regard to the representation of Africans, such a radical shift is not apparent. Feminism is essentially a continuation of the traditional Africanist scholarship.

The historical context within which Africanist discourse was produced was a period of unprecedented European expansion and domination of non-European peoples. In Africa, it was the period during which the Atlantic slave trade flourished, imperialism thrived, and the framework for eventual colonial domination was put in place. Not surprisingly, the tone, content, and form of this literature were imperialistic and racist, designed to justify and rationalize European plunder and domination. Africans were projected as inferior to prove their need for the "guiding hand" of Europeans. Remarkably, Africans, were uniformly framed by European writers regardless of their station. As Jablow and Hammond noted:

what is more significant is that this [racist] idiom should have dominated so many other writers on Africa. Traders, settlers, prospectors, and tourists tended to be equally imperialist in sentiment. It is as if the nineteenth century never ended for them. (Hammond and Jablow 1978:117-118)

Western feminists, as "heiresses" to this tradition, are no exception. It appears as though the nineteenth century is an especially long one, its prejudices endured into the opening year of the twenty-first century.

The concern in this paper is to explicate a certain mode of appropriation and codification of knowledge. I shall examine the images of African women depicted in Western feminist discourse and analyze the implications of the fact that the scholarship is dominated by white women, many of whom have

not managed to avoid the racism and ethnocentrism that have characterized Western writings on Africa generally. The intention is not to undertake a discussion of the so-called status of women in Africa. Rather, I pursue the question of how Western writings affect the subjects under consideration. More precisely, the aim is to show how the way in which African women are constituted, conceptualized, and theorized in Western scholarship creates its own reality. Literally, the image not only makes the woman; the image becomes the woman. It is the discursive domination of the West that I call into question. In her discussion of how anthropology as a study of the Other conjures up its object, Min-ha writes:

What we "look for" is unfortunately what we shall find. The anthropologist, as we already know does not *find* things; s/he *makes* them. And makes them up. The structure is therefore not something given entirely external to the person who structures, but a projection of that person's ways of handling realities (Min-ha 1989:141).

These comments also describe the way in which feminist scholarship has created its very own African woman.

### Universalizing Women's Defeat

The "world historic defeat" of women theorized by Engels did not take place on any grand battlefield, but happened at the stroke of the pen with the declaration of the universal subordination of women in the early 1970's by groups of feminist scholars. The introductory chapter of Michele Rosaldo and Louise Lamphere's *Women, Culture and Society*, a collection widely regarded as seminal in women studies, exemplifies how the defeat of women was engineered. Patriarchy was created largely through a process of flitting from one society to the other, all over the globe, without reference to region, nation, race, cultural boundaries, or even history. Ignoring local specificities, Rosaldo and Lamphere declared that "sexual asymmetry is presently a universal fact of human social life" (1974:3). In spite of the fact that the editors of this collection argued that the anthropological literature has ignored women and thus "tells us relatively little about women," and despite the claim that they suffered from "lack of both materials and theories" (Ibid:vi), they were still able to reach their grand conclusion about the state of the world's women of all time. But they were only able to achieve this feat by recreating all women in the image of the Western woman, who found herself in a male-dominated society. Lack of cross-cultural data did not seem to constitute a problem for these scholars. Karen Sacks identified two lines of argument through which this universe of women's inequality is created:

The first manifests in defining or conceptualizing equality in a slippery way, whatever women lack is the crucial marker. The second utilizes ad hoc reasoning to explain the conditions that underlie men and women's social positions: if the data do not fit the theory, an unusual circumstance has overridden biology... Thus... women in some necessarily unformulated way, are always subordinate to men. It is a theory that cannot be disproved by contradictory data. (Sacks 1979:94)

The ethnocentric idea that the white woman (or man) is the norm—measure of all things—is ethnocentric, and has dominated Western scholarly writings in at least the last two centuries. Consequently, cross-cultural women's studies have largely focused on finding patriarchy, and deciding what strategy Western feminists can use to liberate women of Africa, Latin America, and Asia from its shackles. There have been few genuine scholarly attempts to uncover and analyze the role and importance of gender differences in other societies and cultures. Scholars have simply assumed that if gender is salient in the West, it must be salient in all societies across time and space.

The feminist movement of the early 1970's in Europe and North America provided the historical context in which feminist discourse was produced and proliferated. In fact, the discipline of Women's Studies, has been characterized as the academic arm of the feminist movement. (Farnham 1987:1) This combination of scholarship and political activism meant that feminist scholars were not just content to identify and describe gender inequality; they also sought to eradicate it wherever it reared its ugly head. Hence, feminist theories are simultaneously a description of gender asymmetry and a prescription for eliminating it. Discussing their own research, Alison Jaggar and Paula Rothenberg noted that they, like other feminists, were "motivated by our deep belief, as feminists, that changes were urgently required in the position of women.... It came from our recognition as activists, that not only our political activity be guided by theory but our theory must be evaluated by its success in practice" (Jaggar and Rothenberg 1978:xii).

However, political activism and academic theorizing are often a long-distance "affair" carried out as anthropological studies and "Women in Development" projects in African, Asian, and Latin-American societies. Feminism, like imperialism, discovered its social mission, which was global in scope, and like the white man's burden of the nineteenth century, the white woman's burden of the twentieth century was born. The burden, from these feminists' vantage point, entailed rescuing the exploited, helpless, brutalized, and down-trodden African woman from the savagery of the African male and from a primitive culture symbolized by barbaric customs.

In their passionate zeal, it was inconceivable to some white women that there might be any society in the world in which women fare better than they do in the West. In their perception, the West represented the height of civilization. This was in keeping with traditional European ideas about the evolutionary stages of human progress, which posited that the position of women in any society was closely tied with the position of the society in the evolutionary hierarchy. Curtin cites Millar, who in 1777 created a four-stage schema on the place of women as a means for determining the position of a society: the more "liberated" the women, the more civilized the society (Curtin 1964:64). Because European women were said to enjoy very high status, their society was deemed the most civilized. Predictably, according to this formulation, African women were at the very bottom.

Given this way of thinking in the West about Africa, it is not surprising that feminist studies conducted on African women usually confirmed their "sorry" state. The premises of such studies represented their conclusions; as a result, no new "discoveries" were possible. Moreover, the fact that Western women were the researchers studying other women was seen as proof in itself that they were better off in their own situation, this was evidenced by their new-found position as creators of knowledge. This "positional superiority," to borrow Edward Said's term, put them in a powerful position *vis-à-vis* Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans, male and female. Western feminists did not explain their privileged status, however, in terms of their race and the internationalization of a Western-originated capitalist system; they took for granted that it was a result of how far they had progressed as women in their own society. What white women did not realize was that if they were motivated by women's subordination in their own society to study "Other" women, it was their economic and racial dominance in the global system that made it possible. After all, they were in an equally privileged position *vis-à-vis* African men. Their positional superiority is reinforced by their capacity to create knowledge about Africa and Africans. Edward Said, commenting on the relationship between power and knowledge, observed that:

...the object of such knowledge is inherently vulnerable to scrutiny.... To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it" (Said 1978:32)

and hence to recreate it in an image that fits one's fantasy, I might add.

### Scholarly "Reflections" or Mirror on the Wall

For Western feminism, Africa represented the place *par excellence* for the realization of both the academic project of theorizing gender and the social



mission of liberating women. According to Basil Davidson, historically, in Africanist discourse, "Africa was represented as some kind of human reserve where the nature and condition of Ancient Man could be studied in all its simplicity and savage innocence: a reserve, moreover, in which the Negroes occupied the lowest place in the hierarchy of achievement" (Davidson 1964:37). In this case, the achievement or lack of it on the part of Africans (read, African men) was that they oppressed "their" women. This view of a timeless, eventless, and changeless Africa, so well summarized by Davidson, is evident in feminist writings. In an ethnography of the !Kung, a people in Southern Africa, Shostak writes:

Their culture, unlike ours, was not being continuously disrupted by social and political factions.... Although the !Kung were experiencing cultural change, it was still quite recent and subtle and had thus far left their traditional value system mostly intact. A study revealing what !Kung women's lives were like today might reflect what their lives had been for generations, possibly even for thousands of years. (Shostak 1983:6)

Shostak makes this assumption of !Kung stasis, in spite of the fact that the !Kung had been the basis of a Harvard University anthropological project for years, which must have been quite an event for the !Kung (if not for the anthropologists). The idea that the West could learn about itself and hence that feminists could find themselves in Africa was not a new one. Ranging from the explorers who used their (mis)adventures in Africa to test their manhood, through the Christian missionaries proselytizing for the sake of their own salvation, to the feminists in search of themselves, Africa represented a mirror to the Westerners in which they perceived themselves. Rosaldo and Lamphere, summarizing the questions that reflect their concerns about women cross-culturally, concluded, "ultimately, of course, all of these questions revolve around a need to re-examine the ways in which *we* think about ourselves" "[my emphasis]. (Rosaldo and Lamphere 1974:v) And Shostak explains the reason for her interest in !Kung women: "The Women's Movement had just begun to gain momentum, urging re-examination of the roles Western women had traditionally assumed. I hoped the field trip might help *me* to clarify some of the issues the Movement had raised" (Shostak 1983:5). At a certain level, cross-cultural research was primarily a narcissistic undertaking.

The notion of a static, unchanging Africa is clearly ahistorical. One of the major critiques leveled by feminist anthropologists against their discipline is its ahistorical approach (Leacock 1981:33-81), depicted by the tendency to treat the present circumstances of the so-called traditional cultures as if they were identical to past circumstances. Accordingly, Duley and Edwards understand

the problem inherent in this kind of thinking:

We cannot assume, as many have done, that the present set of relationships between men and women are necessarily those of the past, and efforts to analyze the origins of gender stratification may be seriously flawed by failing to recognize this fact. (Duley and Edwards 1986:29)

Yet, in the declaration of a universal subordination of women and in the search for origins of male dominance, many Western feminists make no reference to history—the history of slavery, imperialism, colonization, and racial domination of non-Western peoples, and the emergence of Western hegemony world-wide. In Gayatri Spivak's words, they deny the "worlding" of the Third World—which is a denial of the impact of the West on the rest of the world. According to Spivak, "the information retrieval approach to non-Western peoples suggests that despite centuries of imperialism and colonial exploitation non-Westerners still have a rich, intact, cultural heritage waiting to be recovered, interpreted, and curricularized for the benefit of the West" (1985:262). It is the curricularization of African women in feminist literature that I call into question.

### "Customizing" Women's Oppression

Inherent in the notion of cultural stasis is the idea of a primitive Africa where humans have remained in their original state, a state of nature, for ages. Indeed, the characterization of Africa as the dark continent is undergirded by this notion. Alta Jablow and Dorothy Hammond posit that two contradictory images of Africans flow from this characterization—the Noble Savage and the Bestial Savage (1970:20). But in relation to "his" women, the African male could not be portrayed as anything but a bestial savage. In this regard, polygamy was singled out and represented as a special evil, symbolizing the degradation of African women and hence the low state of Africans. Likewise, polygamy has been a focus of attention for feminist scholars. Perhaps the two questions that are most asked by Westerners of African women are the ones Shostak asked !Kung women—"how it felt to share a husband with another woman?" (18) and "did spouses love one another?" (5). No doubt, foreigners are often obsessed with perceived curiosities they encounter in other cultures. However, the problem is that in feminist discourse, these questions are rhetorical not because they demand no answers, but because they have pre-ordained answers, such as, monogamy is the only "normal" (read "civilized," "true") form of marriage, and polygamy and love are mutually exclusive. For many Western feminists, polygamy is barbaric, it degrades and oppresses women, and it is alien to the civilized (read "Western") societies

from which they come. No attention is paid to the feelings and perspectives of those who experience it as the only form of marriage, and no examination is made of its implications for social organization. For example, though many feminists promote women's employment outside the home, they fail to acknowledge that women in some African societies are able to earn income by engaging in non-home-based work because of the division of labor among women that polygamy makes possible. Child-care, for instance, can be shared among women, allowing them to pursue different occupations without being handicapped by children's needs. Despite decades of feminist scholarship on Africa, interpretations of polygamy and bride price remain ethnocentric if not racist, reinforcing the beast-of-burden image as a manifestation of African "tradition."

Violence plays an important role in the painting of negative pictures of Africa. It has been powerful in the depiction of Africa as the "dark continent" and it is no less important in the representation of the woman in the "heart of darkness." According to Brantlinger, negative images are created by the constant association of Africa with evil, disease, and brutality. He notes that in nineteenth-century European writing, from abolitionist propaganda to travel tales, violence is depicted in excruciating detail to feed the European imagination. Signs of such "X-rated" concern are apparent in feminist writing. For example, Shostak's choice of Nisa as the !Kung woman to be studied, was determined in part by the woman's alleged story about having committed infanticide. Another case in point is Western women's obsession with and sensationalization of female circumcision—a practice found in some communities of Africa. Their preoccupation with this practice was made obvious during the conference of the United Nations Decade for Women, held in Copenhagen in 1980. The insistence on the part of Western women to label what African women call female circumcision "mutilation" was the first visible sign of deep divisions between them and many of their African counterparts. Although many of the African delegates voiced their interest in seeing an end to the practice, "they stressed that the abolition of these practices is not a priority for them—sufficient food and clean water having a far greater importance."<sup>3</sup> For Western feminists, the position taken by African women was unacceptable and, like the proverbial mourners who wail at the funeral more than the bereaved, they continue to focus on female circumcision as the number-one problem of African women. This presumption on the part of Western women to define the meaning and goals of the lives of "Other" women did not bode well for the sisterhood that was being advocated at these international conferences. The conflict was bound to come to a head, as it did in subsequent international meetings.

A number of other African institutions that Westerners view as barbaric

include arranged marriages, levirate, and child betrothal. These practices are misrepresented as misogynistic and are not placed in their cultural and social contexts that would allow Westerners to discern their meaning from the perspective of African societies. Solange Falade, commenting on arranged marriages, condemns the self-righteous attitude of Euro/Americans and informs us that in Senegalese society:

It is indeed parents who choose the marriage partner. I do not think it is necessary to regard this as nothing but a heartless trick, or something done for egoistic reasons, on the part of the parents. It is not a question merely of a union between two individuals, but of a union between two families. (Falade 1963:220)

In fact, the time seems ripe for many feminists to critically analyze the alternative of arranged marriages—the so-called personal choice or "love" marriages—that are prevalent in the West today, and indeed in Africa where women as individuals are said to choose their own mates. As the popular books with telling titles like *Smart Women*, *Foolish Choices*, and *Men Who Hate Women and the Women Who Love Them*, suggest that personally choosing a marriage partner does not necessarily guarantee personal safety, self-fulfillment, or eternal bliss in marriage. The institutional and social context of marriage is paramount in assessing the welfare of both men and women.

### **The Creation of Patriarchy or "Feminist" Male-Centeredness**

The strategy in Western feminist discourse of singling out women without corresponding attention to men is used to create an impression that African societies are male-dominated and anti-women. For example, Nancy Folbre, establishing patriarchy among the Shona of Zimbabwe, points out that "a woman's consent to marriage was not required and many young girls were promised at an early age in return for a portion of the bride wealth payment" (Folbre 1988:64). What she failed to mention is that marriage was arranged for both boys and girls. Bride wealth is portrayed as "buying a wife," yet no attention is paid to bride service, whereby men may have to provide services to their in-laws for the duration of their lives. The lack of attention to men in much of feminist writing on Africa has produced gross distortions and misrepresentations in the understanding of gender relations. Christine Oppong noticed this unfortunate development and acting to avoid it in a book she edited writes: "In putting together this volume, we have sought to avoid a currently pervasive neo-sexist trap: the study of women, by women, for women! We have sought rather to assemble male and female accounts and observations of female and male relationships" (Oppong 1983:xv-xvi).



Moreover, the creation of patriarchy through denial of female power and agency is pervasive in the feminist literature. An outgrowth of this practice is the image of a weak and helpless African woman who needs to be saved from barbaric customs and a brutal, all-powerful, misogynistic group of men. Jean Henn, in the process of instituting a continent-wide patriarchal mode of production in Africa, dismisses roles symbolizing female importance and power: "Such roles for women can be variously interpreted as the means by which the patriarchal class co-opted particularly capable and potentially rebellious women" (Henn 1988:47). In one quick stroke of the pen, Henn co-opts the counter-evidence, and we are back to the image of the weak, helpless, and subjugated African woman. This discursive practice demonstrates very clearly how "research" can constitute its own subject.

Perhaps one is not surprised at the racist and ethnocentric perspectives displayed in some feminist scholarship on Africa, given that it is part of a larger Africanist discourse that has consistently inferiorized Africans. However, one is taken aback at the androcentricity of feminist discourse, mainly because male bias has been the cornerstone of the feminist critique of traditional Western writing and thought. The androcentrism of four hundred years of Africanist discourse is glaring because of the absence of women as objects of study. In feminist scholarship, women are presented, but like African men, are presented as objects. Men are absent, but their presence is maintained as a malevolent, all-powerful, omnipresent force labeled "patriarchy," directing everything women do. To that extent, such analyses are male-biased. Women are presented, but silenced. Their experience is not validated, thus perpetuating the marginalization of females. In this light then, although a body of knowledge has been produced on African women, much of the new research is no less male-biased than traditional Western scholarship. As a matter of fact, even neutral concepts like "elders" and "in-laws" are masculinized. One wonders whether African women ever aged or had any relationship with the spouses and families of their children.

As a consequence of this androcentrism, much power is attributed to African men, even in situations where they are victims themselves. A good example is Folbre's paper on gender relations in colonial Zimbabwe, where she alleges a patriarchal alliance between African men and white colonial masters, to the detriment of African women. But she fails to explain why such an "unholy alliance" between white men and African men (in which they were assumed to be "partners") kept white women in a state of permanent leisure and African men as their domestic servants. Other scholars have noted the pervasive denial of race as an important category in Western feminist analyses (Davis 1982; hooks 1982; Amadiume 1987).

The stereotyping of Africans in Western writings as a servile, childlike

people who need to be rescued and protected by one Western group or another is an enduring practice. Throughout the different phases of the encounter between Africa and the West, the image has been used to justify European domination both on the continent and in its Diaspora. In the process of constituting African women as objects of discourse, some feminists focus on the most downtrodden groups among women, leaving the impression that African women are all the same—equally oppressed, equally wretched, and equally in need of deliverance. In creating this homogeneous, downtrodden mass, differences and distinctions of age, class, rank, kinship affiliation, marital status, and seniority are ignored as if they do not exist. Amadiume points out that the "picture of Black women as universally deprived only reinforces racism" (Amadiume 1987:5).

In fact, racism is demonstrated in the debate about the impact of colonization on African women; there is a tendency to identify all positive social change as externally derived and all Western practices as good. Anthropologist Jane Guyer, whose work is relatively more sensitive to issues of cross-cultural representation, also displays this tendency. Reiterating the positive impact of European domination on Beti women of Cameroon, she offers this lamentation, which a native male informant is said to have made to an earlier anthropologist:

Why did whites make us clothe our wives? I used to have twenty wives. When they went naked, it was enough that I growl here in my *abaa* (men's house) for them to stop talking in their twenty kitchens. When they had dresses and wrappers, I grumbled here in vain, and they continued to chat as if nothing was going on. (Guyer 1984:6).

Guyer fails to contextualize and interrogate these assertions. Left uninterpreted, their implications are clear enough: African women have a lot for which to thank the West, not the least of which is their newfangled assertiveness (and, of course, their clothes). The agency of African women is again denied; the social mission of feminist imperialism will be thwarted if they are portrayed as self-determining. The need for white women to engage in a rescue operation is certainly made more urgent by this picture of naked and victimized African women.

### The Beast of Burden

In contrast with the image of the weak African woman is one of immense physical strength. Despite the fact that many Western feminists in their own societies glorify women's physical strength as a sign of equality with men, in their writings on Africa the concept of strength is used negatively to construct

a beast-of-burden image for the African woman. Clearly, white women as the bearers of the beast of burden have a more difficult task than their nineteenth-century male counterparts. In Boserup's (1970) "female farming systems" and the "prostitution for survival" stereotype, the African woman is pictured as a mule and a drudge. Few studies of African women fail to make this point, mostly by highlighting what women do and omitting what men do, or by concentrating on what African men do not do—tasks that have been defined as a man's job based on the European experience. This belabored image of the overworked African woman complements the image of African men as lazy and indolent in traditional Africanist discourse. Curtin notes that in constructing what Europeans called the African character in the nineteenth century, laziness and indolence topped the list (1964:223). Of course, in this male-as-norm discourse, "African" meant the African male unless otherwise stated. It logically follows that if men were so lazy, "their women," who were perceived as slaves by Europeans, were doing all the work. Furthermore, in the mind of many Westerners, male and female, African women's gainful employment suggest indolence on the part of the African male. Therefore, the fact of women's very active and visible engagements met with negative interpretations about African societies as a whole.

Summarizing the image of African women in the popular literature of the nineteenth century, Jablow and Hammond conclude that "the assumption that she the African woman is nothing but a drudge, completely subjugated if not actually enslaved, is reinforced by superficial knowledge of the bride-price and polygamy" (Jablow and Hammond 1970:150). Interestingly, the continent of Africa itself has been depicted by various writers as a woman emphasizing her fecundity, helplessness, sexuality and over-burdenedness. Reade, a popular nineteenth century English writer, exhorts readers to "look at the map of Africa. Does it not resemble a woman with a huge burden on the back?" (Ibid:72) In this image, the savage environment and its helpless and hapless victim are united as one.

### Womanhood as Prostitution

One of the recurrent images of African womanhood in feminist writings is that of prostitute. In what Amina Mama appropriately called a "groin-centered" analysis, Cutrufelli states that "either overtly or covertly, prostitution is still the main if not the only source of work [my emphasis] for African women" (Cutrufelli 1983:33). Concluding a discussion of the informal sector and women, Parpart and Stichter write: "It is difficult to imagine the informal sector in Africa being eliminated in the foreseeable future; local food distribution and sexual services in particular, the two areas of women's greatest specialization [my emphasis mine] (Parpart and Stichter 1988:20). Likewise, in an essay on women

and social change on the Zambian copper belt, Parpart asserts: "Playing on their scarcity, women soon learned to bargain with male partners; *changing partners became an accepted way to improve one's living standards* [my emphasis]" (Ibid:115). Similarly, MacGaffey states: "Women in Kinshasa earned money in two primary ways: through *petty trade* and through *prostitution* [my emphasis]" (MacGaffey 1988:164). In contrast, there have been very few studies of prostitution as a distinct occupational category in African societies. In the literature, the impression created is that African women, apart from being peasants, traders, wives, clerks, child-care workers or, whatever, are also always prostitutes.

This image of the prostitute cannot be separated from the association of Africans with strong sexual desire, which reaches back into centuries of European fantasy. Polygamy was interpreted as a sign of innate lust and sexual indiscipline on the part of the African man, and was regarded as proof of his primitivism. In the European mind, civilization is based on the repression of instincts (sexual and otherwise), but primitivism was associated with unbridled sexuality. The labeling of African women as primitive, and therefore more sexually intensive, was antithetical to the portrayal of the European woman as sexually passive. In an informative essay on female sexuality in nineteenth century Europe, Sander Gilman argues that the perception of the black merged with the perception of the prostitute: "The primitive is black, and the qualities of blackness, or at least of the black female, are those of the prostitute" (Gilman 1985:248). It is remarkable that European prostitutes during this period were visually portrayed with steapopygia, as if they were black. Steapopygia was perceived as the physical manifestation of black women's hypersexuality; thus they were defined as prostitutes. The image was pervasive then and it remains persistent; being part of a particular reality written by both white men and white women.

### Conceiving Women or Barren Ideas

The ethnocentrism of some Western feminists ranged from the idea that there is a universal woman who is white (like them), to the imposition of Western concepts and values to interpret the experiences of "Other" women. Based on their own limited experience, they had declared women's subordination a universal fact and had reached a conclusion about how to eradicate it. According to Amadiume:

this kind of global presupposition is itself ethnocentric. Furthermore, the domestic/public dichotomy which led them to the conclusion that maternal and domestic roles were responsible for the supposed universal subordination of women was a feature of their particular class and culture. (Amadiume

1987:4)

The public/private concept has been uncritically applied to Africa despite the fact that various researchers have noted that in Africa, the gender division of labor does not organize itself according to any public/private divide. As a matter of fact, the reduction of gender relations to the economics of women's lack of access to land, labor, men, and jobs is a function of both the application of public/private concept and the economic monism of the West. The public/private conceptualization lacks any clear definition; it is shifted around at will, chasing women about and defining the women's sphere, wherever it is deemed to exist, as private. In contrast, men's location is always defined as public. Thus, the preoccupation in the literature is to get women out of their private sphere and into the public sphere of men as a means of abolishing their subordination. A new vocabulary has developed around this concept in the "Women in Development" literature, integrating women into development is code for moving them out of subsistence production (private world) into the cash cropping (public world) of men. Other ways of maintaining the public/private dichotomy in different terms such as modern/traditional or formal/informal, both of which connote male/female space, respectively. Based on this usage of the public/private concept, it is not farfetched to suggest that a female head of state of any country is operating in the private sphere of women, since by definition it is the presence of women which defines the sphere (a very radical interpretation of the "kitchen cabinet").

Another over-used concept in the "Women in Development" literature, handed down directly from the Euro-American experience, is female-headed households. Female-headed households in the West are perceived as abnormal and male-deprived, and as a result beset with a host of problems. The concept presupposes that households are normally organized around one male authority figure directing all other members of the household. In many societies in Africa, this is not the case; authority is more dispersed in consanguinally-based, multi-generationally based households in which the spheres of control for a variety of individuals, fathers and mothers, siblings and wives are delineated. In addition, the fact that women hold positions of authority within the household does not necessarily suggest male absence or the pathologies associated with female-headed households in the West. It is against this background that Felicia Ekejiuba's concept of "hearthhold," (Ekejiuba 1984) put forward to describe African families which are organized around a mother and her children in polygamous households is especially appropriate. It is necessary to examine concepts critically, taking into account the African experience, because all concepts come with baggage, some of it alien to the cultures to which we apply them. Other concepts, such

as marriage, family, wife, and husband, all bear the taint of "Westocentricity" in their usage; therefore, they should always be defined when applied.

Within the context of this ethnocentric world view, the Western family organization in the contemporary period is perceived as egalitarian, and this is the outcome that is advocated for Africans. Sharon Stichter, in a study of middle-class families in Kenya, poses her major concern thus:

The underlying comparative question is whether more egalitarian and more "joint" relations are coming into being in the domestic domain, such as are said to exist in contemporary European and American middle-class families.... Changes in gender relations in the family can be seen as part of the broader question of whether a transition to the western "bourgeoisie" family is taking place in urban Africa. (Stichter 1988:178)

Apart from the fact that the observation that the Western middle-class family as egalitarian is debatable, the assumption that joint conjugal relations are necessarily egalitarian is unproven, even in the West. The imposition of Western concepts and values on African material has not gone unnoticed by other African writers. Wole Soyinka, for example, commenting on this unfortunate practice, writes:

We Black Africans have been blandly invited to submit ourselves to a second epoch of colonization—this time by universal humanoid abstraction defined and conducted by individuals whose theories and prescriptions are derived from their history, their social neuroses, and their value systems. (Soyinka 1972:x)

The feminist project definitely fits into Soyinka's definition of a second epoch of colonization.

These images of Africa in Western writing are made possible by the projection of a powerful myth of Africa as a homogeneous, unitary state of primitivism. The characterization of a vast continent of diverse nations and peoples as if it were one village can be termed the "villagization of Africa." The "Othering" of this homogenized collectivity is done in binary opposition to the West. Because Africa has been projected as that which the West is not, it becomes abso-



lutely necessary to impose an appropriate identity on the homogenized mass. To be sure, there are commonalities among Africa's cultures, nations, states, and peoples; however, sources of diversity are so many that scholars should be cautious, if not wary, of making overly generalized statements. With regard to gender relations and family structure, even apparent common practices like polygamy and bride wealth transfers have varied meanings in different historical epochs and cultural contexts. Yet, overly generalized statements about these social practices abound.

### A Question of Power

The hegemony of the West and the monopoly of scholarship on Africa by white men traditionally, and more recently by white women, is largely responsible for the persistence of these images and misrepresentations. In a sense, feminist discourse, as the better half of Africanist discourse, has completed the picture of Africa started hundreds of years ago. It is remarkable that, through four centuries of "progress," "enlightenment," scientific discoveries, and space exploration, with technological advancements in information gathering and dissemination, the images of Africa (by the West and for the West) have hardly changed. Information generated through research coded as knowledge is a major tool of domination. In this day of policy studies, the impact of scholarly assumptions and practices is immediately felt by the subjects of research. "Women in Development" studies and their consequent implementation as policy by international organizations and governments are cases in point. Barbara Rogers conducted an informative study on how Western gender assumptions embedded in development policies have negatively affected African women (Rogers 1980).

With regard to women, most feminists postulate gender as a social construct in opposition to the biological constructionists who define women as inferior by nature. Paradoxically, the universality attributed to gender asymmetry by Western feminists suggests a biological rather than a cultural basis, given that human biology is universal, but cultures speak in myriad voices. In fact, the categorization of women as a homogeneous group, always constituted as powerless and victimized, does not reflect the fact that gender relations are social relations and therefore historically grounded and culturally bound.

I have argued that women are not just women; factors of race, class, regional origins, age, and kinship ties are central to the understanding of inter-gender and intra-gender relations, locally and globally. It has been demonstrated that the biological similarity of all women cannot be taken for granted as the basis of solidarity (sisterhood) in the face of a multitude of differences that emerge contextually and situationally. At the level of scholarship, in par-

ticular, white women occupy a position of power, and this has serious implications for their relationship with women from other societies. According to Saddeka Arebi (1986: 17), "in a discourse of other cultures, questions of who speaks, what is and what is not discussed, how it is discussed, what questions may be asked, who defines the reality, and what is true or false take on new significance." Such questions have been central in this study. However, these questions have not received much attention in Western feminist discourse, in spite of the fact that scholars from different parts of the world continue to call attention to them, challenging the positions and presuppositions of Western women (Mohanty 1984; Amadiume 1987; Ong 1988; Minh-ha 1989). It remains to be seen whether the increasing presence of scholars from Africa, Asia, and Latin America will result in more accurate and contextualized portrayals of people from different cultures and societies.

### NOTES

1. This paper was originally presented at the conference *In Search of New Paradigms in African Development* (ISENPAD) held in Nairobi, Kenya in June 1988. I was drawn to Rudyard Kipling's poem on the white man's burden the source of an apt phrase for describing the way in which Western feminist scholars went about their business in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Of course to make it more appropriate, I gendered it. A version of this paper is the first chapter of my dissertation (*Mothers Not Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, submitted in the Dept. of Sociology UC Berkeley, 1993). Though the paper is a fourteen years old, the issues it examines are still current.
2. The discourse in origins is Euro-American; therefore, it is overly determined by their interests and concerns. It should be made clear, however, that Eurocentric views of the world are no longer limited to European peoples. Because this paper focuses on the inception of the discourse, its concern is to examine the implications of the fact that feminist scholarship on Africa was created and continues to be dominated by Euro-American women.
3. Minority Rights Group Report, #47: 10. The point that is being made here by the African delegates is that with regard to priorities, putting the question of eradicating female circumcision over basic needs like food and water amounts to rearranging the deck chairs on the Titanic. More importantly, they are asserting their rights to self-definition.
4. In the light of the dominance of North America, I felt the need for a word that would not just specify Europe but incorporate other centers of Western culture.

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