

# Philosophy and Figures of the African Female

by Sanya Osha

**Abstract. Philosophy and Figures of the African Female.** In this study, the aim is (a) to trace the figure of woman within the specificity of African forms of discourse and to examine how she has been articulated and disarticulated and the ways through which she has reacted to these external mechanisms of power in both textual and existential terms; (b) to interrogate the contours of African feminist discourse in relation to patriarchal culture on the one hand, and forms of Western feminist theory on the other; (c) to give an indication of how terms such as sexuality, gender and the body can be rethought in the light of contemporary feminist theory and practice; (d) to indicate a new direction for African philosophy from the advances made by feminist discourse in general.

**key words:** Africa, feminism, sexuality, conceptualisation, socio-cultural institutions

## ***Alienating Discourse and Alienated Beings***<sup>1</sup>

The birth of the mode of discourse known as African philosophy is quite an interesting one. A version of this species of discourse has its origins in a mix of racism and a specific form of its counter-discourse which is termed decolonization.<sup>2</sup> Western philosophy is a product of a civilization

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<sup>2</sup> Kwasi Wiredu terms it conceptual decolonization (see his *Cultural Universals and*

and a disciplinary quest that is almost three thousand years old. And in the course of this long cultural and disciplinary development *textual inscription* has been a crucial factor. African philosophy, on the other hand, has no such history unless the arguments and conclusions of *Afrocentricism* are accepted in totality. But given the problematic ruptures and discontinuities between contemporary African realities and the undoubtedly impressive cultural and intellectual achievements of ancient Egypt it is difficult to sustain a continuous conceptual relationship between the two disparate contexts. However, for the sake of argument and for a manageable discursive structure let us begin the quest for the origins of African philosophy with its encounter with post-Enlightenment modernity which in the case of Africa and much of the third world entails the realities and the histories of the following events: slavery, apartheid, colonization and decolonization. It is from this painful existential matrix that one locates the birth of African philosophy in its *modern* and its contemporary formation.

Unquestionably, the birth of African philosophy was wrought from highly political circumstances which have continued to have profound implications. The first tendency within the discipline had to confront the need for liberation and as such was based on a discourse that emerged from polemic and overt political rhetoric. The second tendency strived for the discursive detachment and *theoreticism* of Western academic philosophy.<sup>3</sup> The third tendency emerged from the sustained critique of ethnophilosophy. For our purposes, such are the circumstances from which African philosophy in its contemporary formation evolved. However, the origins of African philosophy are not our primary concern. Rather, in this study, the aim is

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*Particulars: An African Perspective*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996), Anthony Kwame Appiah calls it ideological decolonization (see his *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

<sup>3</sup> See Kwasi Wiredu, *Conceptual Decolonization in African Philosophy: Four Essays* by Kwasi Wiredu Ibadan: Hope Publications, 1995. For an even more sustained account of this discursive history see also his *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996.

1. to trace the figure of woman within the specificity of African forms of discourse and to examine how she has been articulated and disarticulated and the ways through which she has reacted to these external mechanisms of power in both textual and existential terms;
2. to interrogate the contours of African feminist discourse in relation to patriarchal culture on the one hand, and forms of Western feminist theory on the other;
3. to give an indication of how terms such as sexuality, gender and the body can be rethought in the light of contemporary feminist theory and practice;
4. to indicate a new direction for African philosophy from the advances made by feminist discourse in general.

At this juncture, it can be claimed that modern African philosophy is a product of a patriarchal culture and hence a sexist one. To affirm that colonial and postcolonial African societies are sexist might not be saying very much. Perhaps it might be more appropriate to say that African philosophy inherited a heavy load of sexism in its encounter with Western philosophy. So the female African subject has to contend with layers of subjugation; first, at the stark existential level and second, at the metadiscursive level. Of course, other layers of oppression exist and are to be found in various ramifications.

It is perhaps not too much to claim that African philosophy had to undergo an abortion before its painful eventual birth. A series of paralyzing questions dogged the birth of the discipline; ‘What is African philosophy? ‘Does it exist?’ ‘What ought to be its foundational methodology?’ etc. Rather than *doing* philosophy, these rather paralyzing questions and forays into unproductive ontology prevailed in the initial attempts to define the parameters of the discipline. Paulin Hountondji’s view that ‘philosophy is not a system but a history, essentially an open process, a restless, unfinished quest, not closed knowledge’<sup>4</sup> did not ap-

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<sup>4</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, Bloomington and

pear to have helped matters. Thus *the fear of birth* was an abiding problematic in the construction of African philosophy. Freudian and Lacanian readings of this fear of the symbolic, of the Law are most certainly instructive here<sup>5</sup>. The entry into the pantheon of White Male philosophical gods was not so smooth for the fathers of African philosophy. Instead of acquiring the much-valued 'secret' knowledge of the White Male Father the African philosopher emitted-at least at first-a wail of resistance. In other words, his adoption of the canon of an alienated literature was marked by violence and trauma. And his adoption of an alienating discourse signified the beginning of his production of a *discourse of alienation*.<sup>6</sup> Indeed the literature on the birth of African philosophy is vast and quite remarkable.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it can be argued that due to the *crises of delivery* that marred the progress of African philosophical discourse from

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Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996, p. 71.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler's psychoanalytical explanations of gender and subjectivities in general in her text, *The Psychic Life Of Power*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997 are undoubtedly useful.

<sup>6</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, 1996. Also, the Heideggerian notion of alienation is somewhat applicable here. So it is possible to think in terms of 'temptation' and 'contentment' as states that would eventually lead to alienation, a notion Heidegger himself borrowed from Soren Kierkegaard. For more details, see Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, tr. Joan Stambaugh, New York: State University Press, 1996.

<sup>7</sup> Apart from Hountondji's *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, see also, P.O. Bodunrin 'The Question of African Philosophy,' in R. A. Wright, ed., *African Philosophy: An Introduction* 3d ed. Lanham: University Press of America, 1984; Kwame Gyekye, *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997; D.A. Masolo, *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994; V.Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984; see also his *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994; Oyekan Owomoyela, 'African and the Imperative of Philosophy: A Skeptical Reconsideration'. *African Studies Review* 30, 1; Olabiyi Yai, 'Theory and Practice in African Philosophy: The Poverty of Speculative Philosophy' *Second Order* 2, 2. 1977. Although these texts and articles on the nature and foundations of African philosophy are by no means exhaustive, they give an idea of the range of the spirited debates that have attended its gestation.

the very beginning, its true emancipatory potential has always been limited. African philosophy was produced within the context of an alienating canon and from that *structural dislocation*, from that unassimilated locus it went on to produce, in some respects, an alienated literature<sup>8</sup>.

Speech and *inscription* in whatever form were an overriding quest of African philosophy, the laborious quest to articulate *presence* in the infinite void of nothingness. The humiliating experiences of slavery, colonization and imperialism had eroded the self-worth of the African subject. And so the articulation of *presence* through philosophical discourse/speech (no matter how rudimentary) was a way of reclaiming a lost humanity. Also, it was a way of initiating a conversation with modernity. In constructing this rudimentary mode of discourse/speech the African philosopher could only grapple with a limited set of discursive concerns most of which were derived from the Western canon. Sex, gender and sexuality were the least of his concerns. From a dehumanizing existential and epistemic void, he had to construct a modern mode of subjecthood, he had to undertake a process of autogenesis after which all other things could follow. Thus the creation of a philosophical practice was also an effort at self-invention, the creation of masculine self straining against an abyss of nothingness. Thus, a certain impatience has marked the evolution of African philosophical discourse. V.Y. Mudimbe strongly suggests that patience is a cardinal virtue of a valid philosophical practice.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., has produced a large body of work contesting the assumed primacy and universality of the Western canon. See for instance, his *Figures in Black: Words, Signs and the 'Racial Self'* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987, see also his *Loose Canons*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992. Indeed a large part of his intellectual exertions has been to unearth and create a literary and theoretical canon that is more representative of the African-American experience. His latest academic effort, *The Bondswoman's Narrative*, New York: Warner, 2002 by Hannah Crafts [edited by Gates] falls within the tradition of his established academic pattern.

<sup>9</sup> Consult his *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988.

This strain and this impatience are not as prominent in the Indian philosophical tradition for instance. Nagarjuna's seemingly unending appeal within the context of Western philosophy speaks volumes.<sup>10</sup> Also, Buddhist thought and brahmanical intellectualism has a history that spans 2500 years. African philosophical discourse on the other hand had to (re)discover its being within the ethos of modernity (and its numerous concepts and discourses) amid often violent processes of reterritorialization and deterritorialization that are redrawing the geographical space of contemporary Africa.

### ***Bodies of writing and the uses of ambiguity***

*...it is not an oeuvre but a desoeuvre.*<sup>11</sup>

The notion of alienation at the beginning of African philosophical writing, in fact, at the beginning of any kind of writing that attempts to transcend the masculinist/dominant canon/text, is quite important to the future of that writing/text. This is because through it we can trace the system(s) of exclusions, continuities and ruptures within a given text. This notion of alienation which is also connected with the ordeal of birth provides a crucial point of departure for understanding an abiding problematic of African philosophy. How does the text or philosophical utterance find its historical/contextual moorings without a body of preceding texts, without a preexisting Library? This engrossing problematic confronted a particular African philosopher, Anton-Wilhelm Amo, who lived and worked in eighteenth century Europe, Germany, to be precise. Anton-Wilhelm Amo who originally came from the Gold Coast wrote most of

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<sup>10</sup> Richard P. Hayes, 'Nagarjuna's Appeal', *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 22, 1994. See also, Jay L. Garfield, *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

<sup>11</sup> Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, 'Introduction' *The Bataille Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd. p. 4.

his works in Latin. Some of these works include: *Dissertatio inauguralis de jure Maurorum in Europa* (The Rights of Africans Living in Europe), 1729; *Dissertatio de humanae mentis apatheia* (On the Impassitivity of the Human Mind), 1734; and *Tractatus de arte sobrie et accurate philosophandi* (On the Art of Philosophizing with Sobriety and Accuracy), 1738.

These various philosophical texts were produced within the context of the European academy and obviously for a Western audience. Paulin Hountondji comments on the status of the texts, ‘what does this work contain that can be called African? Disappointingly though it may be, the answer must be: nothing.’<sup>12</sup> He makes the suggestion that African philosophers ought to be capable ‘of freely seizing the whole existing philosophical and scientific heritage, assimilating and mastering it in order to transcend it.’<sup>13</sup> This is necessary in order to avoid what he terms ‘intellectual asphyxia’. Hountondji’s commentary isolates two complementary and yet separate futures for the African philosophical text. First, it ought to strive to be ‘African’. Second, it ought to be free to avail itself of universal scientific and philosophical traditions. As for the second injunction, Amo obviously meets all the necessary criteria and for the first, his text, *Dissertatio inauguralis de jure Maurorum in Europa*, in a way, is concerned with an African issue. It is an attempt to formulate a discourse to deal with a transcontinental/transnational dimension of African identities of the time. It clearly has an Africa-centered problematic as its focus. In this sense, we are left with the problem of degree or scale.

Nonetheless, Amo in spite of his mastery of Western philosophical traditions experienced a profound sense of alienation within that canon. He eventually returned to the Gold Coast where he died as a hermit. Also worthy of note is the fact that his pioneering work could not have been appreciated in his colonized milieu in the Gold Coast for the reason that an enabling discursive context had not been created. Thus, his experience of alienation was multiple, to be precise, it had three major dimensions.

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<sup>12</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, p. 128.

<sup>13</sup> Paulin Hountondji, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*, p. 129.

First, he encountered alienation within the Western philosophical canon; second, within the existential context of Germany itself and finally within the transitory colonial space of the Gold Coast. Amo's life and work inaugurated the problematic of alienation that would attend the birth of African philosophy. In embracing the *logos* of the Western philosophical text as an essential gesture of birth, that is, in learning an alien mode of philosophical utterance, Amo received the *embrace of death*. The quest of African philosophy in its contemporary formulation has been to break away from this embrace of death and fear of birth in order to discover its true Father. However, it can be argued that African philosophy never discovered its true Father. Instead, it has to make do with a simulacrum of the real thing. It has had to create a concatenation of images, of false fathers, as it were, in order to lay claims to an origin. In a sense, the African philosophical text is still saddled with a problematic that the feminist text (with its espousal of play – *le jeu* – and *polysemy*) has been able to transcend. Perhaps a clarification regarding the African philosophical text is required. In availing itself of a multiplicity of false fathers and a series of simulated births, the African philosophical text has a semblance of authenticity. But what essentially conjoins the 'feminine text' and the African philosophical text is a problematic which can be termed the *crises of delivery*. That is, the problem of creating authentic speech / discourse from within the embrace of death, before the false figure of a tyrannical Father. In my view, the feminine text has been able to overcome this problematic admirably. And the history by which it accomplishes this is quite interesting.

In Heideggerian terms the key to authentic thinking lies at the root of language. In his view, the German language is closest to the spirit of the European civilization because it is the least corrupted of European languages and because it has the most unfettered access to the Greek ethos. But the point is, in order to create a genuine mode of signification, a self-sufficient text as it were, the origins from which the text in question evolves must be taken into account. The feminist text recognizes this crucial problematic and has been able to transcend it.



The patriarchal text has a number of immediately recognizable attributes. In other words, its preoccupations include 'representation, the unitary subject, stable meaning, linear narrative, paternal authority, Truth with a capital T.'<sup>14</sup> Indeed it is arguable that the African philosophical text inherited most of these attributes from the Western Library without a sufficient series of problematizations regarding their ultimate usefulness and thus the essentially masculinist feature of its epistemic foundations. To be sure, there are moments within the history of the Western canon when elements that genuinely seek to undermine its sexist or its hegemonic basis are tolerated and accommodated. Movements in Western art such as Expressionism, Dadaism, Constructivism, New Objectivism and Brechtian realism may be said to fall into this category. The Western text has movements/moments that entertain ingredients that have a lot to do with 'heterogeneity, play, marginality, transgression, the unconscious, eroticism, excess.'<sup>15</sup> These are quite interesting moments in which the emancipatory potential of the Western Text gets to be more boldly explored. We must not, however, be deceived for long by these ruptures within the text. This is because 'like modern capitalism, modern patriarchy has a way of assimilating any number of potentially subversive gestures into the mainstream, where whatever potentially subversive energy they may have possessed becomes neutralized.'<sup>16</sup> However, the main point is that there are moments/movements of which this could be said:

The hallmark of these movements was a collective project [more or less explicitly defined and often shifting over time] that linked artistic experimentation and a critique of outmoded artistic practices with an ideological critique of bourgeois thought and a desire for social change, so that the activity of writing could also be seen as a genuine intervention in the social, cultural, and the

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<sup>14</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990. p. 13.

<sup>15</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 13.

<sup>16</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 123.

political arena.<sup>17</sup>

Given these transgressive cultural conditions it was now up to the feminine text to discover a language that was in agreement with its ideological objectives and its being. There are indeed similarities between the histories of the feminist movement and African struggles against colonial domination. Essentially, these two historical trajectories (in which body and mind were forcefully appropriated) are often entangled with violent processes of *naming, breaking and sculpting, building (bauen)* as effected by White Male Reason. In the same vein, we ought to note as well, that ‘woman has been the name of the hole that threatens the constructions of reason, the dark continent that threatens the regions of light.’<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Western academic discourse denigrated the colonial African subject employing more or less the same classificatory parameters. Africa was associated with ‘darkness’, ‘the dark continent’ filled with ‘dim minds.’<sup>19</sup> By this singular classificatory grid, the white female and the African subject are united under the burden of White Male oppression and in speaking against that singular oppression they are saddled with a language that remains in itself problematic since it carries within its history and modes of circulation instruments for marginalization and exclusion.

Even within the annals of a largely phallogentric Western philosophical tradition, the question of language remains vital. At moments of exhaustion, original Western thinkers have frequently turned to the being of language and the question of being not only to generate new philosophical questions but also as a means discovering a new philosophical

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<sup>17</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 14.

<sup>19</sup> See, J. L. Comaroff and Jean Comaroff, *Of Revelation and Revolution: Christianity, Colonialism and Consciousness in South Africa*, Vol. 1, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991 and *Of Revelation and Revolution: The Dialectics of Modernity on a South African Frontier*, Vol. 2, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997 for a wide-ranging account of how colonialism was not only a potent force of aggression but also widespread change and transformation.

course. For Heidegger, the concept of ‘clearing’ (*Lichtung*), is only one of his strategies for undermining Western metaphysics and reconstructing the entire problematic of Western philosophical discourse. Indeed, his quest for the nature of being took him to diverse fields of knowledge – Pre-Socratic thought (Thales, Anaximenes and Anaximander), Eastern thought (Buddhism and Taoism) and literature (Homer, Sophocles, Dante, Virgil, Shakespeare, Goethe, Rainer Maria Rilke and Stefan George). Philosophy had to recover, discover, unveil new gods in order to attend to the question of being.<sup>20</sup>

Feminist theory realized this important conceptual need, the vital connections between language, identity, authenticity and freedom. For the female theorist, ‘in order to innovate, she has to invent her own position as subject and elaborate her own set of images – different from the image of the exposed female body’.<sup>21</sup> To be sure, some male theorists were useful in this project. For instance, Roland Barthes conceptualizes the distinction between the readable and unreadable (*lisible/illisible*) text.<sup>22</sup> Thus, ‘the readable is serious, fixed, closed, structured, constrained, authoritarian, and unitary; the writable is playful, fluid, open, triumphantly plural, and in its plurality impervious to the repressive rule of structure, grammar, or logic.’<sup>23</sup> Needless to add, the writable is representative of the feminine text. The eroticization of the text and metaphor entailed what has been termed a ‘*disfiguration of language*’. Indeed, it has been noted that the ‘homology between the modern text and the woman’s body was one of the bases on which French feminist theorists in the 1970s, notably

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<sup>20</sup> See Martin Heidegger, *Existence and Being*, London: Vision Press, 1949 and also his *On the Way to Language*, New York: Harper and Row, 1971.

<sup>21</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 26.

<sup>22</sup> See his *The Pleasures of the Text*, tr. Richard Miller. New York: Hill and Wang, 1975.

<sup>23</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 37. See Also Roland Barthes, *The Pleasures of the Text*.

Luce Irigaray, elaborated their notion of *écriture féminine*'.<sup>24</sup> Also, while the male text is 'unitary, phallic, teleologically moving toward a single meaning, a single story, the feminine text, by contrast, was synonymous with the plural, the erotic, the experimental, the new'.<sup>25</sup> In addition to all these ingredients, the feminine text availed itself of elements pertaining to *bricolage*, *jouissance* and *glissement* and all these tools of transgression paved the way for autonomy.

And how has the African philosophical text fared? Arguably, there has not been a vigorous interrogation of the limits of transgressivity or liminality. The reign of the symbolic, the Law of the Father is mostly evident and mostly unquestioned. To leave the discursive foundations of African philosophy unquestioned is to shy away from the responsibility of its creation and the demands of philosophizing thereby legitimating paradigms whose histories are mostly hidden from us. Indeed, as Derrida argues, 'the transgression of rules of discourse implies the transgression of law in general, since discourse exists only positing the norm and value of meaning, and meaning in turn is the founding element of legality.'<sup>26</sup> Major African philosophical texts (especially from the anglophonic divide) in spite of the tendency to Africanize philosophical topics merely reinscribe the inherited hegemonies of Western textuality that the feminine text has done a lot to contest and undermine.<sup>27</sup> However, V. Y.

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<sup>24</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 39.

<sup>25</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 40. For other theorizations see in particular, *The Helen Cixous Reader*, ed. Susan Sellers, London and New York: Routledge, 1994; *The Portable Kristeva*, ed. Kelly Oliver, New York: Columbia University Press, 1997; and Toril Moi *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory*, London and New York: Routledge, 1985.

<sup>26</sup> Cited by Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, pp. 74-75.

<sup>27</sup> See for instance Kwame Gyekye's *Tradition and Modernity: Philosophical Reflections on the African Experience*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1997 and Kwasi Wiredu's *Cultural Universals and Particulars: An African Perspective*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996 which are much influenced by the analytic tradition and which indicate virtually no concern for

Mudimbe's texts sometimes espouse quite remarkable elements of transgressivity. Let us now attempt to Mudimbe read in a way he is usually not read.

Mudimbe has consistently focused on the constitution of the African subject by dominant Eurocentric discourses of which anthropology remains a prime example, in other words, on traces of the African subject as articulated by secondary discourses which are essentially products of power.<sup>28</sup> Though his preoccupation with discourses of power in relation to the idea of Africa has been an overriding concern and is decidedly marked by a discourse of mastery, an equally consistent and at the same time paradoxical tendency toward rupture, discontinuity and transgression complicates (in a favorable sense) the nature of his texts and the ways by which they might be read. His texts not only depict multivalent portrayals of African subjectivities but also address the multiplicity of secondary discourses that mark these subjectivities. By employing elements that are akin to *bricolage*, *jouissance* and *glissement*, Mudimbe's enterprise at that level resembles the projects of Western avant-garde movements that strike out at bourgeois culture. Indeed, the hallmarks of heterogeneity, transgression and excess are often evident in his texts. And yet of his major texts, *The Invention of Africa* seems most unrepresentative of those values. In his words, the text attempts 'a sort of archaeology of African *gnosis* as a system of knowledge in which major philosophical questions recently have arisen: first, concerning the form, the content, and the style of 'Africanizing' knowledge; second, concerning the status of systems of

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Heidegger's important critique of it. This observation regarding Gyekye and Wiredu also applies to D.A. Masolo's *African Philosophy in Search of Identity*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994.

<sup>28</sup> This discussion of Mudimbe does not focus on his text, *Tales of Faith* (1997) for two main reasons; it does not deal with issues of gender and African subjectivities as comprehensively as the other texts and secondly, it has been convincingly argued that it is a less fully realized work. See van Binsbergen, W.M.J., 2005, '“An incomprehensible miracle” – Central African clerical intellectualism versus African historic religion: A close reading of Valentin Mudimbe's *Tales of Faith*', in: Kai Kresse, ed., *Reading Mudimbe*, special issue of the *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 17, 1, June 2005: 11-65; also at: [http://www.shikanda.net/african\\_religion/mudil0.htm](http://www.shikanda.net/african_religion/mudil0.htm).

thought and their possible relation to the normative genre of knowledge.<sup>29</sup> All the elements that give his other major texts their distinctive character are not granted unfettered reign here. What he does instead is to keep in sharp focus the construction, deconstruction and marginalization of the African subject within context of a vast discursive anthropological structure. Within that oppressive structure the African subject had not acquired the distinction of gender as the very question of her humanity had not yet been resolved. Also lacking is the power of agency since the articulation of subjectivity was not conducted at the primary level but at the secondary level; the discursive. In short, the text is an excursion into the Western anthropological library to discover and also recover the archaeological remains of the African subject. It is not primarily concerned (even though it deals with it) with the birth of speech in the African consciousness but the corpse of the African subject in the *morgue* of the Western anthropological library. It is about immense rites of death in equally immense catacombs. But even the dark solemnity of these preoccupations somewhat indicate the eventual directions of Mudimbe's larger project. The quest after lost and hidden mysteries may be construed as the furtive strike of darkness against the light of enlightenment reason, and also as feline, feminine sorties from a lost underground. Even with the absence of urgent living speech, *The Invention of Africa* reveals its ultimate discomfort with an unproblematized patriarchal culture and its sympathies for the rites of the dead, the dark and the feminine where dirges are orchestrated as lifeless symphonies.

Mudimbe's *Parables and Fables*, in a way, is a more evolved and also a more transgressive text even though it may not be as widely read as the previous book. Furthermore, in strictly discursive terms, it definitely covers more ground in terms of attempting to recuperate living forms of African speech and textuality. Here, employing mythological narratives, the text, gender and the body are problematized at loci where they become instruments of creation, agents of catharsis and also spaces of disso-

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<sup>29</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy, and the Order of Knowledge*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1988, p. x.

lution. As heterogeneity and excess demand, the text keeps redefining the boundaries of its own limits which include; a rigorous contemplation of the aims, legitimacies and deceptions of anthropology; the status of deterritorialized, external academic discourse on the condition of the Other (and other intimations of heterology); a metaphilosophical critique of African philosophy; and a sustained poetics on gender and the body; and finally, an extended meditation on Marxist anthropology. Mudimbe accomplishes this and more within the space of a single text. In describing his existential and academic trajectory he writes, 'my experience would define itself somewhere between the practice of philosophy with its possible intercultural applications and the sociocultural and intersubjective space which made me possible'.<sup>30</sup> However, the essential transgressivity of the text and its disciplinary hybridity are announced unambiguously; 'What does this have to do with Africa? All or nothing. Or, to refer to my *Invention of Africa* (1988), it relates to the fact that *poiesis* is, generally, *mimesis*; and, specifically, to the tension between I and the other, the same and its negation, which belongs to metaphysics. In fact, in this book, one can read my own passion and doubts about such concepts as identity, sameness and otherness'.<sup>31</sup> Consequently, the strictures of linearity and systematization are not a feature of his text and this development can be read in two distinct ways. First, by employing mimesis and poesis, he ends up disfiguring as well as displacing the authority of the patriarchal text in unexpected ways. Second, in splintering the unity of the patriarchal text, Mudimbe inaugurates a mode of silent androgyny. So in many ways, his text or rather his technology of textuality offers numerous margins of freedom that are yet to be fully explored.

One of these margins of freedom is conceptual. Mudimbe employs the most fashionable but also the most convincing methodological grids of his time; 'both Sartre and Levi- Strauss bear witness to the grandeur of

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<sup>30</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991 p. 124-125.

<sup>31</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. xxi.

the I thinking about itself vis- a- vis the other. And it is from the least phenomenological of existentialists, who happens to be also the most tolerant of existentialists, Simone de Beauvoir, that I draw the frame within which Sartre and Levi- Strauss can fit with their irreconcilable differences and their complementary ambiguities concerning Descartes' cogito. In the *Ethics of Ambiguity* (1980), de Beauvoir demonstrates that one's being should be grounded within freedom of choice as the means of constructing one's own existence vis- a vis the other who is always a mirror of one's own significance.<sup>32</sup> Thus de Beauvoir is enlisted in resolving a major conceptual *aporia* which is quite novel for discourses on the African subject in relation to difference and the questions of otherness.<sup>33</sup> What this interesting methodological strategy does within the context of Mudimbe's discourse is to reposition the figure of woman in discursive terms, and to centralize her trace- even though the locus is still a delimiting one- in a locus where the quest for greater freedom can begin. To be sure, this disciplined pursuit of the trace, this fidelity to its mark, both invests his text with remarkable qualities (on a purely morphological level) and an almost limitless range of theoretical possibilities. Thus, in his discourse, the boundaries of the subject assume more possibilities than are often found in most texts of contemporary African critical theory. And as always, the mummified figure of the African subject within the *morgue* of Western anthropology is for him an important theoretical starting- point. At a point he focuses not only on the figure of African subject itself but the institution of her practices: 'They were part of a language (*langue*) whose arbitrariness seemed absurd and, consequently, pagan in both meanings of the word *paganus*: as marginal, someone living on the edges of 'civilization' and cut off from the culture of the cities; as someone whose beliefs, opinions, and behavior are un-

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<sup>32</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. xx.

<sup>33</sup> For another reading of de Beauvoir, see Nancy Bauer, *Simone de Beauvoir, Philosophy, and Feminism*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2001.



sound from the viewpoint of the dominant language'.<sup>34</sup> The project of colonialism (*mission civilisatrice*) sought not only to transform the consciousness of the African subject but also to upgrade (*oikodome*) the institutional basis of her sociocultural practices and in this respect, Christianity was a central instrument. For Mudimbe, the attempt to indigenize Christianity can also be read as 'a political generalization of the sign of the other'.<sup>35</sup> From this charged political and discursive site, Mudimbe also traces the origins of modern African philosophy, its various ideological orientations- ethnophilosophy for instance- and its articulations by means of geography. He concludes by stating that 'African philosophy (which is now thought, sought, defined, and affirmed by itself) is diverse and multiple'.<sup>36</sup> On the question of the multiplicity, Mudimbe may well have been speaking of his own texts since the ingredients of heterogeneity, play, excess and heterology are central to his textual practices. His texts articulate the theory and practice by which African philosophy can continually interrogate and hence redefine its own boundaries.

Just as he explores the boundaries of the subject in discourse he also traces the appearance of the body (in mythological narratives) in some of its more organic forms, that is, in the ways in which it assumes its own peculiar gift of agency even within the parameters of the text. An appearance of the body: 'The body of king incarnates the paradoxical encounter of endogamy and exogamy. It denounces itself as the symbolic locus in which nature espouses culture, the disorder of forests faces the conventional norms of a social order, the primacy of laws overflows in its own negation.'<sup>37</sup> Again, he writes, 'the ambiguous body of the king en-

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<sup>34</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 51.

<sup>37</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 75.

compasses these two poles. One, the negative, is linked to the memory of beginnings and incestuous unions. In the royal ritual, its activity (the *bulopwe*, or the sacred blood of royalty) takes place outside the inhabited space, on the margins of the society, in ‘the house of unhappiness’; it is ‘a suffocating environment, without communication with the external world in the sociological sense, and without any opening in a formal sense’. The second (the *bufumu*, or political authority) and human survival.’<sup>38</sup> This passage accomplishes quite a number of things. First, it reinscribes the private/public distinction within the framework of a tribal culture and the various ways by which it can be problematized. Second, it suggests the ways in which the reality of gender mediates between these separate realms. Finally, it suggests that the mediations between private and public, nature and culture, dark and light, male and female can only be conceived in terms of flows, continuities and problematic ruptures and not by a grid of rigid dualisms. In this way, we are encouraged to think of the body in terms of a diverse range of variables that loom beyond its actual physical limits (employed as a mobile metaphor to include land and perhaps culture), that is, the ways in which it continuously reassembles itself within and beyond the limits of ideology. We are also compelled to rethink the multiple ways in which the body recuperates its organicity even under hideous conditions that ordinarily would discourage it. The body, Mudimbe’s narrative suggests, is always on a perpetual quest to transcend its physical limits. This stance is essentially transgressive.

Before we examine how the figure of woman is articulated in his text, it is important to note how Mudimbe points out that the phenomenon of gender pervades the cosmological sphere. In his sub-chapter, ‘Creation, History and the Sex of Beings’, Mudimbe demonstrates how the elements – air, wind, water and earth - are all mediated by dynamics of gender. And this includes the forests, birds, trees, and animals. Beyond wo/man, gender exists giving the universe its myriad forms and investing the rhythms of life with its flows, transformations (*metanoia*) and its

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<sup>38</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 75.

pulse. Thus, Maweja - the name of the Supreme Being- 'is simultaneously father and mother'.<sup>39</sup> What this means is that the Luba cosmological scheme is marked by an elemental hermaphroditism, an existential/cosmological condition that Mudimbe's texts are often able to draw from as signs depicting excess, heterogeneity and transgressivity. The articulation of these issues obviously creates a resonance within his discourse that we hardly find in other African philosophical texts.

Under the Luba cosmological scheme:

A female always includes a junior male side, and a male possesses in itself a discreeter female aspect. In sum, the body of Maweja's creatures is always hermaphroditic, or simultaneously male and female. Yet the male has precedence over the female by virtue of its intrinsic qualities. These are, in the tradition rendered in three categories: aggressiveness and imperiousness; fullness, toughness, and sharpness; violence and strength. The tradition opposes them to the order of the female's qualities: passivity and fecundity; roundness, hollowness, and welcoming; and mildness and beneficence.<sup>40</sup>

Again, Mudimbe writes, 'man needs the woman in order to evolve from primitiveness to an agriculturalist culture. The woman, on the other hand, is from the outset depicted as dependent on the man, who appears as the master of a history in the making. She says to the man: Vidye sent me and told me, 'Go and give birth' summing up an essential vocation which is the very condition of human survival'.<sup>41</sup> Finally, Mudimbe comments on the usual fate of a newly married woman which is in fact a poignant depiction of gender relations among the Luba:

She might be fourteen or fifteen years old, but with the consent of the two families, she will become automatically an adult and fully responsible for a husband, his home, his tradition, and the families hope, his children. Nobody invites her to become a subject of a possible history in the making. On the contrary, she has to promote the respectability of her original family by practicing an ordinary life which fits into a discourse of obedience. A master char-

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<sup>39</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 111.

<sup>40</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 112.

<sup>41</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 131.

ter is given to her as bride; it specifies and individualizes her major duties and his family and in so doing maintains the configuration of a patrilineal tradition.<sup>42</sup>

Thus ends Mudimbe's discussion of the place and destiny and of woman among the Luba as revealed by constructs of mythology. Once situated within the patrilineal signifying economy she is cast as the junior partner and the discourse of cosmological hermaphroditism becomes muted if not completely silenced. As he seems to suggest, the banality of ordinary life disrupts the cosmic unity of the Supreme Being and inscribes an economy of gender based on a monologic form of binarization: male/female. *Parables and Fables* ends with an analysis of Peter Rigby's *Persistent Pastoralists: Nomadic Societies in Transition* (1985) which has very little to do with Mudimbe's previous preoccupations as some might be tempted to believe. But this incursion, in a way, sits well with the understanding of writing as an engagement with rupture and transgression. Mudimbe foregrounds a very novel issue; hermaphroditism and its reconfiguration of gender within the African context. Hermaphroditism, in this case, is a central motif in the myth of creation and the beings and organisms that are generated through it. And in tending to the trace of woman he ruptures a profound silence after which the figure of woman acquires a distinctive kind of circulatory power. This circulatory mobility submerges the subject, body and the text within a mode of signification that evolves in serial and continuous forms, in terms of eddies and flows.

*The Idea of Africa*, Mudimbe's other major text interrogates other borders of liminality using the techniques he had established in his two previous texts. In a sense, this text reads like a contemplation of the tracks explored by the two other texts as a means of attaining a kind of synthesis. This particular discursive trajectory includes the pursuit of the discourse of mastery on the one hand, and the celebration and accommodation of its deconstructive negative, on the other. These two divergent tendencies are part of what give Mudimbe's texts their exceedingly plural character. In the concluding segment of the text, he writes: 'To sum up

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<sup>42</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *Parables and Fables: Exegesis, Textuality, and Politics in Central Africa*, p. 139.

the essentials of the book, two things appear clear. The first is the complexity of the idea of Africa and the multiple and contradictory discursive practices it has suscitated and which, I am afraid, are not all well and explicitly described, or even suggested, in this contribution. I would like to believe that my focus on perfectly unrepresentative texts (such as the fable on Hercules and Burton's treatise on melancholy) and on essentially theoretical issues (as in the case of cultural relativism and that of primitive art), despite its limitations, shows at least one possible way of filtering out an idea of Africa from an immense literature and complex debates.<sup>43</sup> But the initial tone of the text is far from the concluding sense of modesty. Indeed, it begins as a text consumed by a quest for mastery:

In this work, I proceed from a French translation by Blaise de Vigenere [1614] of the Greek Philostratus's *Icones* and from the Englishman Robert Burton's treatise on melancholy [1621] to a synthetic survey of the Greek contacts with the continent, to issues of relativism, to the Greek paradigm and its power, and finally to the politics of memory. I also consider the present-day reactivation of Greek texts by black scholars and discussions of 'ethnological reason,' primitivism, and colonial 'domestication.' Finally, I face a contemporary predicament: which idea of Africa does today's social science offer.<sup>44</sup>

And then he states, '*The Idea of Africa* is both the product and the continuation of *The Invention of Africa* insofar as it asserts that there are natural features, cultural characteristics, and probably, values that contribute to the reality of Africa as a continent and its civilizations as constituting a totality different from those of, say, Asia and Europe.'<sup>45</sup> These various passages reveal the sympathies that influence the text; sympathies are formed by the trajectories that mark the divergent paths of both *The Invention of Africa* and *Parables and Fables*. The discursive concerns and constitution of *The Idea of Africa* are in turn shaped by these two

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<sup>43</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994 pp. 212-213.

<sup>44</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. xii.

<sup>45</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. xv.

different trajectories. In this way, the texts inaugurate varying degrees of hermaphroditism as a recurrent theme but *The Idea of Africa* exceeds the bounds of its singularity by inviting readings in relation to the two other texts and in so doing establishes a doubling of its hermaphroditism, and also a marked intensification of its celebration of excess.

In all of Mudimbe's anthropological and philosophical readings a preoccupation remains central; the figure, condition and fate of the savage, the colonized and the native. And this figure is usually exhumed by an archeological operation which involves a deep immersion in the colonial library. In *The Idea of Africa*, this excavatory mode of scholarship reaches its limits. For instance the dark Africanized figure of the Pygmie is re-presented thus;

‘the Pygmies, who are qualified as ‘children of the earth,’ that is, those who live according to the passions of the body, completely subservient to its pleasures and passions’ and who are ‘at the bottom of the human scale just before the apes.’<sup>46</sup>

We are constantly reminded of the entrenched Western intellectual tradition that promoted

‘the theme and the insistent image of the African continent as a ‘refused place [...]: a hot piece of land on which pathetic beings live on roots, herbs, and camel's milk; a monstrous place and, therefore, [...] a place where madness and melancholia reign supreme.’<sup>47</sup>

These intellectual and historical moorings are always for Mudimbe the essential starting-point to begin the recovery of the figure of the African subject even for an analysis of contemporary times and phenomena. Indeed the entire construction of the African subject in relation to the post-Enlightenment project of modernity has taken shape under a looming shadow, the figure of the savage;

‘The ‘savage’ [*Silvaticus*] is the one living in the bush, in the forest, indeed away from the *polis*, the *urbs*; and by extension, ‘savage’ can designate any

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<sup>46</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 4.

<sup>47</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 9.

marginal being, foreigner, the unknown, whoever is different and who as such becomes the unthinkable, whose symbolic or real presence in the *polis*, or the *urbs* appears in itself as a cultural event.<sup>48</sup>

But darkness connotes not only barbarity; it also has profound reverberations in the fields of gender and sexuality. Indeed: 'In Crete, young men were called *skotioi* because, by age-status, they belonged to the world of women, living 'inside' their quarters, and were thus defined as members of an 'inside' world as opposed to the 'open' world of adult citizens. The basic meaning of *skotioi* is 'dark' and the word is often found in expressions qualifying persons who are 'in the dark', living 'in secret,' in sum, 'in the margin' of the *politeia* or condition and rights of a full citizen.'<sup>49</sup>

By focusing on the theme of sexual inversion, Mudimbe reconfigures the race/sex dynamic thereby introducing an interesting dimension and by employing references from classical scholarship he broadens the concept of darkness. The colonial body was a vulnerable site for colonial power (*mission civilisatrice*) and in this regard, it is useful to note that 'not only was colonial toponymy a radical reorganization of an ancient site and of its political makeup, but, more important, generally, it indicated the *invention* of a new site and body whose routes and movements reflected a new political economy.'<sup>50</sup> There is also a crippling phobia that lurks within the always problematic configuration of race and sex as expressed in the eighteenth century by a French Count, Arthur de Gobineau, summarised by Mudimbe as follows:

(a) there is a connection between the degeneration of a race and the decay of a civilization;

(b) in all mixed races, the lower race becomes dominant;

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<sup>48</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 15.

<sup>49</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 80.

<sup>50</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 134.

(c) the race of 'princes' of 'Aryans' is biologically in danger of extinction.'<sup>51</sup>

Mudimbe mentions the important race/sex configuration without fully developing it by exploring how it might relate to the constitution of the African subject and this an issue I intend to dwell upon during the later stages of this essay. But let us restate briefly his contributions to questions of gender (and perhaps of sexuality). Mudimbe's texts establish an interesting tradition away from a dominant analytic tendency within the anglophonic divide of Africa which never fully interrogates the Law of the White Male Philosophical Father in ways that put the issue of gender in focus. Within this dominant anglophonic tradition, a number of its characteristics - the unitary subject, linear narrative, paternal authority, *eidos*, *arche*, *telos* and *aletheia*- often lead to the exclusion of a rigorous interrogation of topics on gender and sexuality. In fact, they are more flawed than Western texts that espouse the same characteristics since they are left uncritiqued by alternative / oppositional cultural traditions / movements. For instance, the language/consciousness relationship which was powerfully rearticulated by Heidegger and which is persuasively addressed by feminist theory and also contemporary African literature is not examined comprehensively by analytic traditions of African philosophical discourse.<sup>52</sup> However, Mudimbe's corpus signifies a break in mainstream African thought by

1. espousing an entirely different notion of, and relationship with language and textuality which rupture the authority of the phal-locentric text;

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<sup>51</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 100.

<sup>52</sup> For instance a recent publication, *The Third Way in African Philosophy: Essays in Honour of Kwasi Wiredu* ed. Olusegun Oladipo, Ibadan: Hope Publications Ltd., 2002, not only celebrates the work of the prominent figure of the school of logical positivism in Africa but also does not succeed in moving beyond the founding problematics of modern African philosophy. In short, new directions and issues are basically lacking in a text that claims to identify a 'third way' in contemporary African thought.



2. interrogating the figure of woman (most especially in *Parables and Fables* in its interrogations of Luba myths and cosmology) and how it contributes to processes of subjectivation in Africa in everyday life;
3. providing an analysis of hermaphroditism not only as a cosmological principle but by contributing to its doubling and its conceptual possibilities.
4. and finally, suggesting a historical framework by which the race/sex dynamic can be rearticulated.

These qualities endow Mudimbe's texts with a truly revolutionary aspect that is often ignored. As suggested, his text, *Parables and Fables*, not only avails itself of elements of non-linearity but also positions itself by upsetting the structure of the classic patriarchal text.

We can extend Mudimbe's analyses of the sex/race couplet even further. Several arguments demonstrate that 'the tropics provided a site for European pornographic fantasies long before conquest was on the way, with lurid descriptions of sexual license, promiscuity, gynecological aberrations, and general perversion marking the Otherness of the colonized for metropolitan consumption.'<sup>53</sup> In other words, colonized spaces in western lore, were both feminized and eroticized: 'Africa and the Americas had become what can be called a porno-tropics for the European imagination- a fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears.'<sup>54</sup> With the colonial conquest, these fears and fantasies were explored on the land and body of the colonized. For instance, on getting to the New World, 'Vespucci and his crew simply indulged native women's desires by providing as much opportunity of copulating as they could muster.'<sup>55</sup> Thus

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<sup>53</sup> Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002, p. 43.

<sup>54</sup> Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*, New York and London: Routledge, 1995, p. 22.

<sup>55</sup> Joane Nagel, *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden*

colonial domination was not just political and economic in its multiple dimensions, the political economy of sex and its management was also very crucial to the colonial quest and its functioning.

In the next section, the race/sex nexus will be explored in more detail thereby expanding the themes of blackness, feminization and femininity and heterology.

### ***Anxious Moons: The Mesh of Race and Sex***

Matriarchy (*thelukrates*) and darkness share a certain sort of metaphoricity. And so do race and sex. In the Greek *polis*, the Amazons existed away from the more dominant forms of public culture and so their mode of existence was associated with 'darkness' and 'barbarity' and this conceptual relationship can be traced to the black subject using a similar assortment of tropes. The metaphoricity between matriarchy and darkness becomes stronger when it is claimed that the Amazons originated in Africa.<sup>56</sup> In Africa, precolonial forms of matriarchy were said to be dominant until Judeo-Christian and Anglo-Saxon forms of marriage on the one hand, and Islamic culture on the other undermined those forms.<sup>57</sup> And as demonstrated by Count Arthur de Gobineau in his treatise, *Essai sur l'inegalite des races*, a profound anxiety marks the relationship between race and sex. For instance the Jewish program in the mid-twentieth century is just another horrendous reflection of this historic anxiety and phobia.<sup>58</sup> To return to the ancient fear that matriarchy breeds, it has been

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*Frontiers*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2003, p. 66.

<sup>56</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 87.

<sup>57</sup> See Nkiru Nzeogu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, *Hypatia* Vol. 1, [Winter 1996] for a recent exploration of the theme. See also, C. A. Diop, *The African Origin of Civilization*, [Mercer Cook trans.] Connecticut: Lawrence Hill and Company, 1974 and also his *Civilization and Barbarity: An Authentic Anthropology* [Yaa-Lengi Meema Ngemi, trans.].

<sup>58</sup> This anxiety and phobia continues to be reflected in a wide range of ways. For

noted that: 'The rule of women constitutes a problem. It can only exist on the margins of the Greek and Roman *politikon*, as could a city with Douloi (slaves) in power. There is well-known statement by Aristotle in his *Poetics*: 'Both a woman and a slave can also be good; but a woman is perhaps an inferior being- and a slave is utterly worthless.'<sup>59</sup> And the patriarchal order of the period sought to undermine matriarchy by subterfuge: 'The young men have been asked by their elders to encamp on the margins of the Amazons' area and to imitate carefully whatever the Amazons did. 'If the women pursued them, then not to fight, but to flee; and when the pursuit ceased, to come and encamp near them.' The young men have been asked to 'feminize' themselves, and the Amazons symbolize what in the *polis* is a normative 'masculinity' and here is a *thelukrates* or a women's rule and dominion.'<sup>60</sup> And then there is the classical coupling of sex/gender/race; 'the young men (*neotatoi*) are in a situation which is structurally similar to that of *skoitioi* (young men not yet adult, seen as still of the dark), the *azostoi* ('those who are without arms') or the *egdysmenoi* ('those who have no clothes') of Dreros.'<sup>61</sup>

Thus classical patriarchal culture devised elaborate schemes to subvert the rule of women (*thelukrates*) which it viewed as an unacceptable form of sociopolitical organization. Second, the young men enlisted to undermine the culture of matriarchy were relatively powerless within the context of the public culture of the Greek *polis*. Finally, matriarchy connoted 'darkness' and barbarity and the young men who are enlisted to

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recent somewhat Afrocentric reflections of these attitudes see, Richard Poe, *Black Spark, White Fire*, C.A.: Prima Publishing, 1997. For an even more specific and more recent account, see Randall Kennedy, *Interracial Intimacies: Sex, Marriage, Identity, and Adoption*, New York: Pantheon Books, 2003. Of course, racial phobia dates back to ancient Greece as Herodotus, *The Histories*, New York: Penguin Books, 1954 demonstrates.

<sup>59</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 90.

<sup>60</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, p. 84.

<sup>61</sup> V. Y. Mudimbe, *The Idea of Africa*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press. p. 84.

subvert it were equally devalued because they had not yet being initiated into the rituals of a masculine public culture. A devalued class of people was deployed to undermine a feared and devalued subculture.

This classical coupling of sex/gender/race has been carried over into contemporary times with particular virulence beginning with the enlightenment project of modernity which marked certain peoples of the globe (particularly in Africa, Asia and the Americas) as unfit for citizenship and modern existence. The denigration of the black subject became a vast, systematic project within the Western intellectual context; figures such as Kant, Hegel and Hume were indeed racists.<sup>62</sup> But I would like to make some conceptual linkages at this juncture; to trace the rather interesting relationships between colonialism (and also imperialism), race, sexuality and gender and to suggest some of the ways in which they are patterned after varying social mosaics and specific historical conditions. Indeed, I would like to suggest that this triadic structure of sex/gender/race is built into powerful conceptions or narratives of socio-historical processes which only transform the complexion of those processes without disrupting their essential dynamics. In other words, as social processes become more complex so does the triadic structure which has remained in place.<sup>63</sup>

The evolution of the figure of the African woman from the epistemologies of nativism and barbarity, epochs and processes of colonialism, through the enlightenment project and into processes of internal colonialism is quite remarkable. Also, this evolution can be linked to the con-

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<sup>62</sup> See Henry Louis Gates Jr. *Loose Canons*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992 p. 73. See also Ngugi wa Thiongo, *Writers in Politics*, Nairobi: Heinemann, 1981. Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996 has interesting accounts of how the Indian subject was refashioned through the coercive instrumentality of colonialism and modernity.

<sup>63</sup> Indeed there interesting accounts of this structure such as Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Conquest*, New York and London: Routledge, 1995 but we have to continue to refine our interpretations of this lingering structure.

struction of a global/general sexual economy. This interesting history is what I would now attempt to trace.

The figure or rather shadow of Sara Baartman<sup>64</sup> is a potent source to establish various kinds of conceptual relationships between the figure of the female African subject, race and sexuality for the understanding of a particular kind of sexual economy. By her figure, the feature known as *steatopygia* becomes instrumental in constructing a general economy of sexuality as Baartman's unusual physical attributes (in this sense, steatopygic) situate before the Western gaze a site upon which to formulate a series of discourses pertaining to black sexuality and to institute a binary model between the black subject and the white subject in terms of a human/animal dichotomy. Thus, it may be argued that racism and discourses on black sexuality developed jointly.<sup>65</sup> Similarly, imperialism gained tremendous momentum within the context of this human/animal dichotomy and hence renewed the urge to civilize a 'savage' people who were further bestialized by an unrestrained sexuality. Even when black men had gained a degree of assimilation into English society in the nineteenth century, the Eurocentric discourse that coupled race and sexuality assumed a more potent dimension as 'black men became the embodiment of the sexualized beast, which white, and particularly working-class, women could not resist. Black women, however, were more savage than the men, so bestial that their men would choose a white woman in preference to them. This was the genesis of a process that culminated in the

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<sup>64</sup> 'Sara Bartman was a Khoisan woman, born in the Cape of present-day South Africa in the early 1790s. In 1810 she was brought to London, England, and there exhibited to the general public. The reason she was exhibited, that is, the primary object of interest to the general public was what was perceived to be the abnormal size of her buttocks'. See Yvette Abrahams, 'Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, Race and Gender in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain', Ruth Roach Pierson and Nurpur Chaudhuri eds. *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998, p. 220.

<sup>65</sup> Yvette Abrahams, 'Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, Race and Gender in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain', Ruth Roach Pierson and Nurpur Chaudhuri eds. *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998, p. 223.

ideal of white womanhood.’<sup>66</sup> More poignantly, ‘the only alternative to the desexualized, domesticated gender role dictated for white women was to become the sexual savage made physical in the exhibition of Sara Baartman and the many ‘Venuses’ of color who succeeded her.’<sup>67</sup>

The settler colonization that formed the basis of the American continental empire also featured the combustive tropes of race and sex and this conjuncture had a defining impact on its sexual economy. The colonizers engaged in a form of cultural mediation by dealing with ‘indigenous women whose knowledge, prestige, skills, and sexual services benefited the men.’<sup>68</sup> But both the social structure and the sexual economy were also constructed by class which eventually led to the social construction of gender roles. Thus:

Defined ideologically as the opposite of the ‘gentle tamer’ image of the settler woman, white prostitutes were featured as the ‘public’ woman, the ‘sexualized’ female in a sort of sexual market that valued women according to a ‘combination of race, ethnicity, education, sociability, sexual skill, and age’ and gave the greatest rewards to ‘attractive women, usually white, who dressed well, acted like ladies, and played the parts of companions as well as sexual partners.’ The majority, who lacked the most desirable attributes and who worked in shabby brothels, small cottages, or cribs, were often defined legally as something other than women, that is, as ‘lewd and dissolute female persons. As female outlaws, despite their ‘whiteness’ these women came close to occupying the discursive position occupied for ‘Black’ or ‘indigenous’ women in many colonial societies.’<sup>69</sup>

Within this general sociosexual economy, the patriarchal mode of signification allocated the issues of domesticity and nurture to women while

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<sup>66</sup> Yvette Abrahams, ‘Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, Race and Gender in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain’, p. 229.

<sup>67</sup> Yvette Abrahams, ‘Images of Sara Bartman: Sexuality, Race and Gender in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain’, p. 230.

<sup>68</sup> Dolores E. Janiewski, ‘Gendered Colonialism: The ‘Woman’ Question in Settler Society’ Ruth Roach Pierson and Nurpur Chaudhuri eds. *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998, p. 58.

<sup>69</sup> Dolores E. Janiewski, ‘Gendered Colonialism: The ‘Woman’ Question in Settler Society’ pp. 58-59.

men dominated the spheres of politics and the intellect. Also, 'propertyless men, African Americans of both sexes, and Native Americans were excluded from the masculine prerogatives of power and often from the 'respect' accorded white women as segregation, antimiscegenation laws, and discriminatory land-owning patterns 'institutionalized racial-sexual frontiers.'<sup>70</sup> In this manner, the social, racial and sexual economy was constructed in the American continental empire.

However, there are other nations and continents that experienced a similar pattern of racial/sexual economy with equally far-reaching consequences. In colonial Africa, the cruelty of the phallic economy operated beyond the bounds of all forms of constitutional rationality, in fact, it was particularly distinctive for its arbitrariness, grotesqueness and excessive violence. Indeed:

It is through the phallus that the colonizer is able to link up with the surrounding world. The lieutenant selects, among the virgin girls, the ones who have the lightest skin and the straightest nose. The interpreter orders that they be taken to the flood plain and thoroughly cleaned all over, especially beneath the *cache-sexe*. For are they not too dirty to be eaten raw? Without a phallus, the colonizer is nothing, has no fixed identity. Thanks to the phallus, the colonizer's cruelty can stand quite naked: erect. A sliver of flesh that dribbles endlessly, the colonizer's phallus can hardly hold back its spasms, even if alleging concern about tints and odors. Taut as a bow, it sniffs everywhere, uncovers itself, strikes out, grates, knocks, and moans. It never wilts until it has left its stream of milk, the ejaculation. To colonize is, then to, accomplish a sort of sparky clean act of coitus, with the characteristic feature of making pleasure and horror coincide.<sup>71</sup>

It is remarkable that the postcolonial state in Africa inherited the *violences* of the colonial regime and 'the poscolony is, par excellence, a hollow pretense, a regime of unreality (*regime du simulacra*).'<sup>72</sup> But this total appropriation of the violence of the colonial structure by the post-

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<sup>70</sup> Dolores E. Janiewski, 'Gendered Colonialism: The 'Woman' Question in Settler Society' p. 60.

<sup>71</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001 p. 175.

<sup>72</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 108.

colonial state is also reflected within sexual field in which the phallic economy becomes even more lawless, mixing its forms of brutalization with strands from the precolonial world and developments from modernity.<sup>73</sup> In more precise terms: 'The male ruler's pride in possessing an active penis has to be dramatized, through sexual rights over subordinates, the keeping of concubines, and so on. The unconditional subordination of women to the principle of male pleasure remains one pillar upholding the reproduction of the phallographic system.'<sup>74</sup> In other words, 'pumping grease into the backsides of young girls.'<sup>75</sup> However, as mentioned earlier, the *violences* of the postcolony do not appropriate modern forms of rationality in any systematic manner and these account for its excessive theatricality, grotesqueness and Hobbesian brutality. In many respects, technologies of domination and abjection even in their crude forms pervade the sexual field, and are a legacy of the colonial modes of brutal subjectification.

There are other ways of exploring the race/sex dichotomy, for instance, the nation in its recent formation as a project of twentieth century modernity and within the context its supposed rationality employed a form of sexual politics that legitimated the oppression of women during the Second World War. The case of Korean women under Japanese oppression comes to mind. These women who were called 'comfort' women were forcefully conscripted by the Japanese military to provide sexual services to soldiers. In 1991, they brought a suit against the government seeking apologies and compensation for their ordeal during the war. This exploitative sexual economy was not a purely foreign affair as it was also encouraged at the domestic level as well so 'while all non-Japanese were

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<sup>73</sup> The demonization of Africa in discourse has mostly certainly not abated; Paul Theroux's book, *Dark Star Safari: Over land from Cairo to Cape Town*, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003 makes an attempt to outdo Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*.

<sup>74</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 110.

<sup>75</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 110.



treated as ethnic/racial inferiors, Japanese women themselves were discriminated against and sexually abused.’<sup>76</sup> And ‘today, Japanese men often go on ‘sex tours’ in Southeast Asian countries in order to buy sex from prostitutes. There have been reported cases of Japanese men who gone to the Philippines, impregnated the women and then simply left. In addition, there are many cases where Thai and Filipina women have been brought to Japan and forced into prostitution.’<sup>77</sup> Obviously, the plight of the Korean women broaches an important contemporary issue; the discourse of reparations which increasingly is framed in universalistic terms.<sup>78</sup>

African women have had to confront all kinds of oppression as well. In both traditional and modern settings, there are formidable structures of repression in place. There is to begin with, the general demonization of the female; ‘Vagabond’, ‘prostitute’, ‘wayward’, ‘unruly’, ‘indecent’ and ‘immoral’ are just a few of the terms used to label and stigmatize women whose behavior in some way threatens other peoples expectations of the way things ought to be.’<sup>79</sup> So the levels of oppression are what ought to be demarcated next. The crisis of global capitalism has in some ways resulted in what has been termed the ‘crisis of masculinity’ which assumes quite interesting dimensions within the African conti-

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<sup>76</sup> Sayoko Yoneda, ‘Sexual and Racial Discrimination: A Historical Inquiry into the Japanese Military’s ‘Comfort’ Women System of Enforced Prostitution,’ *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1998 p. 239.

<sup>77</sup> Sayoko Yoneda, ‘Sexual and Racial Discrimination: A Historical Inquiry into the Japanese Military’s ‘Comfort’ Women System of Enforced Prostitution,’ p. 239.

<sup>78</sup> The discourse on reparations and related matters is getting more sophisticated in with the passage of time. See for instance, Elizabeth Spelman’s book, *Repair: The Impulse to Restore in a Fragile World*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2002 where she explores the question of wo/man as *Homo reparans*.

<sup>79</sup> Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl A. McCurdy eds. ‘Wicked’ and the *Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*, Introduction, Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2001 p. 4.

ment.<sup>80</sup> Sheer economic necessity is changing the arrangements within the domestic space which in some cases has resulted in far greater economic power for women. For instance, in the Gambia, many women have become gardeners in order to confront harsh economic conditions. Thus, 'some men, when they are asked about their wives, they will say, 'She is no longer my wife; she has a new husband.' The phrase, 'She has gone to her husband' (*Mandika a taata a ke ya*), used by men to indicate that their wives were not at home, but working in their gardens became a shorthand expression marking women's neglect of marital responsibilities; it demonized gardeners as bad wives.'<sup>81</sup> So in Gambia, in the semi-rural/traditional sector, women still confront serious discrimination in spite of their solid wealth gaining activities. In more traditional/colonial contexts, say colonial Asante, women were forced to marry often against their wishes to stem all kinds of moral panics, e.g. venereal disease and the shifting of the traditional bases of social and economic power.<sup>82</sup> In contemporary times, the challenge of global capitalism not only transformed the character of the domestic space but also granted women far greater mobility in terms of seeking better means of survival. No where is this situation more evident than in Lesotho where labor migration severely ruptured the domestic space thereby forcing women to leave for the shanties, towns and mines of the Free State and Transvaal.<sup>83</sup> This

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<sup>80</sup> See Jean and John L. Comaroff, 'Millennial Capitalism: First Thoughts on a Second Coming', *Public Culture* 12, no. 2, 2000.

<sup>81</sup> Richard A. Schroeder, 'Gone to their Second Husbands': Marital Metaphors and Conjugal Contracts in the Gambia's Female Garden Sector', Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl A. McCurdy eds. *'Wicked' and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*, p. 88.

<sup>82</sup> Jean Allman, 'Rounding Up Spinsters: Gender Chaos and Unmarried Women in Colonial Asante', Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl A. McCurdy eds. *'Wicked' and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*. See also Margot Lovett, 'She thinks like a Man': Marriage and [De]constructing Gender Identity in Colonial Buha, Western Tanzania' Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl A. McCurdy eds. *'Wicked' and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*, for another view of patriarchal oppression.

<sup>83</sup> David B. Coplan, 'You have left Wandering About: Basotho Women and the Culture of Mobility', Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl A. McCurdy eds. *'Wicked' and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*.

increased mobility also extended to the sexual domain and led to ‘the virtual institutionalization of not only male but also female adulterous relationships.’<sup>84</sup>

Indeed, Africa exhibits a variety of sexist oppression which is defined by terms of geography, culture, economics, history and religion. But perhaps the most graphic and obviously the most disturbing of these are related to the stereotypes of the postcolony where one is forced to think in terms of ‘the Ministers who explore virgins on hotels beds, and the priests who turn somersaults over the ‘deep behinds’ of young girls and, while digging a ‘delicious void in their bellies, make them cry out the final ho-hi-hi.’ This not to mention the real ‘kings of the bush’- the prefects and sub-prefects, police officers and gendarmes- who have practically unlimited rights over those in their charge (*droits de cuissage*).<sup>85</sup> In regions of the continent plagued by war, genocide and poverty a most brutal economy of violence informs and perpetuates the phallogocentric regime which reigns with an equally brutal randomness. However, this disturbing situation must also be read against the practical and intellectual efforts of women to subvert various kinds of sexist oppression.

### ***Gynocritical musings***

*As for gynocritical work, it began with the necessary task of gathering information...<sup>86</sup>*

The development of feminist thought and practice in Africa has been quite problematic and also interesting. To be sure, its history is marked by the usual antagonisms from patriarchal culture, all sorts of institutional

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<sup>84</sup> David B. Coplan, ‘You have left Wandering About: Basotho Women and the Culture of Mobility’, Dorothy L. Hodgson and Sheryl A. McCurdy eds. *‘Wicked’ and the Reconfiguration of Gender in Africa*, p. 191.

<sup>85</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, p. 126.

<sup>86</sup> Susan Rubin Suleiman, *Subversive Intent: Gender, Politics, and the Avant-Garde*, p. 19.

and organizational problems and the problem (within the African feminist movement itself) of relating theory to practice. This set of problematics is the focus of this section. More specifically, how to create a vibrant feminist discourse within a context of contradictory development? In my view, Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie's work is symptomatic of this particular problem. The second approach relates to the problem of constructing a feminist discourse at the purely theoretical level. For this approach, a provocative essay by Nkiru Nzegwu will serve our purposes.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> There are quite a number of texts by feminists and various authors dealing the questions of female empowerment in Africa both at the practical and theoretical level and they include: Ifi Amaduime, *Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture*, London: Zed books, 1997; *Male Daughters, Female Husbands*, London: Zed Books, 1987; C. O. Ogunyemi, *Wo/Man Palaver*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1996; O. M. Larbi 'New Gender Perspectives for the Millennium: Challenges and Successful Models of North-South Collaboration' *West Africa Review*, vol. 2, no. 1 (August 2000) see <http://www.westafricareview.com/war/vol2.1/larbi.html>; Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Africa Women and the Fire Dance,' *West Africa Review*, vol.2 no. 1 (2000) <http://www.westafricareview.com/war/vol2.1/nzegwu1.html>.; Chasing Shadows: The Misplaced Search for Matriarchy,' *Canadian African Studies Association Journal*, (Fall 1999). Republished in *West African Review*, vol. 2, no. 1 (August 2000) <http://www.westafricareview.com/war/vol2.1/nzegwu2.html>.; 'Colonial Racism: Sweeping Out Africa with Europe's Broom,' *Philosophy and Racism*, eds., Susan Babbitt and Sue Campbell, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999; 'Transgressive Vision: Subverting the Power of Maculinity,' *Issues in Contemporary Art*, ed. Nkiru Nzegwu, Binghamton: ISSA, 1998; 'In Praise of Orishas: A Diasporic African Spirituality,' *Matriart: Contemporary Visual Art*, no. 3 (1997); 'Confronting Racism: Toward the Formation of a Female-Identified Consciousness,' *Canadian Journal for Women and the Law*, vol. 7, no. 1 (1994); L. A. Obiora, 'New Wine, Old Skin: (En)gaging Nationalism, Traditionalism & Gender Relations,' *Indiana Law Review*, 28, 3 (Symposium Issue); Oyeronke Oyewumi, 'DeConfounding Gender: Feminist Theorizing and Western Culture,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall 1997); 'Making History, Creating Gender: Some Methodological and Imperative Questions in the Writing of Yoruba Traditions,' *History in Africa*, vol. 25 (1997); *Inventing Gender: Making an African Sense of Western GenderDiscourses*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997; 'The Role of the Writing Class in Engendering Yoruba Discourse,' *International Journal and African Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1(1997); 'Inventing Gender: Questioning Gender in Pre-colonial,' *Problems in African History* ed. Robert O. Collins, New York: Marcus wiener Publishing Inc. 1993; Fatou Sow, Ayesha Iman and Amina Mama eds. *the Social Sciences*, Dakar: CODESRIA, 1997; Margaret Strobel, 'Gender, Race and Empire in Nineteenth and Twentieth Century Africa and Asia' *Becoming Visible*, ed. Renate Bridenthal, Susan M. Stuard, and Merry E. Weisner, Boston: Houghton

Molara Ogundipe-Leslie states that her text is much-needed in the context of 'African literature, women's studies, literary studies in general, culture, politics, critical thought, social action.'<sup>88</sup> And in many respects, it recounts the issues involved in constructing an active women's movement as part of the drive toward modernization in a postcolonial setting. As mentioned earlier, these issues and problems are present in entrenched phallogocentric practices and structures on the one hand, and the women's movement itself on the other. Oftentimes, this situation creates a backlash against African feminisms. Sometimes, some African women feel they have to apologize for being feminists. For instance, what is one to make of the view, 'I have since advocated the word 'Stigwanism,' instead of feminism, to bypass these concerns and to bypass the combative discourses that ensue whenever one raises the issue of feminism in Africa.'<sup>89</sup> The term is an acronym for *Social Transformation Including Women in Africa*. This particular effort, attempts to do many things of which two particularly stand out. First, at the intellectual level which is broader than it seems. An effort of decolonization is required which will entail

1. a rigorous questioning of the various phallogocentric regimes within the continent
2. and an equally spirited advocacy of counter-phallogocentric alternatives together with a demonstration of why they can turn out to be viable programs.

This approach is necessarily multi-faceted. Perhaps its multidimensionality vitiates its overall impact as an intellectual discourse. Of course this effort has to be made in relation to urgent practical concerns. The challenges of the African woman have been put in this manner; 'One might

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Mifflin, 1998; Aili Tripp, 'Rethinking Difference: Comparative Perspectives from Africa' *Signs* 25 (3) 2000. Of course this is not a totally exhaustive bibliography but hopefully it gives an idea of the issues, debates and orientation that motivate feminist discourse and practice in Africa and some of the figures central in this regard.

<sup>88</sup> Molara Ogundipe-Leslie *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994, p. xiv.

<sup>89</sup> Molara Ogundipe-Leslie *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, p. 229.

say that the African woman has six mountains on her back: one is oppression from outside (colonialism and neocolonialism?), the second is from traditional structures, feudal, slave-based, communal etc., the third is her backwardness (neo-colonialism?); the fourth is man, the fifth is her color, her race; and the sixth is herself.<sup>90</sup> Again this demanding multidimensionality is reflected; the conflation of theoretical matters together with the demands of praxis and the tensions that arise as a result are never completely resolved. The intellectual is required for unrelenting efforts of social activism and the activist must find a suitable intellectual frame from which to act.

Ogundipe-Leslie recognizes the key problems. But then, finding solutions for them is also a major problem. She recognizes ‘the need to ‘humanize the very language of discourse, to ‘de-masculinize’ it and find androgynous and generic terms to discuss what concerns and affects both men and women is society.’<sup>91</sup> However, no sustained attempt to do this is demonstrated in the text. Indeed, as feminist theory and all kinds of decolonization/deconstructive projects have shown, language is an important site for the constitution of identity and also a locus of hegemonic power. The whole concept of *écriture féminine* is a bold and inventive response to this conception of language. Ogundipe-Leslie recognizes this but does not deal with it in a convincing and sustained way.

She also writes, ‘sexual orientation is certainly one area that has not been opened for research or discussion. In some countries of Africa, the death penalty awaits gay people; in others, the state does not persecute them. The experiences of sexual orientation in traditional arrangements require discovery still.’<sup>92</sup> Again, she identifies a major problem

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<sup>90</sup> Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, p. 28.

<sup>91</sup> Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, p. 24.

<sup>92</sup> Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, p. 15.

which until the present times lingers.<sup>93</sup> Ogundipe-Leslie's text identifies many problems women face in Africa but the level of conceptualization in relation to them is a different matter altogether. These problems are mentioned in a casual manner and left at that level instead of theorizing them or addressing them in a sustained way. We have noted how the issue of sexuality in Africa, although identified as crucial area of inquiry, is left largely unaddressed. Another important site of inquiry that is unexplored but mentioned is the female body. She writes 'it is not misogyny that causes African men especially, to fear women's menses, but a conceptualization of the female reproductive system and excretions and body parts as powerful and potent. Menstrual blood is believed to have the power to disrupt, interfere with, or cause to happen. Thus women's monthly blood is also considered very effective in making portions.'<sup>94</sup> But female bodies have to be discussed in relation to so many of the concerns of Ogundipe-Leslie's text: the patriarchal order, feminist theory and cultural practices- and they are indeed receiving all kinds of discursive attention.<sup>95</sup> In the final analysis, some of the important ingredients needed for a vibrant

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<sup>93</sup> In fact, a recent publication, Stephen O. Murray and Will Roscoe eds. *Boy Wives and Female Husbands: Studies Of African Homosexualities*, New York: Palgrave, 2001 may be the first major collection devoted to African sexualities. It points out that there is still a lot to find out about female eroticism and same-sex relationships generally. Also it argues that sexuality among African females is still viewed in terms of the presence of the penis which somewhat delimits the scope of sexuality generally. See also, Signe Arnfred (ed.) *Re-thinking Sexualities in Africa*, Uppsala: The Nordiska Afrikainstitutet, 2004 and Francis Nyamnjoh, 'Fishing in Troubled Waters: *Disquettes and Thiofs* in Dakar' *Africa*, 75 (3), 2005. However, across the transatlantic divide, studies on same-sex erotic dynamics are becoming more visible and the trend is often related to significant cultural moments in the West where the counterculture was able to make an impact on mainstream culture. See for instance, Robert F. Reid- Pharr *Black Gay Man: Essays*, New York and London: New York University Press, 2001.

<sup>94</sup> Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, p. 214.

<sup>95</sup> For instance, see *Bodies out of Bound: Fatness and Transgression*, Jana Evans Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco eds. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2001 which the trend of discursive appropriation of the body and its various manifestations and possibilities.

feminist discourse- a grounding in theory, a discourse on language and its possible reconfigurations, the boundaries of sexuality, the sites of the body and its various appropriations and finally a consistent interrogation of the relationships between theory and practice- are not utilized in a developed or in a strategic way. The text displays the various difficulties and challenges of evolving a feminist practice not only by mentioning them but also by its own very shortcomings.

Nkiru Nzegwu's essay, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*' needs to be read in a more theoretical way. Appiah's text has had a profound influence on African philosophical discourse, cultural studies and African studies generally.<sup>96</sup> And Nzegwu's essay can be regarded as a feminist critique of Appiah's text. She makes some general remarks about the overall intent of the book; 'one of the principal aim of the project is to articulate by means of various literary strategies a transnational, transracial *new* identity that is at home in the social and economic structures of dominance of the Western cultural and intellectual traditions.'<sup>97</sup> This is perhaps a fairer starting-point for a critique of what is generally a wide ranging text but instead, a matrilineal critique is directed at the book. Thus, 'the central problem of its preferred conception of family ignores the matrilineal implications of his father's Asante culture and the damaging consequences of that mode of family structure and organization for his assumed Asante culture.'<sup>98</sup> This point of entry serves as the basis of her critique of the text. Appiah is primarily concerned with the questions of race, transnational identity, postcolonialism, postmodernism, ideological decolonization and a number of other cultural/literary concerns. These

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<sup>96</sup> See Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1992.

<sup>97</sup> Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, *Hypatia*, Vol. 11, No. 1, (Winter) 1996, p. 175.

<sup>98</sup> Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, 176.



are the central concerns of the text. Instead, the details of the afterword are made to be the pivot of an extensive critique of the entire text.

In other words, an epilogue serves as the basis for an extended discourse on matrilineality which was never a preoccupation in the main text. But the operation by which what can hardly be termed marginal gets centralized as a method of reading the entire text is quite intriguing.<sup>99</sup> Nzegwu makes several accusations regarding Appiah's text; for instance, 'the crack in his façade provides valuable clues to Appiah's less than intimate knowledge of Asante culture, of his uneasy stance to the Akan world-sense, and his determined aim to recast Asante culture in the name of 'progress'.<sup>100</sup> Again, she writes, 'epistemologically, the value of his description lies in its disclosure of Appiah's imperialist attitude toward Asante culture and his limited knowledge of Asante family dynamics.'<sup>101</sup> Finally, 'I hope to expose some of Appiah's errors of misrepresentation of matrilineity and show that these derive from a conceptual bias, and an imperialist construction of knowledge of which he seems unaware.'<sup>102</sup> In view of these misrepresentations, it is her aim to demonstrate how Appiah not only has 'a hidden agenda' but also a plan to replace Asante forms of kinship with foreign ones. On that basis, she proceeds on an extended explanation of matrilineity within the Asante context. When she finally refers to Appiah's text, it is to fault its title: 'In choosing the title *In My Father's House*, as if it were unproblematic, as if patrilineity is the norm in Akan culture, Appiah overwrites the explosive issue of patrilinealization in Asante society.'<sup>103</sup> Perhaps this is open to legitimate debate. But she does

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<sup>99</sup> See p. 178 of her essay, where she writes, '... in the epilogue, the most interesting and revealing part of the book'.

<sup>100</sup> Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, p. 178.

<sup>101</sup> Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, p. 178- 179.

<sup>102</sup> Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, p. 179.

<sup>103</sup> Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review to of

not go on to demonstrate how this accusation works within the body of the text. However, the accusations continue: 'Playing the patrilineal card to global readers through the title had enabled Appiah to succeed.'<sup>104</sup>

Nzegwu's discussion of nativism is also quite baffling. She writes; 'Appiah's disregard for Akan matrilineal ethos comes from deep-seated reservation of nativism.'<sup>105</sup> She does not quite indicate the notion of nativism she is applying and this somewhat limits the scope of her critique.<sup>106</sup> In the first page of her essay, she claims that one of the aims of Appiah's project is to fabricate 'a transnational, transracial *new Africanist* identity.' But then she writes, 'twentieth century hybridity of Africans is problematic for Appiah.'<sup>107</sup> Finally, she ends the essay by stating; 'American, European, African, African-American, and other readers of *In My Father's House* need to gain a deeper appreciation of the subtle myriad ways in which neocolonialism and neoimperialism currently thrive in Africa to supplant its traditions with 'europhonic' ones.'<sup>108</sup>

Just as our reading of Ogun-dipe-Leslie revealed, Nzegwu's text demonstrates the problem of constructing a theory and the problematic nature of some theoretical terms: transnational, transracial identities, nativism and hybridity. These are terms that are somewhat pivotal in Nzegwu's essay. The technology of reading Nzegwu adopts deserves

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Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, p. 184.

<sup>104</sup> Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, p. 185.

<sup>105</sup> Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, p. 187.

<sup>106</sup> Conceptions of nativism vary not only in terms of definition but also across academic disciplines. Paulin Hountondji has a searing critique of it (known as ethnophilosophy in African philosophy) in his book, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality*. Recently, Achille Mbembe has been in the forefront of the debates against nativism. See for instance his introduction to the *African Studies Review*, 'Ways of Seeing: Beyond the New Nativism.' Special Issue, vol. 44, no. 2.

<sup>107</sup> Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, p. 188.

<sup>108</sup> Nkiru Nzegwu, 'Questions of Identity and Inheritance: A Critical Review of Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In My Father's House*, p. 199.

some attention.<sup>109</sup> She makes the margins (an incident in the epilogue) of Appiah's text her central concern but there are hardly any references to the essays that make up the collection. She also faults the implications of the text's title. Indeed, she is at liberty to carry out such a reading but it is the operation, the *techne*, by which she reinscribes the margins of the text, a very wide-ranging one at that, as the entire structure of the text itself that deserves greater explanation. Hers is what one might call an isogetical reading. She takes the question of matriliney as her main focus and point of departure. She also offers a traditional or perhaps even a nativist interpretation of matriliney in the Asante context. In order to explore the various meanings and limits of the concept we require interpretations that take into account the transfigurative processes of colonialism and decolonization as part of the greater project of modernity. If she were able to do so, she may in fact end up closer to Appiah's position that she might have imagined. However, this is a problem (*theoria*) that is common with decolonizing regions and continents. In a not too dissimilar context, part of this problem was framed thus:

There was one version of this argument in Edmund Husserl's Vienna lecture of 1935, in which he proposed that the fundamental difference between 'oriental philosophies' (more specifically, Indian and Chinese) and 'Greek-European science' (or as he added, 'universally speaking: philosophy') was the capacity of the latter to produce 'absolute theoretical insights,' that is, '*theoria*' (universal science), while the former retained a 'practical universal' and hence 'mythical-religious,' character. This 'practical-universal,' philosophy was directed to the world in a 'naïve' and 'straightforward' manner, while the world presented as a 'thematic' to *theoria*, making possible a praxis 'whose aim is to elevate mankind through universal scientific reason.'<sup>110</sup>

But in spite of these kinds of intellectual prejudices, third world and decolonizing regions have been able to crack the problem of *theoria* and the

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<sup>109</sup> See Jacques Derrida, *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, trans. Peggy Kamuf New York: Schocken, 1985 on the politics of reading.

<sup>110</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty 'Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for the 'Indian' Pasts?', *A Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986-1995* ed. Ranjit Guha, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 226.

theorizations of the same. It is often affirmed that there isn't an absence of *theoria* in the ancient Indian intellectual context. For one, 'the Indian Buddhist tradition was for the most part insistent on sound argumentation'.<sup>111</sup> Also, numerous philosophically interesting concepts abound within the annals of classical Buddhist thought; e.g. all things exist (*sarvam asti*), nothing exists (*sarvam nasti*), true (*sat*), false (*asat*), good (*punya*), evil (*papa*), virtue (*dharma*), vice (*adharma*), discontent (*duhkha*), contentment (*sukha*) etc.<sup>112</sup> Let us examine how the Indian nation handled the woman's question at the theoretical level.

The 'women's question' in India was crafted into the discourse of nationalism as part of the counter-discourse to the colonialist project which sought to recast the Indian subject as 'degenerate and barbaric.' The patriarchal order which controlled the nationalist discourse encouraged a system of binarisms not only to restore Indian dignity but also to facilitate the process of decolonization. These dichotomies include inner/outer, spiritual/material, home/world and feminine/masculine distinctions and the figure of woman played an important role within this schema. Woman, thus was the repository of specific virtues, for instance, modesty and godlike qualities which are not traits associated with animal nature. It was believed that 'women cultivate and cherish these godlike qualities far more than men do. Protected to a certain extent from the purely material pursuits of securing a livelihood in the external world, women express in their appearance and behavior the spiritual qualities which are characteristic of civilized and refined society.'<sup>113</sup> And in oppo-

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<sup>111</sup> Richard P. Hayes, 'Nagarjuna's Appeal' *Journal of Indian Philosophy*.

<sup>112</sup> Classical Indian metaphysics and epistemology has consistently been found to be very developed by a number of Western scholars; see Richard P. Hayes, 'Nagarjuna's Appeal' *Journal of Indian Philosophy*, 22, 1994; Jay L. Garfield, *Fundamental Wisdom of the Middle Way: Nagarjuna's Mulamadhyamakakarika*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1995 and also his *Empty Words: Buddhist Philosophy and Cross-Cultural Interpretation*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2002; and Richard H. Robinson, 'Some logical aspects of Nagarjuna's system', *Philosophy East and West* 6 [4], 1957.

<sup>113</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nation and Its Women', *A Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986-1995* ed. Ranjit Guha, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 250.

sition to this image of idealized woman was the figure of woman in a fallen or undeveloped state; ‘the ‘common’ woman, who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, and subjected to brutal physical oppression by males.’<sup>114</sup> This patriarchal *apportioning, defining* and *constructing* of roles for woman is similar to other patriarchal regimes in the West.<sup>115</sup> Africa had regimes for the construction of gender roles but what needs to be studied is how the discourse of modernity, nation-building or decolonization constituted the figure of woman as counter-discourse. Indeed, such a configuration must be rare. In fact, it has been argued the patriarchal order in a large part of Africa has no time for the ‘woman question’ since it has endured all kinds of assaults; slavery, colonialism and imperialism and as such all its energies must be directed at fighting these ills.<sup>116</sup>

This is not to suggest that patriarchal regimes that configured the ‘woman question’ into various projects of nation-building or decolonizing were particularly less oppressive. However, the framing of the question within the public sphere also meant concepts such democracy and civil rights had to be enlarged and reframed. The move from the purely domestic realm into the public domain was a significant gain for the feminist movement. It is difficult to think of a nation-building project in Africa

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<sup>114</sup> Chatterjee, ‘The Nation and Its Women’, *A Subaltern Studies Reader: 1986-1995* ed. Ranjit Guha, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 253.

<sup>115</sup> See Dolores E. Janiewski, ‘Gendered Colonialism: The ‘Woman Question’ in Settler Society’, Ruth Roach Pierson and Nurpur Chaudhuri eds. *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998 and Yvette Abrahams, ‘Images of Sarah Bartman: Sexuality, Race, and Gender in Early-Nineteenth –Century Britain’ Ruth Roach Pierson and Nurpur Chaudhuri eds. *Nation, Empire, Colony: Historicizing Gender and Race*, Bloomington and Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1998.

<sup>116</sup> Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie *Re-Creating Ourselves: African Women and Critical Transformations*, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1994 p. 71. bell hooks on her part writes: ‘Often brilliant thinkers have had such blind spots. Men like Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Paulo Freire, and Aime Cesaire, who works teach us much about the nature of colonization, racism, classism, and revolutionary struggle, often ignore issues of sexist oppression in their own writing,’ *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, Cambridge MA: South End Press, 2000 p. 41.

that consistently framed the woman question as part of collective rejuvenation on the one hand, and as a central feature of the counter-discourse to colonialism on the other, as is the case with India.

However, there are other ways to read the genealogy of feminism in India. 'India', we are told 'is sometimes a lid on an immense and equally unacknowledged subaltern heterogeneity.'<sup>117</sup> And obviously this heterogeneity would affect any reading of the woman question in India. In fact, there are readings of the issue which reflect a number of crises and which are in turn influenced by them; the breakdown of the family and its affective symbolizations and the spectralization of global capital.<sup>118</sup> Under these circumstances, 'in modern 'India,' there is a 'society' of bonded labor where the only means of repaying a loan at extortionate rates of interest is hereditary bond-slavery. Family life is still possible here, the affects taking the entire burden of survival. Below this is bonded prostitution, where the girls women abducted from bonded labor or *kamiya* households are thrust as bodies for absolute sexual and economic exploitation.'<sup>119</sup> This sociosexual economy not only appropriates the female body and wrecks upon it untold violence, it also deflects the very meaning of democracy in its contemporary usage. Thus a situation arises 'where everything works by the ruthless and visible calculus of superexploitation by caste-class domination, the logic of democracy is thoroughly counterintuitive, its rituals absurd.'<sup>120</sup> This angle, undoubtedly presents a picture of woman far removed from the noble aspirations of the discourse of Indian nationalism in its heyday in favour of one that is more attuned with millennial capitalism. But in spite of the realities of Indian heteroge-

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<sup>117</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, New York and London: Routledge, 1993 p. 73.

<sup>118</sup> Arjun Appadurai, Spectral Housing And Urban Cleansing: Notes on Millennial Mumbai', Carol Breckenridge *et al* eds. *Cosmopolitanism*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002.

<sup>119</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 82.

<sup>120</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 87.

neity, class-caste superexploitation and the spectralization of the logic of capital ‘the scramble for legitimacy in the house of theory’<sup>121</sup> continues.

The Indian experience demonstrates the various ways in which we can reconfigure the woman question in Africa, that is, to relate it to the discourses of nationalism and decolonization. This gesture is supposed to enlarge our notion of the public domain not only in terms of civic participation but also in terms of its conditions of conceptuality. Second, we must begin to rethink the ways in which the figure of the African female is being deflected and reconstituted by global capitalism on the one hand, and the emerging scenarios of ‘abnormal’ territoriality, state collapse and various forms of informalization in Africa on the other.<sup>122</sup> There would be a lot of work in the house of theory in this regard.

### ***Renegotiations***

What forms does the figure of the African female assume in contemporary times?<sup>123</sup> Perhaps T. K. Biaya’s essay, ‘ ‘Crushing the Pistachio’: Eroticism in Senegal and the Art of Ousmane Ndiaye Dago’ is a good point to begin and also end this discussion since it attempts to locate the constructions of the female figure within the context of discourses of Islamization and modernity both of which are also structured by an entrenched patriarchal order. Also, these constructions occur in multimedia: text and image which offer multiple ways of reading the figure.<sup>124</sup> First of

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<sup>121</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Outside in the Teaching Machine*, p. 137.

<sup>122</sup> See Achille Mbembe ‘At the Edge of the World: Boundaries, Territoriality, and Sovereignty in Africa’, Crawford Young and Mark Beissinger eds., *Beyond State Crisis? Postcolonial Africa and Post-Soviet Eurasia in Comparative Perspective*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press and The Woodrow Wilson Center, 2001.

<sup>123</sup> There are very few studies dealing with sexuality and eroticism in Africa but perhaps this may change with the publication of issues such as the volume 3-4 of *CODESRIA Bulletin*, 1999, which has an extended segment on sexual transformations in contemporary Africa. In fact, one can assert the situation is really changing for the better.

<sup>124</sup> The female figure under late capitalism continues to generate various kinds of

all, we begin by pondering the implications of this contradictory remark; ‘the body is erotically valued in African societies on the condition that it is not naked but accessoried, properly prepared. The body’s beauty and erotic value are achieved not when it is stripped bare but when it is worked or denatured- for example, by excision, scarification, elongation of the clitoris, and so on.’<sup>125</sup> On the basis of these remarks, the female body is still held in place by the injunctions of African tribal cultures that are more or less unmarked by the intrusions of modernity and technology. To be sure, it is increasingly difficult to conceptualize the female African body’s physicality on the basis of the Western conception of eroticism. In other words, the definition of eroticism employed is somewhat imprecise since it conflates a non-Western sense of eroticism with Western conceptual and artistic conventions. It draws heavily from Western conceptions without quite adopting their preoccupation with the sacred, the profane and excess. We must bear in mind that within the Western context eroticism ‘connotes a tearing, an opening on to something entirely other, the abjection of being before an experience which appears sovereign.’<sup>126</sup> Ousmane Ndiaye Dago takes photographs of nude African women as part of an effort to create a tradition of eroticism in Senegal thus following in the footsteps of a Western photographer, U. Ommer. But this kind of

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debates and interest: The American artist, Robert Crumb has made a career of drawing full-bodied female figures which also serve as some sort of commentary on postindustrial culture and therapies of desire. In an interview, he says ‘all the magazines show those bony, anorexic women. They’re bulimic. They vomit up their food. They all feel bad about their bodies.’ He goes on to say, ‘I wonder when the idea of American beauty changed and women got skinny.’ Finally, he says ‘they want to keep women in a state of discontent- constantly going out and buying more shoes and never being fully satisfied with the shoes they buy.’ See *The New York Times Magazine* March 30, 2003 p. 48. These remarks reveal a lot about the power structures that control the female figure not only in the United States alone but also in a very large part of the world as a whole.

<sup>125</sup> T. K. Biaya, ‘“Crushing the Pistachio”’: Eroticism in Senegal and the Art of Ousmane Ndiaye Dago’, Carol Breckenridge *et al* eds. *Cosmopolitanism*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002, p. 138.

<sup>126</sup> Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, ‘Introduction’ *The Bataille Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd. p. 13.



project is very problematic on a number of levels; What informs the morality of the regarding eye? Whose tastes are being served by this activity? By which technologies of power are those sexual objects created? What is the relationship of these images to pornography?<sup>127</sup> These set of problematics are not addressed but beneath a veneer of clinical evasion, the silenced figure of the African female is glaringly evident. In the African postcolony, we are reminded, 'sex, belly, mouth, and violence remain the ingredients of the *episteme* of command.'<sup>128</sup> Power exercises its dominance, its barbaric orgy of excess without a self-critical mechanism while its victims are left virtually helpless. This brutal economy of sexuality which he discusses at length also works effectively within the modern context where even the colonial urban woman is supposed to exhibit qualities of 'submission, good housekeeping, acceptance of the husband's polygamy or infidelity, and motherhood.'<sup>129</sup>

In both Dago's photographs and Biaya's commentary, the female voice is silenced, her figure does not participate in the creative process, she cannot interfere in her own representation (*hypotyposis*). She simply rendered voiceless and powerless. Both image and text thus enforce their specific technologies of exclusion through processes of silencing. Nor is she quite allowed to evolve a mode of sexuality outside the phallic masculine structure. An important concept associated with eroticism is sovereignty. In this context, the regarding male eye assumes it is sovereign but it is in truth disabled by its own narrow limits. 'Sovereignty involves the 'un-knowing' that leaves behind, in contempt, the system of value and all its commodified riches, an un-knowing linked to laughter as it detaches

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<sup>127</sup> See Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 2003 on the ambiguities of the photographic image.

<sup>128</sup> T. K. Biaya, ' "Crushing the Pistachio": Eroticism in Senegal and the Art of Ousmane Ndiaye Dago', Carol Breckenridge *et al.* eds. *Cosmopolitanism*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002 p. 140.

<sup>129</sup> T. K. Biaya, ' "Crushing the Pistachio": Eroticism in Senegal and the Art of Ousmane Ndiaye Dago', Carol Breckenridge *et al.* eds. *Cosmopolitanism*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2002 p. 151.

consciousness'<sup>130</sup> and the loss of itself in excess. Even the regarding eye is impoverished because it loses all metaphoricity and becomes frozen within its own immobile discourse. Its desire imprisons the eroticized female figure but also delimits and devalues the possibilities of desire itself. The oppression begins and ends with sex. Both Dago and Biaya are not particularly concerned with the condition of woman even though she is at their centre of their concerns. The battles for freedom are indeed many and 'sexual freedom can only exist when individuals are no longer oppressed by a socially constructed sexuality based on biologically determined definitions of sexuality: repression, guilt, shame, dominance, conquest, and exploitation.'<sup>131</sup> And what is the meaning of all this? Indeed, 'men have a tremendous contribution to make to feminist struggle in the area of exposing, confronting, opposing, and transforming the sexism of their male peers.'<sup>132</sup> The crises of traditional structures of power should be apparent enough. We require new definitions of power in order to enhance mutuality, co-operation and alternative conceptions and invocations of power itself.

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<sup>130</sup> Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, 'Introduction' *The Bataille Reader*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd. p. 27.

<sup>131</sup> bell hooks *Feminist Theory: From Margins to Center*, Cambridge MA: South End Press, 2000 p. 151.

<sup>132</sup> bell hooks *Feminist Theory: From Margins to Center*, Cambridge MA: South End Press, 2000 p. 83.