These Women are not inferior: Yoruba and Gender.

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“These women are not inferior”: Yoruba Thought, Feminist Mirroring, and the Order of Things

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Abstract
Chandra Talpade Mohanty suggests the need to re-examine the representation of the third world “Woman” and “Women” by Western feminist discourse against the background of the cultural and political imperative of such representation. This becomes imperative in light of the issues regarding these women’s inclusion in, and exclusion from, the mainstream of affairs that regulate living and existence in their societies through the mechanism of religion and culture, especially against the background of contemporary global socio-political experience. Mohanty’s argument is not however entirely new— it is at best a reminder. The Yoruba culture, as well as its system of knowing, also acknowledges this “difference” and provides socio-cultural realities that could serve as guiding principles to its understanding. While it is true that in some societies, women grapple with issues raised by Western feminist scholarship, the Yoruba are also aware of these constraints and have thus put in place systems that regulate behaviour. In this essay therefore, I utilize knowledge from the Yoruba culture to explore Mohanty’s suggestion for the review of analytical tools being used in Western feminist scholarship.

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I

In this essay I aim to reinterpret Chandra Mohanty’s call for a review of Western feminism’s representation of Third World women from the Yoruba perspective of gender. Mohanty decries the image of these women whom Western feminist scholarship presents as the “Other” suffering from a “common oppression” that cuts across race or class boundaries. She insists that the so-called “third world woman” that is constructed is not only an arbitrary image but also a problematic one. She observes the representation of these women as monolithic and powerless victims of a certain system of oppression overseen by men. The image also implicates the idea of being a girl, woman and women as categories of the female gender that suffer oppression in the hands of its male counterpart. Hence, she stresses the exigency of re-examining the analytical strategies employed in Western feminist scholarship to identify these women, and their categorization as “woman” an ideological construct as opposed to “women” the real, concrete, cultural and historical subjects, in light of the political implications of such categorization. In this essay thus, I present the Yoruba cultural practice and concept of gender as the analytical tools that are useful for such alternative perception.

Like several aspects of European life whose impetus could be traced to the past, the Yoruba precepts’ are still relevant in contemporary society, including the discourse of gender, even as events continue to underline the significance of the issues which Mohanty raised many years ago. According to Ashcroft et al, “In much of European thinking, history, ancestry, and the past form a powerful reference point for epistemology” (34), and, as Ayi Kwei Armah also reminds us “there is no need to forget the past. But of each piece of the past that we find in our present, it may be necessary to ask: will it bear me like a stepping stone, or will I have to bear it, a weight around my neck?” (qtd in Osundare 1). More so, the examples of the Yoruba precepts that I will refer to in this essay are parts of a canon that is still being religiously observed today, forming ongoing, living links between the people and their ancestry. I will draw examples from these precepts, Yoruba ritual/spiritual conception of gender as well as their socio-political and mundane dimensions including contemporary practices that they have engendered, to illustrate my points.

II

The field of feminist discourse is suffused with various terminologies and movements which differ in their approach but are united in their purpose. It is a “field of forces” and/or “field of struggles” to use Pierre Bourdieu’s terms. According to Bourdieu, “every new position in assessing itself as such, determines a displacement of the whole structure and that, by the logic of action and reaction…leads to all sorts of changes in the position-taking of the occupants of
the other positions” (58). To wit: Material feminism concerns itself with conditions affecting women in the home in regard to domestic chores; Amazon feminism addresses physical equality of men and women; Separatist feminism (often erroneously depicted as lesbians) clamour for either partial or total separation of men from women to enable the latter see themselves in new light and context; and Ecofeminism advocates the dismantling of patriarchy which they link to the maltreatment of the environment.²

Bourdieu’s argument hence underpins the political/cultural fields in which great effort is made to dislodge male dominance. Bourdieu writes that this cultural field is “a veritable social universe…with its relations of power and its struggles for the preservation or the transformation of the established order…for their specific interests” (163, 181). In short, everything here boils down to power struggles between the sexes. Michel Foucault has also remarked that the struggle for power is both systemic and hidden, and that, “power acts by laying down rules neither sex can escape” from (84). Foucault’s explanation speaks directly to the heart of the universalist animosity to marriage from a western lens that preoccupies much of Mohanty’s argument against the misrepresentation of the place of women in marriage in the so-called “Third World” in Western feminist scholarship.

Mohanty argues that western feminist scholars are concerned with the relations of power that they counter, resist and/or even implicitly support. She argues that Western feminist discourse represents Western women as sophisticated and “being in control” of their bodies and sexuality in relation to “othered” “Third World” women who lead truncated lives denied material essentials due to conservative and archaic cultural and religious practices surrounding marriage. She criticizes the ethnocentric universality of using Western feminism as the normative against which the legal, economic, religious, and familial structures peculiar in non-western societies must be measured. Accordingly, through “‘Women’ as category of Analysis” or what she also terms “We Are All Sisters in Struggle,” Mohanty criticises western feminist paternalistic, essentialist, and stereotypical assumption about non-Western women that establishes hierarchies of the “We” vs “Them” paradigm, which transfers Western women’s experience of oppression onto an exoticized “oppressed third world woman” of their fantasy.

Mohanty calls for a positive, self-conscious, cross-cultural analyses that put into consideration the sociocultural and political differences that Western feminists overlook as a way of developing “a new concept of humanity” in feminist representation of third world women. Mohanty draws from Marnia Lazreg’s suggestion that the point of redefining Western feminist analytical tools “is neither to subsume other women under one’s own experience nor

²I do recognise that feminists/feminisms differ in many ways as I have shown in this introduction and cannot treat all of them, hence I will only focus on radical feminism which concerns me in this essay.
to uphold a separate truth for them. Rather, it is to allow them to *be* while recognizing that what they are is just as meaningful, valid, and comprehensible as what we are…” (99; emphasis in the original). Lazreg maintains that “Indeed, Western feminists essentially deny other women the humanity they claim for themselves, they dispense with any ethical constraint. They engage in the act of splitting the social universe into us and them, subject and objects” (100). In challenging the stereotypical assumptions about “Third World” women, Mohanty’s argument inadvertently resonates with cultural values peculiar to the Yoruba. Essentially, the notion that marriage creates the enabling environment for female oppression as proposed and championed by Western feminist scholarship, differs entirely from Yoruba beliefs that see society as strengthened by the institution of marriage.

### III

Since time immemorial, the Yoruba have occupied the physical region known as the southwestern part of Nigeria commonly called *Yorubá land*, even though the cultural and linguistic space stretches beyond to parts of French-speaking West African countries of the Republic of Benin and Togo, as well as to the diaspora and New World due to the trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Wherever they are found, the Yoruba are bound by a common language and mythology (Falola and Genova 1). The Yoruba attach great importance to several cultural practices: marriage, parenthood, naming, and burial, among many others. In all these, women play important roles as men. The importance of marriage is stressed by at least two proverbs: “*Fòrfóró imú iyàwó sàn ju yàrà díìfọ lọ’* (a wife with a warped nose is better than an empty room); and “*Àìnìyùwó kò séé dáké sí lásàn, bí a bá dáké enu níí yoní*” (a mature man without a wife cannot just keep quiet, if he folds his arms, it results in a problem) (Ajibade 103). Although the man/father may have several responsibilities in the home the essential unit is the mother and the child which supports the Yoruba saying that the mother is the mainstay of the family. Thus, among the Yoruba, the mother is the mainstay of the family, making the family structure matrifocal. Despite some significant changes to the institution of marriage in contemporary Yoruba society due to colonialism and Western influences, these have not negatively affected or undermined traditional Yoruba values regarding marriage.

The Yoruba cultural understanding and value of marriage emphasizes the paramountcy of family, lineage, and social cohesion in the relationship, in terms of a commitment that both the man and woman and their extended families invest in the marriage. The Yoruba family, on the one hand, functions as a generating unit; a system of production and reproduction within both the narrow structure of a nuclear family and the extended type that also embraces the larger society. On the other hand, the basis of the production and reproduction system that marriage facilitates among the Yoruba is anchored on a metaphysical and symbolic levels: “a view of
human life [that it generates] from a total, rather than a dichotomous and exclusive, perspective” (Steady, 7), privileged by radical western feminists.

Considered from a metaphysical realm therefore, marriage for the Yoruba emphasizes life and community as the basis for cosmological balance (8). The cultural consciousness of marriage from this perspective also comes with the knowledge that in Yoruba philosophy everything, animate and inanimate, has a soul (Ajuwon, qtd in Opefeyitimi 139). This type of relationship creates spaces for the ako à t’abo (male/female) principles operating in a balance harmony that fosters a clear understanding of the role of gender/sex. As Oyeronke Olajubu contends, “the existence of gender construct among the Yoruba does not translate to notions of oppression and the domination of women by men, because it is mediated by the philosophy of complementary gender relations, which is rooted in the people’s cosmic experience” (Olajubu 9). Subsequently, male/female relationship is a sociocultural engagement which is devoid of the privileging of either gender: neutral complementarity is at the centre of this Yoruba system of belief and social practice. Built on such a cultural awareness, with its deep normative value, is a consciousness that refers neither to equality or parity, but cooperation that delineates the areas of control for either of the gender (Terborg-Penn and Rushing 82; Olajubu 10). The proverb “B’òkùnrin bá r’éjò b’òbínùnrì bá pa a, k’èjò sà ti mà lo ní” (if a man sees a snake and a woman kills it, it must be accepted that what matters is that the snake does not escape) underscores the binary complementarities between the Yoruba men and women in their relationship.

Yoruba cosmology constitutes the reference point and major influence of Yoruba concept of gender and power relations. Theirs is an excellent example of how mythology can effectively be used to understand socio-political relationships and to address issues that otherwise would have remained elusive. One of these issues is the way men and women are categorized in the society, a classification that recognizes the uniqueness of the male and female gender within the framework of a stable and mutually-beneficial relationship. Simon de Beauvoir in her famous statement “we are born female but we become women” (301), implies that women and men are born as female and male biologically but are constructed into gender by their society. She also implies that “woman” and by extension, “womanhood,” are both culturally determined. Similarly, Maggie Humm writes that gender is the stated roles that are ascribed to men and women based on what society perceives to be their sex---- a culturally shaped group of attributes and behaviours identified with the female or male (1990). But, although the Yoruba also recognize biological differences, sex does not carry the same social implications that categorize the female gender into “girl,” “woman” and “women.” As argued by Oyeronke Oyewunmi, “woman” as a gender categorization did not exist in Yoruba land prior to colonialism, “unlike the West, physical bodies were not social bodies…and the presence or
absence of certain organs did not determine social position or social hierarchy… In fact, there were no women—defined strictly in gender terms” (ix-xii). Thus, the definition of female gender, woman and womanhood among the Yoruba is not always a biological or sexual reference.

Moreover, there are socio-economic points among the Yoruba where women cease to be regarded as female and are ritually and officially designated as men. While these women retain their biologically female bodies, such as menstruation, motherhood, they function socially as “men” (Ogundipe 54). As Kaplan also writes, although men held political offices and authority in principle in traditional Yoruba society, women controlled the ritual base upon which such roles are placed, since it is believed that political structures are anchored on mystical principles that are within the domain of women (319). Fluidity of gender constructs also finds its place in political and socio-economic spheres such as in the institutions of female kings: Lóbún, also known as oba’binrin (woman king) among Ondo people (a sub-group of the Yoruba), the female ruler of Oyo empire, Alaaifn Orompoto, and regency in which the daughter of a deceased king is installed as a transitional ruler prior to the enthronement of another king, are clear examples. Similarly, there are roles such as Ìyá Oba (The King’s mother); Ìyálójà (President of the market); Ìyálóde (Woman Prime Minister) and Ayaba/olori (The Queen), all rooted in traditional Yoruba practice, and are still practiced today and continue to influence some African churches, with positions such as Ìyá Egbé (mother of Association) and Ìyá-Ijo (mother of the faith community), a role that requires nurturing, sustenance, and guidance and akin to the position of Ìyálóde. In fact, in the discharge of her duties, the Ìyá-Ijo is supported by lieutenants: Òtún Ìyá-Ijo and Òsì-Ìyá-Ijo (right-hand and left-hand assistants) all derived from Yoruba philosophical concept of diffused power that negates despotism (Olajubu 133) to mention a few.

Oyewunmi’s suggestion that rank, status, and hierarchy were determined by age and seniority and not necessarily sex is supported by the non-gendered specific nature of the Yoruba language. Because there is no gender pronoun in the Yoruba language, words like he/she/him/her neither have any direct translations nor are there such words like brother/sister/uncle/aunt that indicate gendered familial relationship. The same non-gendered specification applies to Yoruba words like ọkọ (husband) and aya/Iyawó (wife) which could be applied outside of familial relations; while words like ègbón and abúró that show relationship between elder and younger siblings or their relatives are based on seniority rather than sex (Yusuf 15-16). The non-gendered specific nature of the Yoruba language is also shared by their Igbo neighbours in the south-eastern parts of Nigeria where the Igbo word nwoko (male child) and nwanyi (female child) share nwa (child) as a common base that suggests a difference from
nwoko (man) in the way the English language constructs wo/man for both gender (Okafor 75), so that it expresses the equality of the gender devoid of genital type.

Perhaps due to the same Western orientation that Mohanty challenges, several scholars hold a different view to Oyewunmi’s. Citing the payment of bride wealth and the practice of polygamy and the non-recognition of dowry and polyandry, Lorand Matory argues that there had been social construction based on sex in 19th century Yoruba society (xxvi). Similarly, J. Peel contends that the Yoruba culture recognizes that a new bride, irrespective of age, was younger than any child she met in the compound (139). These opinions fail to consider the hermeneutical difference between precolonial and colonial/postcolonial Yoruba cultural practices. What is supported by scholarship is the fact that traditional Yoruba culture gives pride of place to women under at least two designations: 1) their status as daughters in their father’s lineage and as wives in their husband’s lineage (Denzer 3); and 2) the respect as mothers based on the logic that all men are born of women. Hence, violence against women is frowned upon and forbidden, while divorce is considered only when both families have exhausted all means of arbitration, and/or in cases of extreme cruelty, infertility, insanity, extreme promiscuity on the part of the woman, irresponsibility on the part of the man or financial insolvency (Johnson 113), among others. However, Oyewunmi contends that prior to colonialism, there were no “women” or “men” because Yoruba language’s categories of “okùnrin” (anamales), or “obìnrin” (anafemales) were never “neither binarily opposed nor hierarchical” (ix) Instead, they were persons whose anatomy “did not privilege them to any social positions and similarly did not jeopardize their access” (xii). She insists that “Yoruba social identity was, and is, fundamentally relational, changing, and situational, with seniority the most crucial determinant of ranking” (xiii). From the foregoing, whereas perception of gender classification is different in Western culture, this is problematic among the Yoruba, in the setting where such classification often crosses physical/biological boundaries.

As aya/iyàwó and iyá (wives & mothers) and omobìnrin (daughters), Yoruba women are important members of the family and are identified with specific (agbo) ilé or idilé, known from around the 19th century as lineage, which included agnate children and their spouses. In this set up, these categories of women (daughters) have the same rights as sons/boys/men which they retain even after marriage and relocation to their husbands’ family houses. In fact, the older women outranked younger men; while as daughters, they could also inherit properties from their consanguineal homes as their brothers; some of these women can return to this natal home (a practice called ilémosú/ddalémosú although this is frowned at by the society in general)

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3 While family and lineage are not so much distinct concepts among the Yoruba, we may view ilé as house and determined by consanguinity, idilé encompasses the extended family (or lineage) that could span four generations or even more (Olajubu 29-30).
in case of failed marriage, and/or they can also return to occupy an exalted political position as the representative of that particular idilé, which suggests that the functional meaning of identity based on gender among the Yoruba is one of continuum that does not recognize demarcation (Olajubu 30-31)\(^4\), or is it disrupted when a woman marries and leaves her parent’s compound for her husband’s.

Furthermore, although the kind of occupation that the people engage in are often determined by the kind of occupation that is specific to each agbo ilé, women, as mothers/wives, play very significant roles in socializing their daughters into such occupation. While boys in the compound were expected to work with their fathers on the farm, the task of their early childhood upbringing and socialization often rests on their mothers who teach both the boys and girls mutual respect, loyalty, honesty and other desirable social values. This is why, when a child misbehaves in the society the Yoruba say “Íyá è ló jo” (s/he has taken after the mother), which does not translate as a denunciation/disregard of the mother in the house, but emphasizes her important role in raising the children and ensuring the development of individuals whose conducts will bring honour to the lineage. This is another platform where women’s role in the family and society as a whole is duly acknowledged.

Simultaneously, the daughters also learn from their mothers’ various religious duties which included propitiating their own personal òrìṣà that they take with them from their parents’ house and those already located in their husbands’ family compounds. This role significantly reflects their strategic positions in their natal and marital compounds (Olajubu 32). The socialization into religious practices also included being trained in the art of oral literature such as oríkì and èṣà egúnín depending on the kind of cultic practice in their parents’ compound or husbands’. Aside from the religious importance of these verbal arts, they are also useful “textual” materials that the women utilize to teach their daughters history and social cohesion. The functions and structures of these oral tradition, Olajubu maintains, are “not rigid but situational, as mediated by the society’s prescriptions which vary by occasions” (35), and women constitute a large percentage of the practitioners and custodians of these essences, and historical documents that form parts of the Yoruba identity.

In addition to the above religious functions performed by the young girls as wives in their matrimonial homes, they also play a very crucial role in ancestorhood after the demise of their parents. Morton-Williams has argued that among the Yoruba death is linked to social hierarchy, informed by the people’s reaction to uncertainties and the need to ensure the continuity of their genealogy (34-40). While this might have informed the attention the Yoruba

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\(^4\) Till today, the Òjúlòde of Osogbo, a popular city in Yorubaland, is expected to return to her natal home to assume that office.
pay to male children in terms of the sustenance of the family name, the absence of female children in a Yoruba family will adversely affect the transition to ancestorhood (Opefeyitimi 3). The female children play significant roles in the funerary rites that places the deceased on the pedestal for ancestorhood—a role which draws attention to their position as mothers (entry point into the world) and passage to transition at the same time.5

IV

Having said that, let us now examine some of the specific points that Mohanty raised with regard to western feminist conception of third world women and their place in marriage and their societies in general, in relation to Yoruba practices that reflect alternative perception.

i. Women as victims of male violence and as universal dependents

Mohanty identifies feminist scholarship which stresses “shared dependencies” (58) of women in a common context of struggle without any boundaries. In Beverly Lindsay’s opinion for example, “dependency relationships, based upon race, sex and class, are being perpetuated through social, educational, and economic institutions. These are linkages among Third World Women,” especially Vietnamese and African-American women who are “victims of race, sex, and class” (298, 306), irrespective of linguistic and cultural differences that exist between them. If Lindsay’s argument is nothing short of patronizing, Maria Rosa Cutrufellí’s is rather appalling: “My analysis will start by stating that all African women are politically and economically dependent.” “…Nevertheless, either overtly or covertly, prostitution is still the main if not the only source of work for African women” (13, 33). The two views illustrate the tendency of “liberated women” to view other women as inferior.

In contrast to these patronising declarations by women who themselves may be suffering from Eurocentric feminist othering of their societies, the Yoruba conception of womanhood is iconized in Òṣun, a female deity that crosses both male/patriarchal and female archetypal boundaries at will (Ogundipe 65). In Yoruba mythology, Òṣun transitions between being a gentle obedient daughter of Olódùmarè (Yoruba idea of God), to a woman/wife of Òrúnmílàn and possessor of ancient secrets and ancient mysteries, as well as being both mother and Supreme Ìyá Àgbà and leader of the Àjé, the powerful cult of people, “bestowed with spiritual vision, divine authority, power of the word, and àṣe, the power to bring desires and

5 Although the rites vary from one Yoruba sub-tribe to another, the social relevance is the same. Among the Ijesha people for example, as Opefeyitimi argues, kíké ẹrín wá (singing “the elephant has fallen”) and ọrin èmù-ọmọ-láyọlélé (“don’t jubilate-over-children-until-they-succeed-you”) are ritual songs exclusively performed by women, led by the eldest daughter of a deceased person, as part of the funerary rites, where the women in this case assume the role of ritual anchor between the living, the dead and ancestorhood. This particular rite is important “to balance the inequality between the male who is socialised into the wealth [left by the deceased parent] by law and convention and the daughter who performs the most important rite of transition as a recognition of both her role as the agent of regeneration through childbirth” (8-11), and to stress the idea of gender complementarity that governs the Yoruba universe.
ideas into being” (Washington 14). The liturgy about Òsun reveals that instead of being dependent on the male, the female serves as the rallying point for the male. It therefore negates the Western perception of women as “universal dependents.”

Òsun’s embodiment of Yoruba concept of gender and womanhood is represented by the Ìyá Mòòpò, a symbolic and ancient trinity, an imagery of a female figure that protects women’s interest. The symbolism represents Yoruba understanding of the three basic stages of a woman’s life: as a daughter, wife and mother, each with its distinctive place and roles in the home and society. Yoruba culture shows women to be species held with respect, awe and reverence as depicted through the symbolism of the Ìyá Mòòpò (Olajubu 69-72; Balogun 121-52), a direct contrast to western representation of all women as a monolithic lump of powerless victims. Indubitably, Òsun’s non-specificity as a female gender is underscored by visual manifestations and representations of kinship among the Yoruba and in places where Yoruba religion and culture have penetrated and influenced. The Yoruba term “Oba” (king) is genderless, while the feathers on the oba’s crown, is a representation of women’s power of transmigration (recall the Àjé here), and identified with Òsun, whose connection to Ifá, the Yoruba divination system, body of epistemological knowledge and aesthetic principles, makes her synonymous with mystery and esoteric knowledge that drives from Yoruba metaphysics.

Similarly, the Yoruba believe in the sacred position and function of women in the society, underlined by the practice of divination associated with Ifá. While male practitioners called Babaláwo use ikin (sacred nuts) and òpèlè (string objects of divination), isà and/or Èèrìndínlògún (cowries) are “exclusively” reserved as the domain of women-diviners called Iyanifa, hence the saying “Ọlẹ okùnrin tô ń da ‘sà” that is, only a lazy man divines with isà (Oluwole 3). The description of men who divine with isà as lazy is not to underplay the sacred value of women’s form of divination but to stress the specificity of their area of control in that metaphysical and cultural practice. Whereas women are in fact engaged in all other forms of divination, men are restricted in one. For example, Obídídà, a system of divination with four lobes of kolanut is practiced by both men and women. The four lobes are divided into two halves each representing the male and female duality, and the qualifying principle in this form of divination is in terms of seniority in age rather than gender (Awolalu 122; Olajubu 128); whoever uses Èèrìndínlògún or any other form of divination for that matter, and whether male/female, is regarded as the wife of Òsun, whose gender transcends physical features of femininity and sexual barrier.

For example, editors Joseph M. Murphy and Mei-Mei Sanford maintain in Osun Across the Waters: A Yoruba Goddess in Africa and the Americas (1997), that Òsun transforms through water and the mystery of birth. Seen in relationship to Ògún who transforms through technology
and heals with herbal expertise, Òsun, as Murphy and Sanford argue, “(re)presents dynamic example of the resilience and renewed importance of traditional Yoruba…spiritual experience, social identity, and political power in contemporary Africa and the African diaspora” (2), even as she occupies a special place in the Yoruba psyche when it comes to the discourse of gender and sex.

Several contemporary Yoruba women have demonstrated Òsun’s enduring example in the way Murphy and Sanford explain, by transforming the political structure and spiritual perspectives of the Eurocentric and male-dominated Christian churches introduced into Yorubaland during colonialism, to reflect the role of women alongside that of men. Influenced by Yoruba traditional practice, these Yoruba women directly transformed the subordinate role prescribed for women in Christianity by founding churches, and indirectly by creating alternative settings of empowerment by taking up leadership roles in the same churches (Olajubu 126). Despite the enormity of the tasks prescribed by their new roles, these women did not fail to discharge their domestic duties as mothers, by raising children (especially daughters) who continued their pioneering roles in Church activities. Some of the daughters of these founders also established their own churches while maintaining their roles as wives/mothers in their matrimonial homes.6 By introducing a leadership structure in their churches that recognizes both male and female contribution to both the churches’ development and their social functions in the society (the churches were led by the women and their husbands), these women-founders aimed to show “the models for Christian homes where the guiding principle is mutual respect as opposed to domination and oppression” (Olajubu 59), a fact which underlined their awareness of Yoruba concept of gender complementarity.

ii. Married women as the victims of the colonial process in the light of familial system

Laurette Ngcobo, writing from the perspective of weakness rather than the strength of marriage and women in African society, asserts that “the basis of marriage among Africans implies the transfer of a woman’s fertility to [the] husband’s family group” (533). Not done, she argues further that “the major weakness in this formidable role of motherhood is that women can only exercise it from the outside, for they remain marginalized in their… husbands’ home” (534).

6 There are many examples in Nigeria of today: Christiana Abiodun Emmanuel (nee Akinsowon) founded one of the most popular Christian movements in Nigeria, the Cherubim and Seraphim Church, in partnership with Moses Orimolade Tunolase in 1925. Upon Moses Orimolade’s death, Abiodun Emmanuel became the leader of the church; Mother-in-Israel V. John, founded Ona Iwa mimo C&S church, Ilorin; Prophetess F.E. Alabi, established the God’s Grace Church, Ilorin, and Her Grace E.B. Kolawole, founded the Saint’s spiritual church, Ilorin. At the CAC2 churches: CAC, God’s Power Never Fails (Agbara Olorun Ki Ba Ti), led by Bishop Bola Odeleke, and CAC Daniel’s Yard (Aghbala Daniel), both in Ibadan, were established as breakaway factions of the Christ Apostolic Church (CAC), established in 1931; and the Last Days Miracle Revival Church, Ilesa, founded by Bola Adedeji Taiwo, are examples of female Christian leaders whose parents were also Church leaders.
Interestingly, in the same article, she contradicts herself when she argues that “the position of motherhood is socially and cosmologically very central” (534) in the same African society. Ngcobo’s contradictory positions are tellingly supportive of Mohanty’s position that critiques Western feminist scholarship in its construct of Arab and Muslim women. Mohanty argues that intellectuals side-stepping the historical, material, and ideological power structures that determine the status of women in non-western societies serve only to justify the claim that the tribal kinship structure long established, in place and around which the family system is built, serves nothing other than patriarchal purposes. She also argues that such a view justifies the claim that the women in these societies are merely sexual–political subjects, even prior to entering marriage, thus presupposing that motherhood is no more than a euphemism for a system of oppression.

Seen from another perspective however, Mohanty contends that the familial structure bestows a certain autonomy on the institution of marriage, as an alternative space of agency that is not rendered onto women by men as a compensatory act for sex, but as a conscious will and intent to empower women. Consequently, Michelle Rosaldo’s argument that “woman’s place in human social life is not in any direct sense a product of the things she does…but the meaning her activities acquire through concrete social interactions” (400) is tenable in relation to the Yoruba society. Concomitantly, Olajubu also maintains that in Yoruba society, motherhood gives women agency and becomes both an avenue of female power and a potent force for social action (29-31). Thus, when the Yoruba in their oríkì say: “A kíí nílè Bábá, ká má nílè e Ìyá” (one cannot have a father’s lineage without having her/his mother’s), this acknowledges the position of women as mothers “at the centre of power and gender relations in the social space…and [in the] primacy of the family structure through marriage including the role of women in ensuring its perpetuation” (31, 37), as a practice with continued relevance in modern society.

Similarly, as an example of Olajubu’s notion of women at the centre of power and in the social space, Yoruba women engaged in commercial sales of food (hawking) in order to cushion the effect of the growing urbanization and Nigeria’s social, political and economic transformation caused by the colonial system. Thus, these women reduced the effect of the changing conditions that made it difficult for many men to marry at that time (which earned the women the sobriquet “ìyá-àpòn” that is, mothers of bachelors). Alongside their domestic responsibilities, the women engaged in the business due to changing social orientation in postcolonial Nigeria and as dictated by social necessity. They also trained their daughters to acquire such desirable skill that was useful outside of the domestic front in order to support their family. In the process, they developed a unique form of “work song,” or what Ayo Opefeyitimi describes as the “lore of Yoruba women cooked food advertisement” or
“advertisement poetry” marked by “song-like, sonorous, penetrating sounds…often romantic and appeal[ing] to human sense of taste” (Opefeyitimi 15). Aside from the economic gains derived from the business and the development of such a “powerful but neglected women’s culture” (Showalter 25) and a unique art form which “naturally encourage[s] a sophisticated eloquence in practice” (Frances 11), the women showed exemplary example that was in contrast to both Cutrufelli’s derogatory remark that African women were only good as prostitutes and Western feminist’s idea of women as the victims of the colonial process in the light of familial system.

iii. **Women suppressed under religious ideologies**

As it must have become clear by now, religion permeates Yoruba worldview and life in general: here also is where the women’s role is powerfully established. The Yoruba consider women to be sacred because of the special powers that they are presumed to possess and which they share with the Creator and Supreme Being. The Yoruba demonstrate this attitude in their religious observances. This presumed power emanates from the woman’s biological ability to create through childbirth. This point underscores Yoruba primal religious interpretation that giving life and giving meaning are not antagonistic positions. They acknowledge that there can’t be life without meaning as there can be no meaning without life (Ogundipe 28). For example, this is demonstrated during the òkosè wàyè/ímòrí rite by which the identity of a child is revealed through the mother’s. The òkosè wàyè “Stepping into the World” and imòrí “Knowing the Head” rites include the summoning of the child’s orí (head) which is believed to be her/his link to the otherworld through a corresponding recourse to the mother’s. The entire ritual process, supervised by a diviner (Babaláwo), identifies where the child has descended from: the father’s or mother’s lineage or from an ṣe (deity) (Drewal et al, 32-3; Drewal 52-62). Whatever the result, the mother plays a very significant role in the ritual processes of this ritual of knowing and becoming. This refutes Western feminist claim that women in non-Christian religions are oppressed. Here, on the contrary, the mother/female sacred element in the rites supports my claim that motherhood and the mother are crucial to a child’s identity and well-being.

Moreover, while men dominate and legislate in the areas of political administration and social engineering in the broader socio-political sphere, women assert control in ceremonies and rituals as well as their perpetuation in the Yoruba consciousness. The Orò, Egungún (ancestral) and Gèlèdè masking cults and ritual performances are exemplary religious practices that underline the Yoruba’s keen sense of gender balance: while male dominance is established through the first two, the last dismantles such supremacy by its deployment to assert female will which touches on the numinous.
In this regard, the Ketu-Yoruba ritual practices of the above rites are useful for us to understand the Yoruba religious explication of gender consciousness. According to Benedict Ibitokun, during the Ológuódógbọ (Orò) festivals, women are kept indoors, while men dance and sing around town in a quasi-Bacchic impulse, daring the women to show their faces: “Baba ì s’òde lo, b’ór’ólojọ gbe, baba kò kò o” that is, “The elders are going a hunting; should a stranger [meaning women] cross his path, he wouldn’t mind the kill”; the same applies to the Egúngún cult where having been confined to the fringes and secondary roles, women only feature in theatrical (mundane) performances associated with the rites while men are fully involved in the secret rituals observed in the grove (Ibitokun 117). There is a common expression (or song) among the Yoruba: “Awo Egúngún l’obinrin lè se, awo Gélèdè l’obinrin lè mò; b’óbinrin fojú k’Orò, Orò á gbe!” (It is only the mysteries of Egúngún and Gélèdè that women can be privy to, they are consumed by that of the Orò).

However, mythological/historical evidences show that contrary to male dominance and oppression that the song underscores and which Ibitokun provides an example of from the Ketu experience, women are not confined to the fringes and tasked with only mundane/theatrical aspects of the Egúngún rites. In fact, a woman, Ìyámọde, was the first priest (ess) of the Egúngún mystery and cultic practice in Yoruba land.\(^7\) To demonstrate the recognition of the gender binary in the Egúngún cult in present-day Yoruba communities however, while there is Alagbaa the male head of the cult, there is Ìyí Ágan who occupies the same position from a female perspective; the roles of each overlapping in most cases. Moreover, the Ògbóni cult provides an excellent example of where the female power is much more powerful, influential and perverse. Here, the Great Mother is at the centre of worship and devotion. Edan, the symbol of the cult, is a brass figure of male and female joined by an iron chain at the top, and considered to be a symbolism for procreation and old age that tilts towards the female principles (Lawal 1995).

In the Gélèdè performance cult especially, women subvert male supremacy. In dismantling male dominance, they also use men at the same time to assert feminine will. Ibitokun has argued that, this performance is the exclusive reserve of elderly women who have passed menopausal age and who, commonly erroneously referred to as “Àjé,” or more accurately as “our mothers,” exercise their mystic abilities which force men to concede to them the male-female balance (Ibitokun 1981:55-63). It follows then to quote Teresa Washington

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7 As the story goes, Alááfin Sàngó, the third monarch of Oyo/Yoruba Empire wanted to bury the remains of his father, Òránỳán. But, he was told that he could not because the latter didn’t die; he transformed into a stone obelisk (a staff still standing in Ile Ife today). Thereafter, Sango devised another means of paying obeisance to Òránỳán, so, he ordered that a bòrù (royal mausoleum) be constructed and Òránỳán’s corpse, in the form of the Egúngún, be brought out through it with the impression that Òránỳán was making a temporary reappearance in the human world. He placed Ìyámọde, the old woman of the palace in charge of the mystery. Periodically, Sango went to the bòrù and prostrated himself before Ìyámọde who personified the spirit of Òránỳán (Johnson 43-65).
who expatiates on this aspect of Yoruba consciousness about gender balance that the Gèlèdè performance establishes. She describes “our mothers” as the “Agbalagba Obinrin” (elderly women) who personify the secretive, sacred and the mystical within the Yoruba religious and socio-political spheres that are not unconnected to domestic and public well-being. Accordingly, Teresa Washington writes:

[A]mong the Yoruba, the postmenopausal era does not signify obsolescence; instead, when life bearing ends, spiritual magnification begins. An elderly woman is heralded as the one with the vagina that turns upside down without pouring blood. With the acquisition of the beard of old age, an Agbalaagba Obinrin acquires not masculine aspects but dual spiritual material mobility. She is abaara meji, one with two bodies, and olojumeji, one with two faces: Her spirit becomes a force equal to or greater than her physical being. (16)

In their research into the interface of Yoruba ritual and performance of the Gèlèdè, the anthropologists Henry Drewal and Margaret Thompson Drewal also stress the mystical endowment of “our mother” that elaborate on female agency beyond sexual properties. The research highlights the concept of gender balance which elaborates on both Ibitokun and Washington’s observations. According to Drewal and Drewal:

These women are commonly known as “our mothers” (awon iya wa), an endearment that recognizes that we all came out of a woman’s body… We call them mother. If they did not exist, we could not come into this world… These statements imply something much more fundamental than female fertility and fecundity. They claim that women possess the secret of life itself, the knowledge and special power to bring human beings into the world and to remove them. This knowledge applies not only to gestation and childbirth but also to longevity. It is a sign of women’s that they live to be very old, often out-living men. Their knowledge of life and death demands that Yoruba herbalists in preparing medicines seek their support. (8)

Usually a male, the Gèlèdè mask-dancer utilises his masculinity to placate “our mothers” who assert their supernatural pre-eminence, subvert both male sexual arrogance and the myth of women as mere wombs as exemplified in one of their praise names “Iyá an’óbò akójédó” that is, the woman whose vagina no penis dare penetrate (Ibitokun 1987:11-13). At the same time, although the Yoruba society may appear to be “governed” by a phallic sensibility whereby “man poses and woman endures,” the Gèlèdè underscores the fact that the socio-sexual reversion that is established with the ritual performance draws from the Yoruba philosophy that what is seen is a representation of the unseen, a cultural sensibility which underscores the gender dynamics that rests on the definition and use of power (Olajubu 85). Hence, when Alahira argues that “at no point was the African woman restricted to purely her biological sex
roles” (72), she must have had in mind the Yoruba who demonstrate a profound understanding of the physical differentiation of both the male and female gender and accorded each its socio-cultural roles as their gender cultural practice shows.

V

“Afterwords”

In this essay I have re-examined Mohanty’s views about the representation of Third World women in Western feminist discourse by applying the knowledge of Yoruba conception of gender and sex which emphasizes gender complementarity. Mohanty argues that the analytical tools being used in Western feminist discourse to analyse the conditions of women in the Third World should consider socio-cultural and religious factors which inform the political aspects of lives in those societies, instead of imposing Western ideal and experience that do not recognize such differences. I drew examples from Yoruba religious/social practice to argue that women are strategically placed at the centre of power and gender relations in the social space. I concluded by stressing that gender and sex are two different concepts among the Yoruba and that, at no point in time were these determined merely by the biological composition of the body.
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