

THEORY AND THE FUTURE OF WOMEN'S STUDIES IN  
NIGERIA

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At the present time any talk about Women's Studies in Nigeria must be tentative. As a matter of fact when one writes about Women's Studies in Nigeria, one does so only anticipatorily. The reason is because, as an autonomous discipline, Women's Studies is an emergent phenomenon in this clime. To some to say that writing about women's studies in Nigeria is an anticipation is to cast doubt on the task which the organizers of this Conference want the participants to execute. After all, the theme of the Conference is an examination of the state of the art in Women's Studies in contemporary Nigeria. Needless to say, one cannot assess the state of the art in a nonexistent discipline. Meanwhile talk of anticipation suggests that the phenomenon is yet to occur. We, therefore, have to contend with what seems like a paradox right at the start of our project. However, there is no paradox, only the appearance of one.

To talk anticipatorily of a thing or a process is at one remove to talk of its emergence de novo and, at another, to acknowledge that it is extant but at the same time to go beyond its present manifestations to prognose its future evolution. Our task in this paper, therefore, starts out from an acknowledgement of a beginning but concerns itself with the anticipation of its future state. We wish to assert that the discipline is in the process of being constructed; hence, it is emergent. The reasons for our position will be adumbrated presently. However, the emergent character of the discipline allows the kind of intervention we make in this paper. At a time when the discipline is being constituted an intervention such as ours is sure to have a salubrious effect on the product that results from the process if it be heeded.

We have noticed in those works of the genesis that we are familiar with a certain atheoreticism which we refer to as 'the poverty of theory'. Our aim is not to supply the theory which will rectify this poverty. In the first place,

it will be presumptuous of us to suggest that one theory could capture the complexity and multidimensionality of Women's Studies. It will be sheer arrogance on our part to think that we have such a theory. In the second place, even if such a theory were feasible, it would require the collective efforts of several researchers adopting a multidisciplinary strategy to work out the theory. Even then, several regional theories would be required to explain the typologies of women's existence and the specificities of their experiences - historical, sociological, psychological, political, economic and the like. We, then, must disappoint those whom the title of this paper has misled into thinking that consequence of this project will be the propounding of a theory for the future of women's studies in Nigeria.

On the contrary, our aim in this paper is the very modest one of sensitizing practitioners in the field to the pressing need for theory in the construction and strengthening of women's studies. Hence the thesis of this paper that: a successful, in terms of depth, scope and relevance, programme of women's studies in the future must begin to take theory seriously. Put more concretely, we are arguing that there is no future for women's studies in Nigeria unless it is premised on some plausible, coherent, and adequate theory (or theories) of women's oppression which, while remaining faithful to the universalist dimensions of theory-construction will be alert to the specificity of the Nigerian situation and its diverse manifestations, and reorient itself accordingly. To this extent our paper is largely programmatic.

Given that we have chosen to highlight what we have identified as the poverty of theory, it is imperative that we explicate what we mean by poverty. 'Poverty' can refer to, among others, two things: an absence and a deficiency. An absence must be taken in its literal sense: an emptiness.

Poverty of theory where poverty refers to absence will be the utter lack of theory. But poverty can also refer to an insufficiency: not the lack of the thing (theory), but its presence in not enough quantities. Insufficiency may itself be of two kinds: it may be used to refer to inadequacy and incorrectness - either way we mean it is not good enough. It may be used to refer to irrelevance - that is, the theory proposed is not suited to the reality it purports to explain. In other words, there is a lack of fit, a disjuncture, between theory and reality.. For our purposes, poverty of theory shall refer to the general lack of theory, i.e., an absence, in the field of women's studies and inadequacy in those places where some attempts have been made at theory-formulation. Having established what we mean by poverty we will now try to summarize our understanding of theory.

We rarely apprehend reality directly, immediately. Let us take a very simple example. In our visual perception, our sight is assailed by myriad phenomena which are, as a rule, disjointed. With the aid of various mental operations we synthesize clusters of phenomena and with language, identify and individuate them. The categories with which we analyze, organize, and synthesize phenomena into interconnected and internally coherent wholes are theories. However, in this paper, we use theory as applied to whole, synthetic, identified and individuated phenomena - that is, the business of establishing patterns of determination in discrete and diverse phenomena. This is what natural scientists do with nature and what social scientists do with social phenomena. Let us try to relate this explication of theory to the problem of women's studies.

When we talk about theory in women's studies, it refers to the conceptual tools with which we identify patterns of determination in social phenomena regarding women and their place in society - that is, find out the whats, hows, and whys of the situation of women - the proper province of women's

studies - causes, courses and consequences of regularities discernible in the social events regarding women. By so doing, we are enabled to understand the realities of Nigerian women, a fundamental precondition, for observers and participants alike, for the more arduous task of changing those realities that require transformation for the better.

In the Nigerian case, anyone who is familiar with some of the works that have been done in the area of women's studies cannot but be impressed by the sheer amount of descriptive content they embody. In history, in sociology and in political science and related disciplines, we are told how women are marginalized in the appropriation of social values, how they are shut out of politics, and how they are incorporated as subordinates in the economic processes in the society. Data of the sort that these represent form the material theory is supposed to help us make sense of. What we find, however, is that even though there is the general agreement that the various phenomena are variants of the universal oppression and subjugation of women at all levels, there is hardly any serious attempt to delineate patterns of determination - the stuff theories are made of - in this welter of experiences which will enable women and others alike to make sense of the roots, nature and evolution of their oppression. We are saying in essence that there is an absence of a feminist motif in works about women in Nigeria and there is very little in terms of bold theoretical strokes in most of the works. In a moment we shall illustrate the claims we have made in the preceding pages. For now we want to say a word or two about Feminism.

From what we have said so far it could be seen that while we have accepted the presence of women's studies, we have lamented the absence of a feminist motif. Let us spell out the distinction between women's studies sans qualification and women's studies with a feminist motif. A male chauvinist, even

a misogynist, can engage in women's studies. What defines the field in this case is the subject-matter. Strictly speaking, any study of and about women would fall under the heading, women's studies. However, women's studies that is done not merely of and about women but is done for women and, in the main, by women with a view to self-understanding and collective praxis for social transformation is work that properly speaking embodies a feminist motif. From this characterization it should be obvious that a male chauvinist or a misogynist cannot engage in feminist women's studies. Our point, therefore, to go back to the main trend of this discussion, is that most works that have been done as part of an effort at self-understanding and a transformatory praxis. They have been done just as other social scientific studies. What we are calling for are feminist studies on women and other phenomena in Nigeria which, borrowing from the experiences of Nigerian and women of other lands, will distill patterns of determination discernible in the Nigerian situation. Such works will be defined by women's experiences, informed by feminist sensibilities and structured towards liberatory practice.

Women's studies informed by a feminist motif will be clearly partisan on behalf of women and will be critical in a way that some existing works are not. For instance, there will be no room in a feminist work for the of romanticization of the position of women in pre-colonial, pre-Christian, non-Islamic indigenous societies in Nigeria. As a matter of fact, the very facile inventions of heroines and matriarchs in our history will give way to a sober, critical assessment of the defeminized roles occupied by these heroines and to which they owed their claims to fame. For, quite frequently, those heroines whose lives form the subject-matter of lore achieved renown precisely for negating their femininity - it is either they remained virgins in which case they were never 'fulfilled' as women; or even when they bore children they were so

effectively masculinized that their claim to renown rested more  
on their being obinrin bi i okunrin (women like men).<sup>1</sup>

In addition, feminist studies will enable their authors to confront the specificity of women's oppression and of women's reaction to it. We are not suggesting that there are no works which have documented women's reaction to their oppression. What we assert is that there are few works which try to understand in behalf of women the variegated forces which have been at work in the lives of women throughout history in this part of the world. To take an example: the sexual division of labour is usually taken to be the primordial division of labour in human history. Nigerian societies have not been an exception. Usually, even though the complementarity of the roles in the sexual division of labour is trumpeted, the truth of the matter is that the roles filled by women have been discounted and undervalued in such a way that in the extreme case reported by Marx and Engels, women were the first property in history.

Yet, Annie Lebeuf asserts that the profound philosophical ideals which underlie the assignment of separate tasks to men and women stress the complementary nature rather than the separate nature of these tasks.<sup>2</sup> Also, she avers, neither the division of labour nor the nature of the tasks accomplished implies any superiority of the one over the other and there is "almost always compensation in some other direction for the actual inequalities which result from such a division".<sup>3</sup> Though Lebeuf might be right in establishing a thesis of complementarity of sex roles in Africa, she failed to understand that it is in actual fact not viewed as such. As Nina Mba has pointed out, women were not considered equal to the men.<sup>4</sup> Thus, in essence, in a situation in which the women had a profession like trading which complemented their husbands' role of fishing or farming, they were not considered equal partners because of the sexual division of labour, they were regarded as women who were to be seen, not to be heard.

We have said that the sexual division of labour existed in our societies. Now what were the characteristics of this division of labour among various Nigerian peoples over time? What were the implications of this division of labour for women and the work they did and still do? How were these features transformed in the triplex epochal foreign influences viz: Islam, Christianity and Colonialism - on Nigerian development? Was the sexual division of labour oppressive in pre-colonial societies? Were there differences in the concrete manifestations of the sexual division of labour in our various societies given their uneven development of productive forces and ideological superstructures? What cleavages - class, religious, ethnic, national, etc. - existed in these societies and to what extent did they differentially impact on the experiences of the women who were implicated in these structures? How have these influences evolved through time? What all these questions highlight is the complexity of a single phenomenon and its ramifications. There is no room for a prioriism. Careful analyses must in each case bring out the peculiarities of each region of inquiry. The need for theory cannot be overemphasized. Simi Afonja, in a paper that broaches some of the questions just raised, makes a similar observation:

What is missing in studies of Yoruba women's economic activities, therefore, is an explanation of how trade is integrated with other areas of production and reproduction in an economy characterized by a low level of specialization. Also missing is an analysis of the social relations generated by this integrated economic structure and of the ways in which these relations have been altered by the transformation to commercial and industrial capitalism.<sup>5</sup>

Several works on women in Nigeria lack the kind of a satisfactory explanation Afonja refers to. Nina Mba's Nigerian Women Mobilized is a study of political activity amongst women in Southern Nigeria from 1900 to 1965. She discusses the position of women in pre-colonial communities and the impact of colonialism on the indigenous institutions and how they affected the status of women. Her contention is that the



position of women was both diminished and enhanced under  
6  
colonialism.

According to her, in government and administration there was a loss of their areas of responsibility in indigenous modes of governance and participation because they were excluded from all levels of administration. In the economic realm, while colonialism provided increased opportunities for the women in trade, it also led to a take-over by men of many areas that had hitherto been the preserve of women. This led to a gross underutilization of their usual roles in, say, agriculture. The results were mixed in other areas too.

On the obverse, she notes that colonialism did result in real losses for African women who before the advent of colonialism "occupied a position complementary, rather than subordinate.

... (T)he sex segregation which existed in many spheres of society often enabled women to control their own affairs".  
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However, given that she herself acknowledges at the same page that even the maximum political power of women was actually minimal relative to the power of men, one is bound to query her conclusion: that is, the conclusion that colonialism was responsible for the erosion of women's political power and influence and that the sex segregation system of these societies offers a way out of the political constitutional predicament of the present.

In the first place, whereas it may be true that women in states with monarchical systems in precolonial societies who were of royal descent had more room for them to manoeuvre, it is questionable whether these features can be generalized. Secondly, recommending the sex segregated system of the past as the model after which to fashion solutions to extant constitutional problems ignores the historicity of those systems. More importantly, it rests on a dubious homogenization of sexual categories which ignores the real cleavages in the ranks of men and women.

By ignoring these nuances of the pre-colonial situation, Mba ends up with an unwitting romanticization of the past which makes her lay the blame for the colonial status of women squarely on colonialism. A more correct analysis would seek to identify the pre-colonial roots of the colonial transformation of the status of women given that one could make a case for the androcentric character of our societies before the first Europeans came to these shores.

The Women in Nigeria (WIN) Document, (1985), is one of the few avowedly feminist works on women in Nigeria. This document covers various areas which affect women - the rural and urban areas, education, law, associations and network, mass media, family, religion and health, and contains policy recommendations on all these. In this work, the description and ramifications of the oppression of women are compelling. These are used as a basis for recommendations geared towards the amelioration of the situation of women.

In the policy recommendations on education, for instance, it was noted that vocational and technical colleges are male-dominated, and that the polytechnics, colleges of education and universities emphasize professional schemes like catering, food technology, secretarial studies and education for women. Generally it was discovered that women were being rail-roaded into sex-role stereotypical disciplines with low pay, little self-esteem and limited career opportunities.

In the discussion on women in the media, the document discussed the various problems women in the media face. We shall not be concerned with the details of their discussions. What is significant is that the document is long on description. However one looks in vain for some general overarching theory with which to make sense of the fabulous descriptive content of the document. For instance, in the sections already cited and others, there is hardly any attempt to come to grips with the structures of consciousness in which women and men are

imbricated. In other words, the document lacks an appreciation of the psychological and ideological milieu in which women's oppression thrives. It completely escaped the authors the fact that women themselves are the principal vehicles through which the sexism and androcentrism of existing society are reproduced. This occurs in the socialization process in which the facts of biology + sex - get transmuted into gender roles. We are referring in essence to the process of the construction of 'male' and 'female' in society.

Having failed to consider the theoretical underpinnings of those structures of consciousness, it is not surprising that the authors completely failed to pose the question of how men come to control the levers of power in society which includes the crucial power of naming. The control of the power of naming enables men to impose on women self-abnegating images of themselves(women), and to deny women a profile in history. Thus sexist language complements and transmits sexist consciousness in an androcentric world. Given that this is the case, one begins to understand why women as columnists and lead writers in the media reproduce the same sexist ethos prevalent in the larger society. We can say the same for the sexism of educational institutions, religion, etc.

We see a similar problem in the discussion on women and health. We refer specifically to the problem of abortion. Except a cursory reference in the recommendations on women and health, there is an eloquent silence on what, to us, is the most important feature in the question of abortion: the right of women to control their bodies. By not raising the question at this level, the document unwittingly gets trapped in the National Council of Women's Societies' tradition of looking at the abortion issue as a religio-moral problem.

We find a similar equivocation in the discussion of the problem of female circumcision. In addition to the motley

every field keep using these bogus concepts.

We ask: what precisely is 'traditional Nigeria'? What are 'traditional Nigerian societies'? Are we talking of Nigeria before the advent of Europeans? Or is it Nigeria before the onset of colonialism? Does 'traditional Nigerian societies' refer to the societies, in this area, of the 11th century or the 19th century? Does it refer to societies before the islamization of much of the northern part of Nigeria, or the christianization of the southern part? Does it include Kanem-Bornu under Idris Aloma, Benin under Ewuare or Ibadan under Alesinloye who died in 1936? Needless to say it is much easier to invoke theoretical shibboleths like 'traditional Nigeria', 'traditional Nigerian woman', etc. than it is to work assiduously to study Nigerian women in ever-changing social structures with an awareness of the complexity of the structures themselves and women's roles within them.

Social formations are very complex phenomena and they often have articulated within them several modes of production. Of course, there usually is a dominant mode to which the rest are subordinate. It is this complexity that notions like 'traditional Nigeria', etc., tend to obscure. A very good illustration of how these vacuous notions can vitiate analysis is Afonja's paper, already referred to. In the paper we find references like 'the African subsistence mode of production', 'Yoruba production modes', 'traditional economic formations', without serious attempts made to clarify what exactly each of these entails by way of concrete determinations. However, she insists that:

In order to explain the relationship between the cause and the effect of female subordination, therefore, one must analyze the continuity between historical and contemporary patterns of the sexual division of labour in production and reproduction. This is imperative in African studies, because the labels 'traditional' and 'modern', 'colonial', and 'precolonial', draw arbitrary lines through the historical process of change and, as Audrey Smock and Alice Schlegel suggest, encourage the

gynaecological problems attendant upon clitoridectomy there is the equally important question of whether or not the procedure represents an instance of child abuse and what is the extent of the rights of parents to do what they like with the bodies of their wards. We do not claim to have the answers but we believe that the inability of the document to raise the questions we elicited is related to the lack of theoretical focus. So far we have looked at specific consequences of this lack of focus.

Furthermore, to take seriously the historical development of the social structures and women's places within them one must be ready, willing and able to engage in hard and serious theoretical exertion. But as we have argued serious and hard theoretical exertion is missing in many existing works in women's studies in Nigeria. We are sure that many people are familiar with notions like 'traditional African values', 'traditional Nigerian societies', 'traditional women', 'traditional marriage', 'traditional child-rearing practices', etc., etc. which feature prominently in writings about women in Nigeria but which are theoretically vacuous. It is not only in women's studies that these notions are widespread.

Those who are familiar with African political theory will easily recall that the idea of a precolonial Africa where everything was okay before spoilsport Europeans came to upset the order was the foundation on which many political theories and visions of a new society were built, especially on the morrow of independence. Julius Nyerere's Ujamaa and Kwame Nkrumah's Consciencism are well-known examples. But even the two theorists repudiated any homology between their pictures and the reality they purported to describe. In any case, their assumptions have been seriously challenged and fatally undermined by new historical findings establishing the reality of cleavages in those societies that are facilely dubbed 'traditional'. However, many writers in Nigeria in practically

analyst to transpose the phenomena of the present onto the past.<sup>9</sup>

Thus theory must, in every instance, explicate the concrete determinations of the concepts it employs and the historicity of the material to be studied should never be ignored. Summoning the research findings in history, anthropology, politics, etc., feminist women's studies must strive to work out regional and global theories which will capture in rich detail the complexity and multiplicity of women's experience in society.

So far we have discussed the absence or inadequacy of theory in women's studies and we have related it to the absence of a feminist motif in the works. We may have conveyed the impression that both theory and feminism are monoliths. We wish to caution that such an impression is far from our intention. On the contrary, we are quite aware of the variety of feminisms there is in the world. In the main, the types are defined by what theories and /or Weltanschauungen inform them. For instance, there are conservative feminists for whom the possibilities for a transformatory praxis already are available in existing societies and all that women have to do is to lay hold of these tools and effect their liberation. For such conservative feminists there is nothing wrong with the doctrine of separate spheres for men and women with women doing their own part and men likewise. What is missing is a proper and adequate valuation of the tasks which women perform in their own sphere.

Then we have liberal feminists for whom the singular failing of existing androcentric society is the fact that it has denied women the opportunity of redeeming the promise of individual self-realization and the freedom of the individual to define for herself the good life and actuate it which is the hallmark of liberal democracy. A liberal feminist could be radical or not relative to how much or how little intervention the collective is allowed in the individual's articulation and realization of the good life for her. And, certainly, an

anarchist-feminist will insist that there should be no authority intervening in the individual's conception and construction of the good life.

Between Socialist-Feminists and Marxist-Feminists the distinguishing factor hinges on the level of emergency which either of them gives to the women's struggle in relation to the class struggle against capitalism. Basically, they both share the view that the struggle for women's emancipation is part of the general struggle for human emancipation. The oppression of women is seen as one form, among others, of oppression which is an integral part of capitalism. For them, while there is need to struggle against women's oppression, national oppression, racial oppression, etc., such a struggle should not be allowed to obfuscate the ultimate goal of overthrowing the basis of all oppression in the present epoch - capitalism. They differ from Radical Feminists like Shulamith Firestone who see "feminist issues not only as women's first priority, but as central to any larger revolutionary analysis".

For socialist-feminists, however, the best insights of radical feminism (the emphasis on women) must be combined with those of Marxism (class analysis) in a creative synthesis. On this view it is not the case that marxian class analysis is wrong but that, for the purpose of women's liberation, it is inadequate. Gender analysis must combine with class analysis. This is because in dealing with women's oppression, we are not dealing with one system - capitalism - of which the oppression of women is a feature. We have two systems - capitalism and patriarchy - the first of which oppresses everyone through class rule and the second of which alone can explain the oppression of women, qua women. This is what has come to be known as the Dual Systems Theory. Marxist-Feminists, on the other hand, insist on the primacy of class struggle and its resolution as the fundamental prerequisite for complete women's liberation.

We shall not be concerned with the claims of each of these feminist groups.

What we have done in the brief discussion of the various feminisms there are is to show that feminism is not a monolith. Concomitantly, the theories which each variant of feminism will deploy to study women and other subjects will be conditioned by its perception of what is of primary emergency and to what extent existing society holds promise of liberation for women.

In all cases the theories will enable a more coherent and better structured apprehension than atheoretic descriptions of reality. We have decided not to identify particular works on women in Nigeria as instances of one feminism or another because we have argued that, with the exception of the WIN Document, very few works are characterized by a feminist motif.

We have advocated the injection of a feminist motif into women's studies in Nigeria. A most important pylon for the construction of feminist women's studies is the working out of a general theory of women's oppression in Nigeria. We must move from the crude empiricist problematic of merely asserting the occurrence of women's oppression to careful regional studies of the mode and nature of women's oppression in different polities in Nigeria and their levels. Theory-construction of this kind is sure to make available to writers in the media, etc., some frameworks within which they can make sense of the subjects they write so confusedly about. It will arm women with tools for the understanding of their situation and, hopefully, will reduce the incidence of high-achieving who make light of the gravity of the oppressive situation of women when they insist that there is nothing to liberate women from. It will even enable men who have always wondered about the prostrate situation of women but are incapable of grasping at a deeper level the causes of this eventuality. The net effect of all this will be a very welcome rise in the level of discourse about women's



issues and women's liberation beyond the inchoate perorations of Woman's Angle writers. Indeed, the infusion of a feminist motif and an efflorescence of feminist theory-construction will be the best armour against the ghettoization of women's studies as an area in which great heat is generated but little illumination is produced.

Anyone who, like us, calls for the emergence of a feminist problematic in women's studies in Nigeria must be alert to the danger of sectarianism. For this we can only recommend the caution of two women who have polemicized with Euro-American feminists on the dialectic of the concrete and the universal in women's studies. Achola Pala has cautioned that

...the position of women in contemporary Africa is to be considered at every level of analysis as an outcome of structural and conceptual mechanisms by which African societies have continued to respond to and resist the global processes of economic exploitation and cultural domination. I am suggesting that the problems facing African women today, irrespective of their national and social class affiliations, are inextricably bound up in the wider struggle by African people to free themselves from poverty and ideological domination in both intra- and international spheres.<sup>11</sup>

On a similar note Bolanle Awe notes that

... (M)any of our assumptions about the universality of female interest and objectives are questionable. Apart from the distinctions of class, occupation, environment, etc., the position of women differs nationally and, even more significantly, from Third World to developed countries. The problems of women, therefore, have to be examined within many contexts and with an awareness of differences.<sup>12</sup>

We must not write as if women form one single, continuous bloc in society because like men they are cleft into classes, ethnicities, nationalities, etc. Theory must take account of these cleavages. Finally, the danger of sectarianism should always be kept in mind so that we do not permit ourselves to think that the emancipation of women can be done outside the context of the general emancipation of humankind.

OZ  
Yes,  
but...

NOTES

<sup>1</sup> See Nina Mba, Nigerian Women Mobilized, (Berkeley: Institute of International Studies, 1982), for an example of such romanticization which we discuss below.

<sup>2</sup> Annie Lebeuf, 'The Role of Women in the Political Organization of African Societies,' in D. Paulme, ed., Women of Tropical Africa, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), p. 113.

<sup>3</sup> Lebeuf, p. 113.

<sup>4</sup> Mba, Nigerian Women Mobilized, p. 37.

<sup>5</sup> Simi Afonja, 'Changing Modes of Production and the Sexual Division of Labour among the Yoruba,' Signs, (7), 2, 1981, p.300. Hereafter cited as Afonja, 'Changing Modes.'

<sup>6</sup> Mba, Nigerian Women Mobilized, p. 67.

<sup>7</sup> Mba, p. 37.

<sup>8</sup> See A. Ajose, ed., Report of the Committee on Law and Status, NCWS Biennial Convention, Makurdi, 1982, cited in Ute Ballay, 'Women in Nigeria: Aspects of Social Transformation', Africana Marburgensia, XVI, 2, 1983, p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> Afonja, 'Changing Modes.', p. 300.

<sup>10</sup> Cited from Vivian Gornick and Barbara K. Moran, eds., Woman in Sexist Society, (New York: Basic Books, 1971), p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> In The Wellesley Editorial Committee, ed., Women and National Development: The Complexities of Change, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 9.

<sup>12</sup> The Wellesley Editorial Committee, ed., Women and National Development: The Complexities of Change, p.314.