

**Oyèrónké Oyewùmí, ed.: *African Gender Studies: A Reader*. New York:
Palgrave Macmillan, 2005**

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1 With the performative turn's emphasis on the discursive construction of gender categories, a growing awareness has emerged within the interdisciplinary field of gender studies that "insistence on coherence and unity of the category [woman, SA] refuse[s] the multiplicity of cultural, social and political intersections in which the concrete array of 'women' are constructed" (Butler 1990: 14). Hence, the project of countering the internal structure of white hegemony in the field of gender studies - although well under way for considerable time - has gained added momentum and amplified scope. One of its latest additions is Oyèrónké Oyewùmí's anthology *African Gender Studies. A Reader* (2005). Bringing together a wide range of voices and disciplinary perspectives of African scholars, the collection interrogates some well-established concepts and ideas of (Western) gender studies so as to "correct the longstanding problem of Western dominance in the interpretation of African realities" (xiv) and to re-define "gender" as an analytical tool applicable to African contexts.

2 On a critical note, however, the editor seems to establish a dichotomy between two homogeneous cultural spheres in her brief but lucid preface: Africa and the West. While at least the former's uniformity is clearly deconstructed as the anthology's contributions cover a wide range of cultural contexts, it still comes as a surprise that the homogeneity of the "West" and "Western" gender studies respectively remains largely uncontested, especially when considering that all but five of twenty-two contributors are African scholars in the diaspora, holding positions in the U.S. academia. Hence, although this anthology is primarily concerned with portraying thoroughly African perspectives within the vast field of gender studies, these perspectives themselves are located at the interface of "Africa" and the "West."

3 The anthology is divided into seven thematic sections and twenty-one chapters. Each of the sections is briefly introduced by a concise sketch of its thematic outline and a short summary of each of the following contributions. As the editor thus deliberately lets the texts speak for themselves critical conversations may emerge first and foremost within the sections but are intended to subsequently reach beyond these confines. Against this backdrop, this review will explore how the juxtaposition of the texts compiled in this anthology as well as their different disciplinary approaches - ranging from the social sciences to literary theory - ultimately culminates in a patchwork picture of African gender studies.

4 In the first section, "Transcending the Body of Knowledge", Oyewùní's opening essay resumes the preface's assessment of Western gender categories as deeply entrenched in the "bio-logic" (xviii) of Western culture. The author's - perhaps not too unexpected - perception that social roles in Western culture are intrinsically determined by the body flies in the face of the aforementioned performative turn's emphasis on the perpetual (re)construction of, for instance, gender roles within and beyond existing social norms. In contrast to this perception of an underlying 'bio-logic' of social roles in Western culture social roles in Yoruba culture are depicted as inherently circumstantial and relational, and therefore not only as entirely free of any biological influence, but also of gendered restrictions. Yet, again quite contrarily, Akyeampong and Obeng's study on the development of power and authority in the Asante nation reveals that it was precisely their bodies that have effectively come to exclude women from hitherto unlimited access to positions of power: it is women's menstruation that keeps them from powerful positions in this society before they eventually become "ritual men" (30) - and hence eligible for positions of power - after menopause. Accordingly, these contributions outline a critical dialogue on the subject of gendered bodies. Nevertheless, one significant gap in both essays remains the lack of consideration for any colonial influence on the significance of "gender" in the two societies.

5 The second section, "Decolonizing Femininism", explores the relationship between feminism and colonialism and emphasizes the different experiences of feminism and feminist ideologies for women in the West and women in former colonies as either a liberating ideology or an extension of white supremacy rule. Nnaemeka's contribution focuses on the (im)possibility of achieving global sisterhood in the light of the specific construction, teaching and dissemination of knowledge about the - simultaneously raced and gendered - Other. Lazreg, on the other hand, openly advocates a non-reductive, all-inclusive femininity based on the acknowledgment of a common humanity at the center of womanhood, which transcends both cultures and races, and ultimately fosters a new consciousness of an inherently decentered, "transindividual" (78) subject. Both essays convincingly argue that the project of "decolonizing feminism" entails the subject's understanding of his or her own stance towards the other(ed) culture.

6 Moving from a critique of Western gender studies and (post)colonial feminist discourse to the third (and longest) section, "Reconceptualizing Gender", the following essays demarcate "alternative conceptions of the social world and the place of gender in it" (81). To begin with, three case studies explore such alternatives along the lines of the concepts of matriarchy (Amadiume), social roles in Yoruba society (Oyewùní) and woman-woman

marriage among the Gikuyu (Njambo & O'Brien). Furthermore, this section includes a personal account - notably written by one of the male contributors to the anthology - illuminatingly portraying the author's subjective experience of genderless social categories in Yoruba society, so often alluded to in previous and subsequent contributions (Adéèkó). The section concludes with a theoretical text on the liberating scope of women's "essential roles" in African as opposed to their limiting qualities in Western societies (Kopytoff). Quite strikingly, and despite the success of all these contributions in broadening the perceptual and conceptual range of the social construction of gendered roles, all but the two contributions on Yoruba cultural structures seem to reveal possibilities for transgression which nevertheless remain - more or less subtle and acceptable - deviations from gendered societal norms.

7 While the previous sections primarily discussed and contested the contemporary significance of the concept "gender" in diverse African contexts, the fourth section, "Gender Biases in the Making of History", challenges not only male dominance, but also the ensuing invisibility of women in the field of historiography. Containing two theoretical essays and a case study the section is opened by the editor's third contribution to her own anthology, illustrating the introduction of the concept "gender" into Yoruba history in Rev. Johnson's historiographic record *The History of the Yorubas* (completed in 1897). Here, the use of the English language is shown to introduce gender differences into a cultural system where originally gender was unspecified by assuming men's and neglecting women's presences in positions of power. Along similar lines, the following reading (Zeleka) of four well renowned history textbooks reveals considerable gaps and silences on the issue of women's representation both in the textual and visual material. The last contribution to this section counters women's invisibility by portraying the significantly different life narratives of two female leaders in Senegalese politics, Arame Diène and Thioumbé Samb. (Indeed, this text speaks eloquently - albeit critically - to Kopytoff's essay in that it contradicts his introductory assumption of a relative ease with which women in formerly colonized countries seem to ascend to positions of power. But while the two Senegalese leaders became involved in politics during their countries' phase of transition, Kopytoff focuses on the postcolonial period instead.)

8 The fifth section, "Writing Women: Reading Gender", addresses various issues of the representation of Africa and African women in colonial and postcolonial writing. Comparing the symbolic significance ascribed to white and black women in sexual relationships with white and black men, Busia's essay "Miscegenation as Metonymy" succinctly explores relationships of power at the race-gender interface in colonial novels. Nfah-Abbenyi then

analyzes the concept "gender" and feminist theory in postcolonial (women's) writing. Posing the pertinent question of how the concept of "gender" can be localized so as to become a suitable analytical tool in postcolonial contexts, the author reevaluates key themes of Western feminist theory. In another case study, Gadzekpo portrays the involvement of women in Ghanaian print culture during the colonial period. Within and beyond the gendered space of so-called "women's columns", newspapers provided a forum for mainly elite women's self-expression, even though on the one hand, anonymous pen names contributed to women's invisibility while on the other hand, even female contributors were perceived as male when writing about "men's issues" as, for instance, politics.

9 In response to the challenging observation that development programmes hardly target the material needs of local populations, contributions in the sixth section, "Development and Social Transformation", offer both theoretical conceptualizations of sustainable transformative initiatives as well as a case study of women's successful empowerment. In a very brief but concise essay on women in development, Pala calls for the acknowledgment of both women's and men's needs within local communities and, shifting her focus to women's issues, continues to list three central points for successfully drafting and implementing development projects. These rather general directives then re-surface in Steady's subsequent description of an "investigative framework for gender research in Africa". The author emphasizes the need for oppositional discourses and feminist challenges to Eurocentric paradigms which should eventually yield to Africa- focused and gender-sensitive approaches to development. She concludes by listing nine important research questions for development and transformation programmes. Concluding this section with a succinct case study of the Yum initiative, Banoum illustrates the benefits of women's self-empowerment through traditional, indigenous knowledge systems. The women in this study successfully negotiate the tensions between dependency on a global market and traditional concepts that were also depicted as key issues in the previous two chapters.

10 The seventh and last section, "Critical Conversations", establishes an illuminating dialogue between Appiah's epilogue to his influential monograph *In My Father's House* and Nzegwu's challenge to his subjective albeit authoritative depiction of the concepts of matrilineality and patriarchy under the intersecting - and often contradictory - influences of Ghanaian and North American cultures. Lewis further provides a detailed survey of approaches to gender studies in African and postcolonial contexts, highlighting shortcomings of traditional trajectories but concluding with an identification of newly emergent, innovative patterns. (Lastly, Murunga's review essay of three books tackling the issue of "African

Women in the Academy and Beyond" succinctly sums up some of the major concerns voiced in the contributions to the anthology under review here. Most importantly, it once more foregrounds issues of "representation, equity and access to knowledge" (398) in the academic context that allegedly also influenced all the contributors' awareness of the concept "gender".

11 In conclusion, it is important to stress that the broad scope as well as the variety of voices and perspectives compiled in this anthology indeed contribute vitally to a broadening and (re-)conceptualization of gender studies. Nevertheless, three points of criticism remain: The first revolves around the the afore-mentioned positioning of most authors in-between African and Western cultures. Furthermore, the collection's primary interest in North and West African indigenous cultures, which not only narrows the frame of the patchwork picture of African gender studies, but neglects the hybrid nature of postcolonial societies. A third and last critical observation concerns the anthology's general conflation of gender studies with women's studies. Despite the editor's own cautioning against such reductive tendencies, the contributors to the anthology (including the editor herself!) focus chiefly on women's issues in the particular African contexts they study. Nevertheless, as the anthology targets a primarily Western readership, it is one of the collection's biggest assets that at no point do any of the theoretical texts, case studies and personal accounts attempt to apply such reductions to the concept of Africa, but instead respect and in fact point out the multiplicity and diversity of cultural contexts to be discovered on this continent. Hence, *African Gender Studies* does indeed present a very useful and recommendable tool for the study of "gender" in African contexts, which will, moreover, surely leave a challenging imprint on the Western reader's own conceptualization of "gender".

Works Cited

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge, 1990.