

## Supposing that there were Female Fathers

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**ABSTRACT:** The paper highlights how African female self-images have changed over generations. In the ancient African culture, a female child occupied a significant position in the community. However, due to culture contact and change and the domestic violence in our postmodern society, it appears as if the role of the woman in public life is no longer recognised. The paper unearths the sisters or aunts in Shona culture in Zimbabwe, Luba culture in the Democratic of Congo, as well as the Venda of South Africa, which we believe are relevant in reviewing gender practices in postmodern Africa. The point of departure in this paper is to draw from patriarchy the problem solving roles that women once played or continue to play in this system. Although the women's roles were not always similar to those of their male counterparts, however, their leadership roles went beyond ordinary familial and matrilineal duties. The paper argues that a fuller understanding of the role of female fathers in these cultures is vital to resisting the perceptions that the violence attacking the heart of our society today emerges from patriarchal areas of barbarity.

**KEYWORDS:** *Africa, culture, gender, female fathers, and human being*

### I. INTRODUCTION: HALF OF EACH SEX/GENDER

The idea of double gender is a controversial issue in the contemporary world. One does not need to examine this statement further to know that it is a false supposition: fathers are males and not females. Femininity and masculinity are the primary organising principles in most cultures, because gender is often perceived the same as sex. Whenever the female sex is mentioned, people usually associate it with women, and vice versa. Even children as young as two, born in our homes, know that 'This is Mom' and 'This is Dad'.

Part of this cultural gender comprehension is facilitated by the symbolic interactionism, as manifested in the dressing code which visually distinguishes mom from dad, or gender roles that make one a housekeeper and another a breadwinner – factors that reinforce gender disparity in our society. We all know the old joke that 'Boys will be boys'. We think of boys as leaders and glorify maleness over femaleness.

One must not wonder why girls react as they did hundred years ago. They secretly envy boys and wish they were boys. But one of them, we assume a small girl, realised the beauty of being a woman when she said: "Depuis que j'ai découvert que l'homme est descendant du singe, je suis heureuse d'être femme" ("Since I discovered that man is the offspring of monkey, I delight in being woman"). Most people will agree that gender binary is a big problem in society. This example is used to show the dangers of this stereotype and how quickly the young girl widens the gap between genders and even eliminates a possibility of her being a descendant of apes. It could be a main concern of our contemporary society to help those whose mental constitutions do not allow them to counter the illeffects of sexist attitudes.

Meanwhile, harsh gender binaries abound. To state the obvious, some cultures are fundamentally patriarchal and have created environments where girls find no place to grow to their full potential as human beings. While jokes such as the examples above exist in many cultures, perpetuating the lower status of the female child, they surely do not apply to most African cultures in which girls are given leadership roles and initiation guidance to stretch the boundaries of their roles in society?

It is easier for most people to see gender and sex in binary male-versus-female terms than potentially coexisting, as in the term 'female father' suggested in the title of this article. This illustrates that the issue has not been given enough attention. An interesting example is the case of a Venezuelan transgender couple whose names will not be mentioned here. The one who is biologically a man but identifies as a woman impregnated the other, who has female genital organs but identifies as a male. Their child is thus born from a female father and male mother.

Since gender relates to identity, and identity is an internal matter, it is therefore natural that a person with masculine physical traits may claim to be a woman, and vice versa. The revelation of our gender that comes from outside or from other people only confirms or denies what one is not. We respect lesbians, gays, bisexuals, transgenders and queers (LGBTQs) for fighting for acceptance. But their claim of having a specific gender

(whether gay, lesbian or straight) is in contrast with our argument, which is not for gender identity or equality, but for the duality of gender personality. Most existing gender identities have their limitations, lacking the framework and implications of broader perspectives. In other words, these gender identities refrain from attempting that kind of analysis, precluding a perspective from which we can view the duality within the female gender in African culture. In a sense, the purpose of our discussion is to show the concrete reality of female gender and the levels of its underlying male gender features and implications.

All of us are combinations of male and female gender characteristics, but most of us do not want to consider that our masculinity is tainted with some femininity or our femininity is soiled with some masculinity. Unfortunately, many insist on believing in pure gender, even when it is scientifically proven that we have in us both the oestrogens and progesterone hormones inherited from both our parents.

We may carry this argument one step further, with examples from the wonder of nature. The brush-footed butterfly of Southeast Asia (Malaysia) is half male and half female, a combination of two sexes (genders) detected mostly from its wings (each of the two wings is a different colour). According to James Borell who has done research on these creatures, these unusual cases are not hermaphrodites; rather, they are literally half of each sex. Like these butterflies, clownfish, Borell (2016) says, are also sex changers. They are born male, and in any community there will be at least one female. But if this female dies, the largest of the males will be obliged to change sex and take her place. This process is a massive change in hormone levels, and it seems that the transformation is completed in the space of a week. The long list of sex changers includes slugs, corals, frogs, snakes and birds.

Nature thus gives us examples to prove that genders can get different classifications including half male and half female. Learning from nature puts our discussion of female father back on the right track. The argument in this paper does so by focusing on the role of women in Shona culture of Zimbabwe, the Luba culture in the Democratic Republic Congo, and to some extent the Venda culture of South Africa. Despite the title, the paper's argument is not an exercise in supposition but rather a presentation of evidence.

## II. BEYOND THE GENDER BINARY DIVIDE

The African culture goes beyond the gender binary divide. While Western knowledge portrays the world in dichotomies such as public versus private, right versus wrong, material versus spiritual and secular versus religious, African people view the world not in terms of artificial divisions but rather as a continuous whole. To them, the spiritual and material are intertwined, and there is not only black and white, but grey as well. Let us give an example from the Tshiluba, one of the tribes in the Kasai province of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. The Luba Bantu-speaking people have the word *tatu-mukaji* which means 'female father', or 'a father who is a woman'. In English, this phrase would simply translate as 'aunt'. *Tatu-mukaji* is known to be the father's younger or elder sister who is referred to as 'male father' by his nieces and nephews. However, a careful reader will quickly notice that two genders or titles are embedded in the compound word *tatu-mukaji*. It is an acknowledgement of the fact that, though a woman, a person can also be a father.

One could argue that some cultures perceiving gender in sex are not attuned to African philosophy. Gender disparity or inequality and gender based violence are aspects of sexist or divergent thinking, the result of a focus on the parts rather than the whole is encouraged by the new world. The African approach, on the contrary, followed convergent thinking in which the ultimate goal was to unite rather than to separate things. In our sexist age, we have perpetuated binary distinctions between genders and mental attitudes towards gender hierarchies that the old African cultures sought to eradicate.

African culture has practiced gender dualism practice for ages. It is easy for contemporary African women to think that they have been completely disempowered or made to be inferior beings compared to men. However, all through the great ages of African history, women have always been well regarded in society by men. Despite men's weaknesses and inconsistencies, they have always given women their space in things that divide us today. Except for unknown cultures, nowhere have women found more difficulty in enjoying their rights than in what is known as modern societies, with postcolonial Africa worst of all.

Understanding the role of the woman in postmodern society and the violence she is exposed to has proven difficult. Most scholars have been tempted to describe women as victims, neglecting to show some of the strengths women still hold in society today. We want to address this neglect by arguing for the irreplaceable role of the African woman. Despite their noble intention to better the condition of the woman, gender researchers have often misled their audiences into believing the patriarchal culture is the reason why men victimise women.

The question is: how are we to make sense of the glorious past African women once enjoyed in the face of this modern disfigured society replete with all forms of violence towards the weak, the woman and her baby daughter? Explanations are various, depending on where one positions oneself – as a feminist, gender critic, Africanist, and so on.

African women today are unmindful of their own past, though few people in the world ever had such a past to be proud of and thankful for. Africa saw queens, female soldiers and high priestesses for the past three thousand years, teaching us how much women can do in society. We do not agree with the poor image that is created of an African woman in society today. We acknowledge that women are vulnerable, but so are men. Women lose much from

beginning the feminist discourse at the wrong end, concerning themselves first and principally with the idea of how society has forgotten them, without considering the converse: what they are able to give society. We reject theories that find the origin of women's disempowerment in patriarchy, in the power of man, in the power of circumstances or believe that this imbalance will be addressed by attacking men.

As this paper argues, African women draw upon a set of perceived notions of femininities in the postmodern world they have been exposed to for some time. But the underlying thesis is that although these new conceptions have created new gender identities that benefit women in some ways, depending on their expectations (modern, global, alienated, emancipated from traditional cultures, and so on). While it is not entirely untrue that women as historical subjects are complex interactions of sexual, ethnic, class, and even religious differences, we still believe that the history of our matriarchal system in Africa is in itself a history of steadily enlarging understanding of the wealth of civilisation that already passed the stage of sexual, ethnic, class, and religious differences.

However, in general the postmodern woman has not, we admit, made progress towards some of the crucial questions: what in the period of history between indigenous pre-colonial Africa and the imposition of European-dominated colonial system, was the thing which led to gender inequality? Why has matriarchy disappeared in some societies which were predominantly matriarchal and given way to patriarchy? At what point do oppressed African women decide that the oppression is embedded in cultural norms and not in the structures of modern society itself and turn to the feminist ideology for their way out? In this way, it is worth asking how important it is to understand first, the role of the African woman in the local culture and history.

Some examples from different parts of Africa can help in building our argument. While the theme of conscription of female soldiers is only beginning to be given attention in the world as an emerging event, we find a clear example of the use of women as soldiers and the king's secret police in Dahomean kingdom or state (in today's Benin) under the rule of King Ghezo as early as the ninth century. During the war of conquest, the French army lost several battles to them before they realised that they were being defeated by female warriors whose skill in battles was the equal of every contemporary body of male elite soldiers from among the colonial powers. The 7000 corps of female soldiers under the rule of King Ghezo also called the *ahosi* 'royal followers' or the Amazons fought in 32 bloody battles against the French. These young women, says Edgerton, "maintain[ed] their morale and enthusiasm for close combat to the very end" before they were all killed to the last woman soldier by the French troops with the help of the *tirailleur sénégalais* (Edgerton (2000:154). The French Foreign Legionnaires and Marine Infantry who fought against them in 1890s, acknowledged, observes Edgerton, that they were not only far superior to Dahomey's excellent professional male soldiers, but every bit the equal of those proud French soldiers (Edgerton, 2000:2).

The religious practices associated with Vudu or Voodoo and its success among the slaves in Haiti, which brought about the independence of the first black republic and is one of the best documented anti-slavery protests in history, reminds us at the same time of the most highly developed religions in respect of the woman's role. While Christianity is discriminatory against women, oral history has it that Hwanjile, a wife of Agaja and mother of Tebesson brought the *vodun* to the kingdom of Dahomey. The primary deity is the combined *Mawu-Lisa* (Mawu having female characteristics and Lisa having male characteristics). Mawu-Lisa governs the sky and is the highest pantheon of gods, but other gods also exist in the earth and in thunder. In short, religious practice organised different priesthoods and shrines for each different god and women here made up a significant number of the priest class.

There are very few female Muslim Imams and female Christian ministers. This means that not many know that the place of female in religion is even a possibility. Instead, women must 'sit down and listen'. If feminism is fighting the male-dominated structures in these religions today, it is because these religions are discriminatory. It is difficult for one to read the Koran and the Bible through the lens of gender equality. Whether women were originally given space in these religions' traditions and then change took place over time is difficult to determine, but what is certain is that women in these religions are regarded as second-class Christians or Muslims.

Unlike Islam and Christianity, African traditional religion, as shown above, has had no need to put up a fight against a huge weight of gender discrimination against women as the place of the priestesses has always been there for her to connect with deities. Put simply, the feminism movement is only bringing new alternatives in these patriarchal religions. In Zimbabwe, the African religion played a major role in the fight against colonialism. In fact, the first *Chimurenga* ('revolution') war was led by a woman spirit medium by the name of Mbuya Nehanda under whose command men were instructed to go to war against white settlers. Like priestess Kimba Vita in the Kingdom of Kongo, Nehanda fought against slavery. Both women were killed by the colonialists, in the belief that to kill them is to kill the African revolution. In the same vein of thought, the *mbonga*, a female guardian whose celibacy protected the Shona chief, and the *chibanda*, a caste of male diviners was believed to be possessed by female spirits as referred to by Marc Epprecht in his 'Hungochani' reminds one of combined gender identities. Most members of the community, in their inalienable inviolability as their "culture of discretion around sexual matters" allowed, reduced the *chibanda* homosexual identity to invisibility even though this attitude was not in itself homophobic.

The above evidence would seem to support the idea that Africa was a gender-free society. If we turn from African to Western culture, we can find scores of examples of the use of women in positions of power that provide ideological support for a movement of resistance to European anthropological conclusions on gender in Ifi Amadiume's (1987) study, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in African Society*. The study stresses the ambiguities in gender balance which, however, in African conception is not an ambiguity at all. The study is revolutionary because in it there is a mixture of return to the past and control of the new.

We must bear in mind that although this past is equally necessary for constructing an argument in our present effort at tracing the origin of the evil that affects our gender practices today, the goal is not to list these facts but to bring in focus the relevant issue: how African women were involved in roles and activities regarded as manly in other parts of the world.

### III. THE ROLE OF AFRICAN AUNTS

In the section below we want to show how the girl in the Shona family, regardless of her age, has the power of settling palavers or sitting on an advisory board for her brothers' side of the family, a function none can perform better than she. Before going into detail, let us start by stating that the reason why the girl child in Shona culture is awarded such powers by culture between, for instance, her brother and sister-in-law derives from the importance the Bantu people attach to the family structure. Marriage in that sense is an important social institution that is interrelated with the social structure and organisation as well as other aspects of the culture of the particular society concerned. In this manner, the family has influence on the ties of kinship and all other relationships constituting such ties (such as the family-in-law) and regulating them.

Sisters, writes Stewart, "are highly respected authorities in their brother's marriage, they are acting as advocates of their natal families vis-à-vis their brother's wives. Wives are expected to consult them in marital disputes" (Stewart et al. 2000:61). Emphasising their role, Stewart (1998:223) writes the following:

*The role of vatete (senior women in the family – aunts) in Shona societies was critical at all stages of inheritance decisions. Such women were often the source of family genealogies, and had the last word if not the final decision when it came to how estates should be divided and allocated.*

In a paper entitled 'Sisters and Marriage in Shona Society (Zimbabwe)' by Andrea Mester (2008:2), a man's sister's role is explained as follows:

*...this atete is ranking higher than their husband in marital disputes. Although her duty was to back the wife's interests in marriage, she would demand her brother's daughter to act as a good wife and integrate into her marital family. She would try to sort out and repair broken personal relationships in order to keep the marriage going... [She] was the one to speak the final word in marriage negotiations, as she had to make sure that no marriage taboo would be broken.*

Mester tells us that "for her brother's wife, she is *amwene* (owner of the wife). On the other hand "his children call her *atete*, a term expressing authority and a close emotional bond (Holleman in Mester 2008:1). Weinrich (in Mester 2008:1) also describes her bargaining position in the marriage process: "The father's sister has the final word to say, and if she is against the proposed marriage it is unlikely that negotiations will be initiated". What Weinrich implies is that in Shona culture this woman is privy to these roles which have been, to some extent, filtered into the postmodern Shona society. It is to that end that the *lobola* or dowry negotiation ceremony, for instance, cannot proceed without the *atete* being there in the same way as sisters settle marital disputes of their brothers' marriages.

The responsibilities of aunts in the African family are almost the same across Bantu culture. Drawing from 'Traditional Xhosa Marriage in the Rural Areas of the Ciskei' (1971:176-178) by E.J. De Jager, the following expectations of the married son (man who is married) can be noted:

- To be the economic support of his family
- To educate his family
- To make sure that he does not ill-treat his wife
- To respect his family-in-law ('The Luba of Kasai say the King has no greater than him, his bosses are his in-laws').

The woman has the following responsibilities:

- To restrict her sexual favours to her legal husband and not engage in affairs with other men
- To observe the customs of her husband's home and lineage at all times, and must attend and show love towards his family (this does not mean that she abandons her own people)
- To perform most of the ordinary domestic duties
- To wear dresses of ankle length (wearing shorter dresses is considered shameful and provocative behaviour towards the other male members of her husband's family).

From the above, we see how two persons who once belonged to unrelated kinship groups enter a marital relationship. When problems arise between the couple, such as the ill-treatment of the wife and children by the husband, he has an affair with another woman and does not have time for his wife and children, or he becomes a lazy drunkard, the man's own family will bring pressure to bear on him to stop his cruelty. This is where the 'female father' sister's role as a negotiator and peace maker is needed by her sister-in-law. While all these are grounds for divorce in our postmodern world, the dissolution of marriage in Shona traditional society was rare and there was no need for such procedure because there were mechanisms to deal with internal issues.

When a problem such as those listed above occurs, the wife informs the husband's sister of his misconduct. She listens carefully, and if her brother is found to deviate from the cultural norms or responsibilities which are expected of him as a married man, she has the duty to address the issue. She will send for him to meet with her. The husband's



sister is chosen by the complainant on account of her good relationship with her, long experience in these matters, but preferably if she appears to be a person who can defend her. They need not necessarily be old, a 15-year-old girl can redress her 50-year-old brother's misconduct, because the culture gives her power to do so.

In our experience, more often than not, the accused pleads guilty before this family court where the judge is his own sister. He pleads for mercy without even daring to face his sister. The man's show of humble acceptance of guilt is an essential feature of the feminine side of African masculinity in the traditional Shona culture. Even today, urban and rural Shona men alike observe this cultural norm. It is certainly a show of manners that men still respect the leadership of women. Very seldom will a Shona man quarrel with his wife for reporting him to his family or show disrespect when asked to account for his misbehaviour.

This internal court, as we wish to call it, and one in which the female father presides in terms of traditional values, almost amounts to a regulatory board. It is a social guarantee that the man will acknowledge his wrongdoing and amend his behaviour. This man will show respect for his sister even if he is wealthier, for in Shona culture nobody is above culture. On such an occasion the husband, in the context of Luba from the Kasai ethnic group, would bring gifts to settle the dispute with his wife he has wronged – a hen, rooster, a fabric or money. This compensation is a sign of reconciliation as peace and security re-enter the home.

The aunt's role is multifarious: she is the person who gets the information about her niece's marriage proposal to her before anybody else, including the girl's own father. She is the one who speaks with the prospective family-in-law, and her role extends to *lobola* negotiations. The Venda people use the word *makhadzi* for aunt. In his *The Role of Makhadzi in Traditional Leadership Among the Venda* (2013), Pfarelo Eva Matshidze addresses a very important issue. The study shows that we live under the impression that women are subordinate to men; however, *makhadzi* aunts play a crucial role in the community and are highly regarded as such. Matshidze states (2013):

*... the makhadzi play critical roles in succession, resolution of disputes, regency, initiation of girls and spiritual roles. While some of the cultural practises are repugnant to the notion of justice and morality and would be of dubious legality given the constitution essentialisation of human rights and dignity, the study has shown that the makhadzi has a place and role in the new democratic society.*

One must also bear in mind that it is an important feature of African culture that brother-sister relationships are always strong. Some even believe that their bond is stronger than that between man and his wife. This is illustrated by the tradition among the *Sotho* people where it was common for "brothers and sisters to be paired off and the *bogadi* (*lobola* or dowry) received for the girl is then used to acquire a wife for the linked brother" (De Jager, 1971:172). According to De Jager, "this custom of linking brothers and sisters for the purpose of *lobola* creates a special relationship between the children of a woman and her brother and this maternal uncle has considerable influence in their lives" (172). *Muvhango*, a popular South Africa television series with almost six million viewers created and produced by DuaKa-Ndlovu, is such an example. The role of the *makhadzi* sufficiently is played out in order to show the power the female figure in the African society.

In Shona culture, "the pairing of brother and sister in terms of bride wealth is known as *chipanda*-system (Holleman 1952:169ff). Although we may find very little to support that since many customs have fallen in disuse, the custom of *lobola* remains very important. Some of its values are that it controls the conduct of marriage partners, legitimises children and makes divorce difficult to occur. Western critics fail to see it in its proper perspective and claim wrongly that it is the purchase of the woman. But to us, *lobola* brings a legal control over marriage, the wife and her children. A married woman will not suffer as long as her sisters-in-law are there and can step in to defend her and her children when violence visits the family unit. Her role as key family member and leader enables social integration.

While in the Shona society the word aunt (*atete*) is used interchangeably for paternal aunt and sister, depending on what role the woman is playing, as an aunt, the Shona woman assumes her role of a protector of victims – women, in this context. Like Simone de Beauvoir, these aunts know that the behaviours of men sometimes support their strength: "it is not in giving life but risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills" (De Beauvoir).

Similarly, if a child among the aunt's nieces and nephews misbehaves and faces punishment from her or his parents, the aunt steps in to protect, mediate and devise restorative measures on behalf of the child. The aunt does this not to cover up the child's misdeeds, and she does so only after establishing that the child is remorseful and ready to accept correction and change its behaviour. The aunt, therefore, has a civic role to play in the family, as she does in the community.

We acknowledge the fact that gender roles in African societies have always been complementary in nature, and all directed for the greater good of the family, clan and ethnic grouping at large. Power is not a piece of cake to be shared, so that when one takes there is a subtraction. Power is infinite, and is drawn in different circumstances by both genders, to address matters arising. It does not matter whether the source of that power to be called for is from the woman's or man's arsenal; what matters is that the problem is solved.

From the above it becomes clear that the role of a girl child as female father in Shona culture and the role of the paternal aunt as female father among the Luba people of Congo will not be abolished as it is a deep-rooted and significant custom integrated with legal and social aspects of our cultures. Our lifestyle from traditional to modern may change outwardly, but such roles of women in the affairs of the family and society will always remain significant ingredients of Bantu culture in our countries, where we can return and adjust our ill-gotten behaviours.

It is difficult to address all the gender issues raised above in relation to our complex history, mingled as it is with colonisation. It comes as no surprise to us in the lightness of touch in which gays and lesbians fight to officialise and legally make the world recognise their sexual rights long suppressed in Europe. In a society where women or men have been diminished by their history of gender conflict, their stake in self-discovery and social change is to be expected. In this sense, the movements to address the powerlessness of European minority groups are understandable. It is therefore fitting that, when speaking of feminism, African women must either look at it with suspicion or caution, because it is not patterned on African culture or history. We can reasonably argue that it is the Western male society's injustices towards its own subcultures that brought about a hip of radical solutions we are facing as displayed by Western feminism and the LGBTQ movement. But the image of women, as discussed above, did not receive similar treatment in Europe, as many critics have argued (Anta Diop, 1989, Amadiume 1987, Minga 2016). That is to say the European women did not enjoy the privileges that their counterparts in Africa had enjoyed.

#### IV. THE POSTCOLONIAL WOMAN'S NERVOUS CONDITION

The *Nervous Conditions* by the Zimbabwean female writer Tsitsi Dangarembga deals with the theme of gender in this novel. Dangarembga, who has not returned to fiction after the famous *Nervous Conditions* published in 1988, gives the impression that the different types of femininities she listed in her novel continue to reflect the condition of the postmodern African woman to this day. *Nervous Conditions* is indeed a great book, a prose that draws attention to the postcolonial African woman's psychological condition. There remains something unresolved about the book. The condition of the postcolonial woman as a perpetual existential crisis filtered through the pages of this book on different levels: western cultural alienation, financial dependence, and stigma regarding sexual orientation as captured by Abena Busia of Rutgers University in Dangarembga (1988:i) in the passage below:

*In the story of one family, through its deft negotiation of race and class, gender and cultural change, it dramatized with a sense of wit and clarity of purpose the 'nervousness' of the 'post-colonial' conditions that bedevil us still. In Tambu and women of her family we African women of the latter part of the twentieth century can see ourselves, whether or displaced, doing daily battle with our changing world with their mixture of tenacity, bewilderment and grace.*

The book shows that the gender problem is a serious cultural and moral one. The protagonist, a local girl, Tambuzai, is neither passive nor aggressive but resistant to male domination in an African respectful way. Nyasha, unlike Tambu, is too liberal, identifies herself with the West and even has the audacity to slap her father. This is a type of resistance nobody needs in Africa. In its stubbornness and identification with the West it becomes a threat to gender balance, storing up anger that only explodes in a self-destructive manner. These are aspects of our society that have made gender one of the grounds of fierce battle against man, race, normative sexuality and patriarchy, all of which have put the woman in an nervous condition.

The French Philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre's gift of observation in his "Introduction" to Frantz Fanon's (1961) *Les damnés de la terre* ('The Wretched of the Earth') exposes the role colonialism played in shaping our nervous condition:

*Violence in the colonies does not only have for its aim the keeping of these enslaved men at arm's length; it seeks to dehumanise them. Everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language for theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them ours ... The status of 'native' is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by the settler among colonised people with their consent.*

Unlike Sartre who was a mere observer, Dangarembga felt this nervousness in her body. She speaks not by imagining things, but by re-experiencing them. On the last page of the novel, one hears the author's voice as that of the young urban African woman: "...but the story I have told here, is my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and our men, this story is how it all began" (Dangarembga 1988). What such language achieves is realism, too exact, loaded with facts. Haeflner must be near the truth when he argued that feminist and queer movements "have often been among the first to openly proclaim the virtues of sex for pure pleasure rather than procreation or marital obligation" (Haeflner 2013:16). Nevertheless, anthropologists and cultural critics, historians and literary persons such as Dangarembga, Chinua Achebe, and so on, continue to re-establish old truths and facts on sexuality and gender relations. Some new insights are gained filling the gaps in the existing knowledge of particular ethnographic areas, and how this knowledge has been twisted and changed under the circumstances of culture contact and change.

The main issue that has emerged from this debate is whether or not patriarchy is to blame. The African man becomes the main suspect. Patriarchal ideologies are not usually thought of as a field where men accept a submissive role to women. Yet our findings show exactly the opposite: Africa is predominantly matriarchal. Even in places where patriarchy was practiced as shown among the Luba of Congo and the Shona of Zimbabwe, we are uneasy if the role of women in these communities is not only accepted but revered. And so most researchers mislead us in claiming that gender problems in Africa have their source in rigid patriarchal rules that deny women space to free themselves. Yet what most gender critics fail to do is to consider analysis in the kind of paradigm of dualism as suggested above. Those who regard gender as binary or a single identity have left themselves with one point of reference: to see gender through a patriarchal lens. They forget that the latter was itself influenced by colonial violence and that gender in

Africa must not only be analysed through phenomenology, but also through the knowledge of African culture and its practices.

When shall we have men or ideologies that come with interpretations and solutions, or that lift up the woman to her human dignity? They will be found giving themselves powers they do not have. Only when the African woman remembers her role in history that is conveyed to her neither by the feminist movement, the post-constructivists nor United Nations policies, but by her culture in which she is complete, lacking nothing feminine or masculine for her balance, she will make an impression in her community and the world. As long as the African woman forgets to recover her status in this culture, she forgets who she really is. She will, of course, make noise, she will have her little day. But she will cease to be because she will become man and fail to be a *tatu-mukaji*, *anatete*, a female father, a female husband, a male daughter. Why? Because the beauty of these roles has been diminished in the postmodern world in which she lives.

It is true that our postmodern world does face many limitations which, in our humble view, arise from the broader perspective of thinking. The distance between genders that permit the body of woman to be seen as an object of man's pleasure has its own drawbacks, and a healthy society guards itself against the perception that compromises gender balance. It has been wary of the kind of stereotypes discussed in our introduction, avoiding excessive reliance on sexist thinking or assuming that one gender is better than the other.

Recently, the Italian physicist, Professor Alessandro Strumia made publicly some sexist comments according to which 'physics was invented by men'. One of the benefits of sexism to the oppressor is a sense of superiority. Man, in the position of power (physical, political or economic) consoles himself with the thought that he is not a 'weak woman' and exploits this pride to offer a job in exchange of sex, to use his physical strength to rape, to put himself in a position where women demand favours from him. Similarly, the African man is made to feel inferior to the white man. The black man's status is reduced by all, including the white woman who feels superior to him. We still have a long way to go before we can see men and women across races converse on the same footing of equality.

Realising the importance of a gender-free society, the French philosopher Simone de Beauvoir (1973) spent years studying the condition of the European woman before producing her *Second Sex*. Her influence saw the emergence of the feminist movement in the 1970s in Europe. They made their voice heard that social subordination between sexes should not exist as woman is equal to man. We agree that we should be suspicious of the arguments of feminists whose controversial aim is said to deprive them of their real value, but "if the woman question seems trivial, it is because masculine arrogance has made of it a quarrel; and when quarrelling one no longer reasons well" De Beauvoir states (1970:26). Unlike De Beauvoir, post-structuralists maintain that "difference is one of the most powerful tools that women possess in their struggle with patriarchal domination, and that to equate the feminist movement only with equality is to deny women a plethora of options because equality is still defined from the masculine or patriarchal perspective" (Irigaray, 1999). The post-structuralists' view is understandable in the sense that the world is enriched by our gender differences.

Effective analysis and thinking on gender issues, then, depends on the incorporation of views into a study that penetrates beneath the surface of issues, a method that refutes representations that portray women as superior, inferior or equal to man. Such notions have long corrupted our discussion of the subject of gender, but we want studies that present women simply as human beings. What we need is to see a society where there is no females or males, but 'female males' or 'male females' at once. As Judith Butler argues, "Binary gender has no ontological necessity" (Butler 1986). In that way, the fact of being women or men will not affect our lives. The question, however, is: what opportunities have been given us to recreate such a society? What future awaits our baby girls and baby boys, and what paths have we created for them? So, what do we have we to do?

This is what we have to do: we have, as already said, to cleanse our minds of all false gender suppositions. It is true that it is difficult to get the suppositions of modern culture that women are inferior to men out of our minds. It is difficult because they have become part of our own prejudices or even culture. African women constantly complain about what society has done to them, because they do not recognise the height of the role they have in that very society. It cannot be denied that there are many disruptive forces from the urban man (sexual assaults, domestic violence) that have destroyed the urban woman's life today and led to her own destructive conduct such as walking naked in the streets and selling her body to the media and as a commodity for consumption.

The drama of the modern African woman lies in this conflict between the dream of material possession to which we are all driven, and the compulsions of a society in which she is reduced to her body that gives pleasure to men. The body, as explained by Simone de Beauvoir, has led to biological discriminations which, in turn, have reinforced the binary gender system in modern world. Women's bodies connect them to sex for men who tend to think of them in terms of sex and pleasure. For De Beauvoir, however, the body "is not a thing, it is a situation: it is our grasp on the world and our sketch of our project" (De Beauvoir, 1970). De Beauvoir promotes the historicity of the body of the woman because it cannot be reduced to sex; it is a situated body which has something to do in the world. This situation will not be solved if we think that our destiny is determined by the pleasure that economic means affords us. Woman must escape these limits ascribed to her by Hellenism, and find her liberty and happiness in higher values.

Modern women "enter in aspects and spheres of life which under traditional circumstances would have been taboo to her sex", to borrow the phrase from De Jager (1971:182). But forces that can help us maintain the ideals of

African manhood and womanhood still exist; we can unearth them. Traditionally, men and women underwent initiations that were necessary to becoming responsible man and woman in society. To a large extent, these rites have fallen into disuse. It is at this point that we must look for the facts which lead us towards a theory of duality in gender practices our forefathers and mothers once enjoyed and fulfilled their dreams.

### V. CONCLUSION: THE HUMAN COUPLE

Undoubtedly, the new Africa will continue to present new gender challenges, not because African men and women are deeply corrupt in nature, but for neglecting the social norms of our cultures that helped reduce strain and stress in society. These challenges await us, but if we look back, we will see that women were like men and men were like women and put their strengths together for the greater good of their society.

There is no denying that the colonial disruption brought great destruction to our values. It happened in the nineteenth and early part of the twentieth century, and the question remains: why aren't we willing to change? We have lost our memory, might be the answer. It seems that adapting ourselves to the slavish condition is what is left of black culture. Yet the founders of our culture left us statutes in which women enjoyed their offices. It is on the destruction of these cultural values rather than on gender, that the entire controversy on issues such as domestic violence and rape appear to hinge. We hope that the "slavery of half of humanity", together with the whole system of deception it implies, will be abolished and "the human couple will find its true form" (De Beauvoir, 1970:731).

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