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Is there a Place that is Non-Gendered in this World?: A Critique of Oyewumi's Non Gendered Yorùbá Family

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Abstract

The paper is an appraisal of Oyeronke Oyewumi's argument that Yorùbá is non-gendered. It examines her arguments in support of this. It finds out that Oyewumi's claim is not evident in Yorùbá setting. At best, it can be considered to be pseudo argument. The paper concludes, using the methods of conceptual analysis and philosophical argumentation, that since the discourse about gender is a universal phenomenon, and since it cannot be done away given its inherent function, there exists no nation, race group of people without gender. Therefore, Yorùbá cannot be an exception, that is, by implication, Yorùbá is gendered.

[**Keywords:** gender, non-gendered, feminism, *agbo-ilé*, *omọ-iyá*]

Introduction

It is not uncommon to hear people talking about gender and sex. In which case, both concepts are parts of human languages. They are very common in the feminist context such that no feminist theory can be discussed without mentioning either of these concepts. However, these concepts have different meanings and interpretations, and their meanings and interpretations depend on the use. For instance, Idowu (2002: 39) has differentiated between sex and gender. For him, the difference is that while sex refers to the genetic and physical characteristics of persons that define their identities to be either male or female, gender refers "to the culturally accepted behaviours and ways of relating to others expected of the two sexes." In this case, gender is socially constructed (Idowu, 2002: 39). It may imply that gender discussion is neither relative nor contextual.

Oyewumi (2002) has, however, argued that gender discourse is not universal but contextual. This further implies that feminist theory and, of course any discussion are not universal. To argue for this, Oyewumi (2002) uses Africa (Yorùbá) as point of reference to prove that Africans and Africa are non-gendered; rather what is evident is seniority orientation.

This paper examines Oyewumi's claims and analysis used to deny Africans as non-gendered. Method similar to hers will be adopted, that is, conceptual clarification. This is informed given by her use of method of conceptual clarification. It shall conclude that her claims are not tenable.

An Overview of Oyewumi's Notion of Gender

Oyewumi (2002) has taken a bold step to look into the issue of gender and conclude that Africans are non-gendered. To prove this, she looks at the issue from one of the African nations, Yorùbá. What she intends to do is to prove that if actually there is a nation or tribe in Africa that is non-gendered, then, it will be easy to establish the fact that Africans are non-gendered. In which case, the argument will be structured thus:

Yorùbá are non-gendered.

Yorùbá are Africans.

Therefore, Africans are non-gendered.

Apparently, the structure of the argument is valid; it is so in the sense that the information in the conclusion, which is Oyewumi's thesis, is already contained in the premises. While the argument is deductive, it is, however, not sound. The argument, although deductive, is neither plausible nor tenable, bearing in mind that not all deductive arguments are sound; and for there to be a sound argument, the premises and the conclusion must be true and valid (Copi and Cohen, 2002: 42-43 ; Oke and Amodu, 2006: 81).

Before examining the main thesis, a look at her view about gender construct, origin and nature of feminism is necessary. According to Oyewumi (2002), there was a period named the age of modernity which was magnet-like age. It came with a lot of things like "the development of capitalism and industrialization, as well as the establishment of nation states and the growth of regional disparities to the world system" (Oyewumi, 2002). Furthermore, due to modernity, some other things not only surfaced but came to stay. These things, perhaps, still exist up till today; which are gender and racial categories (Oyewumi, 2002). The consequence of this modernity is the expansion of Europe and establishment of Euro/American cultural hegemony throughout the world.

This expansion would not have been felt if nothing had come with it. But it did not come alone; it came with what is today regarded as the best thing to have happened to the 'uncivilized people', which is education. This has led to the production of knowledge about human behaviour, history, societies and culture (Oyewumi, 2002). This means that the Europeans have since been in possession and production of knowledge (Salami, 2008: 195-213; Salami, 2009: 131-141). This has affected the history, religion, ethics, philosophy etc of other parts of the world, Africans inclusive, thereby leading to eurocentrism, the view that a particular group is intentionally and deliberately put at the centre and the group at the centre is propagated as being emulated (Summer, 1906; Berry and Kalin, 1995: 329; Toth and Vijder 2002: 252; Bailey and Harindranath, 2006: 304). The effect of this is both positive and negative, but since the focus of this paper is not on this, then, it needs not be discussed further.

Nevertheless, it must be said that the effect of eurocentrism is the racialization of knowledge, as noted by Oyewumi (2002). Of course, one needs not begin to question that due to the fact that most of this formal education training is in line with the European set

up. That is the basis of her assertion that “Europe is represented as the source of knowledge and Europeans as knowers” (Oyewumi, 2002).

Given the fact that European knowledge is taken to be authentic; and their knowledge encompasses some other things, like their ethics, as this knowledge was being impacted into the Africans, their ethics, morals, values practices, norms etc. were not left out, since the knowledge is all inclusive. Some of these things are done in line with male dictates. This implies that modernity can be said to be in line with male gender. That Africans are affected by European knowledge (modernity), and civilization is to say that Africans are also affected in this male dictates. It can be argued that European is concerned with racialization of knowledge. Male gender and ethos are enriched in nuclear family. Therefore, African concept will be examined based on the nuclear family.

Oyewumi (2002) notes that the issue of gender did not come in isolation, the western feminists were those who brought the idea of gender knowledge. “Feminists ... have used their newly acquired power in western societies to turn what were formerly perceived as the private troubles of women into public issues” (Oyewumi, 2002). Their experience forms the basis for the different concepts, theories, which have led to gender research. This further shows or proves that feminism is a reactive thesis. Gender then serves as the foundational concept to account for women’s oppression worldwide. As explained by Oyewumi (2002), “feminist researchers use gender as the explanatory model to account for women’s subordination and oppression worldwide.” One has to question the rationale behind this feminist approach when it is evidently clear that there are some other problems with women in the society distinct from the ones discussed. Why have the feminists taken their time on this gender discrimination and not focusing on other things? One possible answer is that it may be true that there are different problems as the critics may want to say, but given this analogy, it is also clear that feminists cannot focus on all problems confronting women.

Nuclear Family as the Source of Gender

Oyewumi (2002) is of the view that the source of gender and other related concepts, like sisterhood, is based on nuclear family setting. Hence, feminists’ concepts are grounded on western nuclear family setting. This is to further buttress her argument that gender discourse is not universal but contextual.

Due to the features of nuclear family, one can easily recognise the gender sensitivity. Oyewumi (2002) describes nuclear family as that with the father, the mother and their children living together. Given its basic feature, it can be said to be monogamous nuclear family. There is another version of nuclear family with its members more expanded, that is, the polygamous nuclear family. Members still live together under the same roof, but there is a father and mothers with their children. Her choice of the former is perhaps of its being the commonest among the westerners. Oyewumi (2002) describes nuclear family as “a gendered family per excellence. As a single-family

household, it is centred on a subordinated wife, a patriarchal husband, and children.” She makes us understand that in this type of family, gender is practised such that in a home with two parents, the male is the head; he dictates and is regarded as the breadwinner of the family.

Gender serves as the fundamental organizing principle of the family; and gender distinctions are the primary source of hierarchy and oppression within the nuclear family. It seems Oyewumi (2002) sees something wrong with this. Can there be an egalitarian society, a society without hierarchy? How about the problem of who controls who? Whose orders are supreme? If each member is allowed to give commands, then, it may turn to a family of anarchy, in which no one will listen to the other.

However, due to the fact that there is presence of gender identity, different categories of gender begin to associate themselves, such that male gender goes with his male counterpart and female gender goes with his female counterpart. She says “gender sameness is the primary source of identification and solidarity in this family type; thus, the daughters self-identify as females with their mothers and sisters” (Oyewumi 2002). That nuclear family is not universal, but a Euro/American form makes it alien to Africa.

Some features and concepts are also alien, but emerged from Euro-American feminism. Some of them are the concepts of womanhood and wife. These two concepts are the same. The implication is that when wife is mentioned, it means womanhood is also mentioned and vice-versa. If it is claimed that by referring to woman, wife is also referred to, the question to ask is that is every woman wife? Is it every wife that is woman? Unless if woman has no age limit. I don't think we can refer to a girl of 14 years old, who is impregnated and eventually turns the wife of a boy of 17 years old, as woman. She is a wife to that boy indirectly, but not a woman. The same thing is applicable for a woman who refuses to marry; can she also be called a wife?

An Appraisal of Oyewumi's Non-Gendered African (Yorùbá) Family

Discussion about women, either by women or men, has been attended to more than often. On the one hand, it is, perhaps, due to the fact that women need more recognition than before. On the other hand, it is due to the subordination and their traditional roles (Dukor, 2003: 83-92; Ogungbemi, 2011: 3-16; Adéşuyì, 2013a: 97-112; Teboh, 2014: 337-401). This suggests that gender issue is as old as humanity itself. This is why many scholars have attempted discussing this either in a positive way (Makinde, 2010: 280-288) or a negative manner (Schopenhauer, 1981: 297-305; Greer, 1981: 306-316) Oyewumi's argument tries to dissociate itself from this line of reasoning arguing that in Yorùbá, gender is not considered, that instead, it is seniority. Her ground is that, in Africa, both nuclear family and gender are alien. Africans were colonized and different things handed over to the Africans – Western Education, religion, western norms and ethos etc. which have effects on Africans.

To argue this, Oyewumi (2002) uses the Yorùbá example. She argues that there is no gender in Yorùbá land, because nuclear family is alien to Yorùbá. Extended families

are evident in Yorùbá setting; most towns are dominated by members living together in *agbo-ilé* (compound). What is the basis of these extended families? In the affirmative, it is in the nuclear family (Adéşuyì, 2013b: 487). Extended family could not have started a family. For there to be family, there must be the father and the mother. They would then come together and have children. This is nuclear setting. Extended family is established when the children, especially the male ones, get married and have their families. If it continues and they are living together in a compound, then, there comes extended family. Each immediate family is nuclear. However, Yorùbá family setting can still be described as nuclear in extended family. So, nuclear family is not alien to the Yorùbá as Oyewumi will want us to believe/accept.

The core of Oyewumi's argument is that "the traditional Yorùbá family can be described as a non-gendered family" (Oyewumi, 2002). One of the reasons given is that kinship roles and categories are not gender-differentiated (Oyewumi, 2002). Another reason adduced to is that "power centers within the family are diffused and ... not gender-specific (Oyewumi, 2002). In addition, the fundamental organizing principle within the family is seniority based on relative age and not gender (Oyewumi, 2002), such that kinship categories are not based on gender but seniority. With these reasons, the Yorùbá family is non-gendered. To buttress this point, she uses different concepts and explanations for each of the concepts. In the foregoing, each of the concepts will be appraised. This line of argument is similar to that of Susan Hekman (2006). She argues that one is neither born a man or woman, but one becomes either when s/he finally grows up (Hekman, 2006: 563). Every potentiality becomes actuality. Everybody is potentially a man or woman. Men and women are either male or female; therefore, it is a synthetic-apriori judgment that potential baby boy or girl is man or woman.

In her earlier work, Oyewumi (1997) has argued that Yorùbá is devoid of gender. She mentions the choice of *orí* (metaphysical/inner head) as a non-gendered act. She further argues that "the fact that the mode and manner of acknowledging a superior does not depend on whether s/he is a male or a female indicates the non-gendered cultural framework (Oyewumi, 1997: 38). If understood properly, the choice of *orí* at the yard of Ajala and the final sealing up at *ibodè* imply the choice of gender. The *orí* would have contained the fact that A will be the wife of B (Idowu, 1962; Abimbola, 1976).

For Oyewumi (2002), one of the concepts is the *ègbón* (older)/*àbúrò* (younger). She argues that with the *ègbón* and *àbúrò*, gender has no role to play here. It does not matter whether the *ègbón* is male or female. What matters is who is older such that *ègbón* carries out the responsibilities assigned to him/her, while *àbúrò* performs his/her own duties. Oyewumi may be correct in a sense; given some situations, where the senior ones are called in any matter. If, for instance, in a family where there are six (6) children and the youngest is about 2 years but a male child and others are female, then it could be accepted that seniority but not gender counts, hence, this Yorùbá saying that "*k'ókùnrin r'èjò, k'óbìrin pá, k' èjò má ti lọ ní*" (if a male sees a snake and a female kills it, the important thing is that the snake does not escape).

There are, however, some functions that *obirin* cannot perform which will be compulsory for the *àbúrò*, although male, to perform. In this case, recognition is given to the male and for the female, it is not. In some others, the female is recognized and not male. An example is, when somebody dies in some parts of Yorùbá land, when the corpse is to be bathed, the first son of the deceased is always called upon to do the first bathing. He is given whatever that is used for the bathing before those who want to continue will take over. In the same vein during incorporation, there are rites performed to introduce the deceased into the other world (Ray, 1976: 91), the first son, a male is called upon to come and perform the earth to dust rite first before others follow. In case of the female, it is strictly the duty of the first daughter to buy casket in which the corpse will be put. Has this not negated the idea of seniority and relative age?

Another concept referred to by Oyewumi (2002) is the concept of *omọ* (child). There are no single words denoting girl or boy as she explains. On the one hand, she seems to be correct to an extent when some concepts are considered, for instance, when the word *omọlójú* (favorite) is used. It does not matter whether reference is made to a girl or a boy. When somebody says *omọ dáadáa*, (good child), *omọlúàbí* (virtuous child) it does not matter whether the *omọ dáadáa* or *omọlúàbí* is a girl or a boy. She may argue that there are some names that are borne by both male & female.

Nevertheless, one cannot say that on the basis of this there is nothing like gender. Even the *omọ* that is referred to is gendered. There are *omọ okùnrin* (male children) and *omọ obirin* (female children). There is a question that is always asked when a pregnant woman finally puts to bed. She is asked whether the new baby is male or female. This already presupposes that there is the idea of gender. For instance in a family, where all their children are females, they will be looking for male, *Òkánlàwón*. Where all are male they will be looking for female, *Táàńwá*. What is Oyewumi's defence of this?

Another concept is *okọ* (husband) which Oyewumi (2002) says is not gendered. To prove that *okọ* is not gendered, she notes that:

The distinction between *okọ* and *iyàwó* is not one of gender but that which distinguishes between those who are birth members of the family and those who enter by marriage. The distinction expresses a hierarchy in which the *okọ* position is superior to the *iyàwó*. This hierarchy is not a gender hierarchy because even female *okọ* are superior to female *iyàwó* (Oyewumi 2002).

With this assertion it can be explained that *okọ*, which, in a strict sense, is meant for male, can be assumed by female as well. The reason being that when a wife is married, she dares not call members of the family by their first names; instead she gives them names, like *Eyínfún*, *Ìdí-Ìlẹ̀kẹ̀*, *Kúrúyejọ*, *Ìbàdí-Àrán* etc. The rationale behind giving them another name is the fact that since they are the relations of the *okọ* she marries, they are equally her *okọ* (husband), even at times, she even calls them *okọ mi*.

However, one cannot, because of this, deny the fact that in that context, the family is not gendered. *Okọ* is strictly for male. The fact still remains that she marries the *okọ*,

which is gendered of a kind and this is the reason why the nomenclature *ọkọ* is given to members of the family. It is, however, to be noted that the female ones are at times not referred to as *ọkọ* but *iyá ọkọ mi*, meaning that she has struck out the difference between the male *ọkọ* and the female *ọkọ* which she refers to.

Ìyàwó is another concept in religious context, where both male and female are taken to be *iyàwó òrìṣà*. The problem with this is that, given the number of deities in Yorùbá land that there are more than two hundred (Fabunmi, 1985), she does not specify a particular *òrìṣà*. Although this may be said not to be a genuine argument to debunk this claim, because it can equally be argued that the fact that she does not specify does not mean such does not exist. However, where the problem lies is the concept *iyàwó*, strictly for female, shows that there is superiority-inferiority complex, which is common in discussing gender. The *iyàwó* is inferior to the *òrìṣà*, which is the acclaimed. It must be noted that not all devotees are *iyàwó òrìṣà*. For instance, can we refer to *Yèyè Ọṣun* the priestess of *Ọṣun* divinity as *iyàwó Ọṣun*, when *Ọṣun* is a goddess? If *Yèyè Ọṣun* is a female devotee and *Ọṣun* is a goddess, then, where does *iyàwó òrìṣà* come in?

Ọmọyá (mother-womb sibling) is another concept used by Oyewumi (2002). She argues that the category *ọmọ-iyá* transcends gender. There is the defining shared experience that binds the *ọmọ-iyá* together in loyalty and unconditional love, and that thing, according to Oyewumi (2002), is mother-womb. Mother-womb is so important that when two siblings are fighting, people often say *nígbà tí ó jẹ ọmọ iyá niyín* (after all you are from the same womb). The Yorùbá often say *okùn ọmọ iyá kù já, ó kàn le tẹ ni* (the relationship between siblings is always stronger, there may be problem, but that does not dissociate them). What Oyewumi (2002) is pointing at is that, whether my *ọmọ-iyá* is *ọkùnrin* (male) or *obirin* (female) does not matter; what matters is the fact that we are *ọmọ-iyá* and I need not refer to any of the *ọmọ-iyá* as either *ọmọ-iyá mi obirin* (my female sibling) or *ọmọ-iyá mi ọkùnrin* (my male sibling). This goes further to refer to even cousins as *ọmọ-iyá*. One can ask that is motherhood not gendered? The concept of *ọmọ-iyá* presupposes that there is *ọmọ baba*, simply put, *ọmọbà-kan* (siblings of the same father). This is relevant in the family matters and discourse, because it is a register that cannot be evaded.

Having considered Oyeronke Oyewumi's (2002) conceptual analysis of the traditional Yorùbá family as a non-gendered one, some things have to be understood. One of these is the fact that she has viewed this from an aspect of Yorùbá practice and neglected some other aspects. Culture is not about language alone. She has analysed from linguistic point of view. Culture can be interpreted in, at least, two senses. One, culture is the social forms and customary beliefs and practices of a human group. Two, it can be said to be the language of a particular human group (Wiredu, 1998: 36). Some other aspects of Yorùbá culture need be considered, especially the first which is about beliefs and practices.

One of these aspects is religion. It plays a prominent role in Yorùbá nation such that reference is made to religion in terms of issues and discussion. It is in this sense that

one can say that “the Yorùbá are basically and inherently or incurably religious” (Idowu, 2002: 44). If this is the case, there are some roles in the religious setting which are played by male. In the hierarchy of priests, there is a limit to which females can attain no matter how devoted that female is. This is to show that even in the religious setting, there may be a particular deity worshipped by that extended family. The duties there are gendered.

Another aspect is the social and political structure. Though, both male and female are conferred with chieftaincy titles; hence, they are all regarded as *Olóyè* (Chiefs). There are, however, some chieftaincy titles that are meant for male and female, showing some signs of gender. Each *agbo-ilé* in a town has its chieftaincy title; most of which are strictly for the *òkùnrin* (male). An example is the title of the *Ọba* (King). In Yorùbá land *Ọbaship* titles are strictly for male children, no matter the age; “the office is hereditary in the same family, but not necessarily from father to son” (Johnson, 1921: 40). The succession by hereditary is established by male descendants of the original founder(s) of the lineage (Raji and Danmole, 2004: 270).

It must be noted that in some parts of Yorùbá land, especially in Ondo and Ekiti States, when an *Ọba* joins his ancestors, the first female child is made an *Adelé* (Regent). She dresses like a man, acts in the capacity of *Ọba* and acts male-like. Two implications may be drawn here. One, it can be said that the issue of gender does not arise; any sex can become the *Ọba*. Gender sensitivity is still evident; the position of *Ọba* of any town reserved is for male. Therefore, all the activities of the *Adelé* are masculine, indicating that there is gender. Two, the *Adelé* wears male dresses. In fact for the period that she will be on the throne, she is referred to as ‘he’ or *bàbá* (father). She is also forbidden from any sexual intercourse. This implies that for the period, she is not to be impregnated. While she is on the throne, efforts are being made to look for a male child that will become a substantive *Ọba*, because while she is there, the stool is still vacant. As soon as they finally get a preferable candidate, the *Adelé* immediately vacates the throne.

Talking of functional roles, the male children are preferred. Idowu (2002: 47) argues that the idea of seniority that Oyewumi (2002) paints must be understood as consisting of seniority only in the male gender construct. This may further be proven by reference to a particular position in the extended family, which is *mógàjí* (head of extended family). The *mógàjí* of an extended family cannot be a female and must come from the male lineage. These two conditions are very importance. If any of the conditions are not met, the candidate cannot be a *mógàjí*. Logically conditions A and B will make him *mógàjí*. Note that the logical meaning of a conjunction is that both components must be true otherwise false.

The first child, even if he is the youngest, is called *àrẹ̀mọ* or *dáwódù*. Idowu (2002: 47) gives an analysis of *àrẹ̀mọ* to be strictly for first male child. He is given a prominent role in the family. *Àrẹ̀mọ* is emphasized on as the choice and this happens to male. He plays prominent role(s) in the family. According to Idowu (2002: 47) “it is *àrẹ̀mọ* who hands over the other senior sisters, if they are yet to marry, in a marriage on the day of their wedding.” He also explains that “where the *àrẹ̀mọ* is too young, his uncles perform this crucial role” (Idowu, 2002: 47). In fact, his authority is extended to the wives of the

dead father (Idowu, 2002: 47). This role, as enumerated by Idowu (2002: 47), may not be tenable in some places, for it is relative; it is in the sense that, although, such may be happening in some areas, but not every part of Yorùbá cultural practices. There is this Yorùbá adage that says *ìdálúú ni ìṣẹ̀lú* (literally, the governance of a town is dependent on the principles upon which it was founded). What this means is that cultural practices are relative. Another problem is that the use of 'father's wives' is all inclusive; it includes his own mother. Does he handle his mother the way he handles other wives? Absolutely NO!

For *àrẹ̀mọ*, it is not only strictly for male children alone. In some parts of Yorùbá land, for instance, in Akurẹ speaking communities, *àrẹ̀mọ* will be shared between the first male child and first female child. In this case, the *àrẹ̀mọ* is a prefix that is added to another adjective *ọ̀kùnrin/obirin*. In those communities, there is the *àrẹ̀mọ ọ̀kùnrin* (first male child) and *àrẹ̀mọ obirin* (first female child). In this context, *àrẹ̀mọ* may not be strictly for male. Rather, the one that is strictly meant for male is *dáwódù*, female children don't share this with them. This also means that there is gender sensitivity.

Conclusion

Several theorists see the notion of gender as situational and positional (Lorber, 1994: 38). As further expatiated by Lorber (1994: 38), "the understanding of gender encourages exploration of different kinds of personal and political negotiations that become necessary as contexts change." This implies that there cannot be any culture without gender sensitivity. The reason is a simple one. Gender is a social tool and structure. For Risman (2004: 429-450), it best is conceptualized as a social structure, and through this, one can analyse and understand better how gender is embedded in individuals and societies at large. Individual sex difference is an important tool to understanding gender. The sex difference encompasses both biological and social in origin.

Thus, it can be argued without and equivocation that gender difference, borrowing from Risman (2004: 430), is primarily an instrument of justification, for it is used to justify sexual stratification (groups/categories). It, therefore, means that if one agrees with Oyewumi's claim that Yorùbá family is non-gendered, one important instrument of justifying the society is eluded without a plausible/tenable reason.

Therefore, Oyewumi's argument that there exists non-gendered Yorùbá family setting is pseudo. As Idowu puts it, "in a very important sense as a very important qualifier, the [principles] that underlie the idea of gender differentiation and characteristics in Yorùbá extended family system is not strictly linguistic, but psychological and cultural" (Idowu, 2002: 49). It is clear enough that language is not the only reality to Yorùbá culture, there are other phenomena. Therefore, if it can be argued that it is not the case that Yorùbá families are non-gendered, then, it can be concluded also that it is not the case that Africans are non-gendered and that in actual fact, there has been the presence of gender differentiation in Africa from immemorial (Imafidon,

2013: 21-30). Any attempt to deny gender in Yorùbá setting implies that Yorùbá is neither patriarchal nor matriarchal.

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