

Where is the Foundation of African Gender? The Case of Malawi

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ABSTRACT

The conceptual framework of feminism, as a reactionary ideology, basically consists of 'power,' 'woman,' 'rights,' and 'equality'. The same can be said of African feminism, which has on its priority list such goals as self-determination, which have economic overtones sewn on a materialistic metaphysic. African womanism, despite its pretensions to seeking co-operation or its advocacy for interdependency between men and women, uses a model of conscientisation of women that is foreign to Africa, and runs the risks of obscurantism, vulgarity, inauthenticity, and irrelevance. To put it cryptically, African womanism 'can't want and can't not want' men at the same time. Although gender has made tremendous strides in conscientising women about their plight *vis-à-vis* male-dominance, its future in Africa demands that it re-position itself appropriately. At least it must re-think three theories, that is, the labour theory, economic theory, and social theory. (Ed.)

Keywords: feminism, womanism

INTRODUCTION

Africa's contemporary socio-political scene depicts theoretical and practical confusion of gender with feminism or, for that matter, gender with broad emancipatory movements, such as African womanism, which nonetheless use gender theory as an intellectual tool for critical analysis for the supposedly discriminatory social, religious and political organisational structures. Feminist thinkers loathe these structures because they see in them deliberate mechanisms for oppressing or marginalising women. This oppression of women characterises the present economic inegalitarianism in a male-dominated *status quo*. Consequently, it is argued that these male-founded and male-dominated structures can only be changed so as to render them balanced or equitable if and only if revolutionary measures are employed. The usual elements of such arguers form a class of people called feminist ideologues. Feminist ideologues are those people, male and female, minority or majority in one country, who share the ideas or beliefs or attitudes of male-dominance over women. They tend to look at society in one way; they are certainly unhappy, dissatisfied and critical of what they see around them as compared to what they would like to see. The rational justification of their discontent and critical attitude is quite another thing. Insofar as feminism comprises people, who share one set of ideas or

beliefs or attitudes as a group or community and who are (radically) organised, feminism is an ideology,¹ which is posited to displace the prevailing male-dominated ideology. It is the core of an ideology or the ideological core, which is the most difficult part to change because it is the *worldview* of the people. The ideological core consists of the core ideas, core beliefs, or core attitudes of a people. By implication, if the core ideas, beliefs, or attitudes are purged out then the people's practical reality is annihilated. The revolutionary spirit is germane to any feminist ideologue because he or she believes that lasting and effective change must be moral and intellectual. These detested moral and intellectual values are in-built in society so that their removal or reduction calls for a drastic revolutionary overhaul of the whole social fabric. This drastic revolutionary overhaul of society must be no less than a critique of the prevailing ideology because it purports to subject to intellectual scrutiny, and eventually refute or reject prevailing ideas, beliefs, or attitudes, which are rationally unjustified or prejudicial to the position of women in society. And then feminist ideology purports to create its own better ideas, beliefs, or attitudes. In other words, feminist ideology creates its own counter-consciousness, and eventually its own counterculture. This counterculture comprises a new set of beliefs and a new style of life that is intended or hoped to challenge and eventually expose the inadequacy of the prevailing culture. Only when the ideological core of the prevailing culture is removed and replaced by a new ideological core can lasting and effective change occur. Any change less than that involving the ideological core is superficial or transitory.

In a nutshell, feminism challenges the prevailing *status quo* and develops a counter-ideology that questions the prevailing *status quo* and then attempts to modify it. Feminism advocates change rather than order. It criticises the regime in power and existing social and economic arrangements. It advances schemes for restructuring and reordering society. It generates political movements in the form of women's movements in order to gain enough power and influence to effect the changes it advocates. Feminism is an ideology of action for it motivates people to demand changes in their lifestyles and to modify the existing social, religious, political, and economic relations. It also mobilises its followers and adherents to preserve what they value.² Ultimately, feminism is political and revolutionary. The revolutionary tinge of feminism has historically at times sanctioned the use of violence,³ which has not precluded bloodshed.

¹ J. Plamenatz, **Ideology**, p.15.

² cf. R.C. Macridis, **Contemporary Political Ideologies**, pp. 15-16.

³ *Ibid.* pp. 248-252.

1. PROBLEM STATED

Gender thinking adopts this feminist stance, with little or no modification or retouching and with few or no disclaimers, so that it is conventional gender thinking to posit men as the perpetrators of female-oppression and discrimination in a society which is viewed as male-dominated, a society in which this sad scenario is ingrained in the fabric of the prevailing political regimes, and where the social, religious, political and economic relations and structures are arranged so as to embrace and promote inequality between men and women. The result is that the gender paradigm centrally addresses the problems of equality and liberty rights, more or less zeroing on a variant of welfare-state ideology. Gender thinkers see no need to take caution in distinguishing gender-*ism* from feminism. Feminism is taken for granted as the appropriate seed and vehicle of gender. In contemporary literary circles, the philosophical presuppositions of gender thinking and practice are not put to a litmus test because testing gender implies testing feminism, which, in any case, has withstood many a crucial test as evidenced by its record of persistence and triumph especially in Europe, Great Britain, America, Canada, and Australia. This being the case, the cogency of popular gender-*isms* can only be tested, or critiqued, against cross-cultural objectivity. This paper argues that the lack of demarcation between gender and feminism leads to confusion of western feminism with gender. By grounding itself in feminist ideology, gender inherits most of the weaknesses and shortfalls of western feminism. Gender finds its impetus and modes of expression in western feminism. Therefore, Africa needs to rethink a specific gender, which is appropriate to the African situation in this new millennium.

2. CRITICAL REVIEW: QUESTIONS OF CONCEPTUAL ANALYSIS

Conceptual analysis of gender and feminism becomes a problem for a start because there is a plethora of such offers on the contemporary intellectual and political scenes. Below, only extant literature is reviewed on the question of gender and feminism in Malawi and elsewhere in Africa. In the case of Malawi, only a few representative papers are considered. Any other contributions outside these papers are nonetheless worthwhile but very likely to be implicitly implicated and/or critiqued in one or more of the representative papers. The choice of the papers is free and deliberate: social philosophy, education, religion, and environment, i.e., unarguably, some of the hottest beds of gender debates and activism.

At this juncture, it should be appreciated that African intellectuals have for some time tried to conceptualise gender and feminism in their own situation. As far as philosophical writing is concerned in Malawi, Hermes Chidam'odzi was

the first to notice and then critique this confusion between gender and feminism in the mid-nineties, when he saw some African (elite?) women, who were dissatisfied with feminism, trying to come up with a variant of feminism called 'womanism' in order to distance or distinguish themselves from both African and western feminism (Chidam'modzi 1994/5: 45). The first reason for this anti-feminist stance in African womanists is that "feminism fails to deal with issues that directly affect Africans: she is not truly represented by mainstream feminism."⁴ The second reason for African womanists in distancing themselves from mainstream feminism is that the latter is exclusionary of men in its approach and so the "womanist would rather identify more with the African man in the struggle for social and political freedom than with the middle-class white feminist who ignores the fact that racism and capitalism are concomitants of sexism."⁵ This all-inclusive approach is not unique to African womanism; African feminism also believes, among the usual rights-claims, in the "centrality of children, multiple mothering and kinship."⁶ Unlike her western counterpart, the black womanist refrains from bitterness in her confrontation and relationship with men; rather, she accommodates and does not negate men since men are central to her life not merely as husband (Chidam'modzi 1994/5: 46).

However, womanism shares a lot of ground with feminism, says Chidam'modzi, "central to feminism in general is the women's freedom to choose, and this involves autonomy and self-determination. This is evident in womanism as well."⁷ African womanism excels over mainstream feminism in that African womanism is not antagonistic (against men); in fact it seeks male support. More importantly, African womanism prizes and praises womanhood, wifehood or motherhood: the promotion and preservation of the pride of being a female human being (Chidam'modzi 1994/5: 46). The implications are (1) that while African womanism recognises that African societies indeed have inequitable structures that oppress or marginalize women, the *modus operandi* for improving the situation of African women is not necessarily by means of a simplistic 'categorical reversal' (women taking on the 'better' characteristics of men) or through a war of the two sexes (see also Dzama 2001: 1). (2) Women should take pride in being women. All this sounds very well. But, Chidam'modzi points out three problems in conceptualising African womanism or distinguishing it from mainstream feminism. For lack of a better expression, the first problem may be put down as 'Africa's cultural heterogeneity'. To this end, Chidam'modzi argues:

⁴ Chidam'modzi, H.F., "Addressing African Feminism," in **Journal of Humanities**, No. 8/9, 1994/5, p. 45

⁵ Ibid. p. 45

⁶ Ibid. p. 45

⁷ Ibid. pp. 45-46

Since womanism has very little (if any) concern with the continent as such but with productive human beings, and given that Africans have diverse cultures, then the uniqueness of womanism to African experiences needs to be clarified (Chidam'modzi 1994/5: 44).

In other words, what is so African about African womanism? The second problem is the identity crisis in the African womanist since the modern African woman is not seen as an authentic African woman by her fellow Africans whereas her western counterpart, the western feminist, is considered an authentic westerner all right by her fellow westerners. She is a hybrid of both modernity and tradition; the African womanist is regarded as a "philistine or as a Westernised woman tinctured with traditionalism."⁸ The third problem is the lack of clear demarcation between African feminism and African womanism; the latter shares two important features with the former, namely, autonomy and self-determination. In wanting to be warm to and inclusive of men while seeking her autonomy and self-determination, the African womanist wants to have and not have men at the same time. The fourth problem is two-pronged but ideological in form; (a) it is an emancipatory programme of African women and at the same time a tool of liberation of all Africans from all forms of oppression, including, but not limited to, racism, sexism, and capitalism. Now, its anti-capitalist stance gives the second prong: (b) African womanism is Marxist because it seeks equitable or egalitarian modes of economic production. Chidam'modzi opines that womanism may have to review this Marxist orientation in line with African family relations of production historically and economically (Chidam'modzi 1994/5: 50). To show that African womanism is mistaken in imposing a Marxist interpretation upon Africa, Chidam'modzi shows it over-generalises the prevalence of patriachalism in Africa. To him, matriachalism is strong in many African societies (Ibid., op.cit.). The African womanist ought to be critical of foreign models. Below, in Section 3.1, we illustrate the strength of matriachalism in Africa by using the cases of *Chewa* and *Tonga* tribes of Malawi.

In sum, on the continental plane, confusion abounds as to the conceptual frameworks of feminism and womanism. Let alone the distinction between African womanism and African gender. One wonders whether women who distance themselves from the controversial and revolutionary or antagonistic extremities, including emotional outbursts, of African feminism automatically subscribe to African womanism. At the local level, in Malawi, African womanism seems to exist in print only. Therefore, it seems that African feminism masquerades in literature as African womanism, and only a handful of westernised or elite women really know its message, and hence the problem of using it to mobilise women anywhere in Africa. And so, we are still left with the pair feminism and gender in Africa. Chidam'modzi's paper only sets the ball rolling, as it were, by pointing to the potential theoretical space for confusion

⁸ Ibid. p. 45

between feminism and womanism, and his paper strongly suggests the latter as more promising for Africa. But, his otherwise enlightening paper did not, and may not have been intended to, expose and critique local (Malawians') attempts at conceptualising the same problem of conceptual analysis.

At the local level, E.N.N. Dzama⁹ complains that it is difficult to make sense of gender because of what he conceives to be “gender noise” particularly in the extant African genres of literature. What makes writing on gender more difficult is the sensitivity of the subject of gender in an African setting. What is testimonial to this sensitivity is the fate of the author of the paper, which motivated Dzama to write on gender. The anonymous author had already left the college campus in circumstances, which Dzama recounts as rampage and vandalism of her house. As sensitive as ever, Dzama does not disclose the name or even sex of his ill-fated motivator (Dzama 1998:1). For him, gender, unlike sex: a biological nature is a ‘social construct’¹⁰ and hence gender is relative spatio-temporally, i.e., it can be ‘negotiated’ culturally and temporally. Dzama’s negative literature in his implicit definition of gender comprises such well-trodden paths as Aristotle, Sigmund Freud, and Father Nicolas Malebranche, among such commentators as A. Walton, among others. What Dzama recalls about these philosophers converges on only one point: western philosophical history depicts male-dominance over women in the entire social fabric. Dzama¹¹ thinks that this social injustice can be cured once and for all only when human beings, especially men as oppressors, undergo attitudinal change; he illustrates this possibility by pointing to what colonialists in Malawi underwent after the Second World War; their pre-war attitude towards girls’ education was Aristotelian but their post-war attitude towards the same issue was anti-Aristotelian. Dzama is a dynamic optimist. Dzama’s focus, however, is on girls’ education¹² and so he cannot be expected to devise a precise and widely or conventionally acceptable definition of gender. On the same question of girls’ education in Malawi, Emmanuel Dzama (2001),¹³ Chipso Kanjo (2001), and

⁹ Dzama, E.N.N., “*Towards making sense of the Gender Noise*” in **Faith and Knowledge Seminar**, No. 59, Zomba: TRS, 1998 (unpublished).

¹⁰ E.N.N. Dzama 1998: 2

¹¹ Ibid. p. 1

¹² Dzama begins by disclosing the aim of his short paper, that it is a description of the purposes of formal education “as stated or suggested by missionaries and colonial administrators”(p. 1) and he concludes it by challenging the current regime in Malawi that “there is little that has been done about the problem of gender equity in recent years that cannot be found in the recommendations of the [1962] Phillips Report.”(p. 6).

¹³ cf. Dzama, E., “*Gender disparity in enrolment and performance: a call for gender balanced school curricula and positive discrimination.*” A paper presented at the sensitising workshop held on the 19th and 20th October 2001, Chancellor College, Zomba, Malawi. Unlike the early Dzama (1998) who only notes ‘attitudinal change’ in white-settlers towards girls’ education, Dzama (2001) notices a paradigm (or theoretical) shift in feminism; first generation feminism “attempted to force masculine characteristics on girls.” However, second generation feminism “rejected this uncritical assimilation of the female into the male world.”

Rachel Fielder (2001) all equally fail to fully capture the gender paradigm in their 'equal opportunity' chorus, which basically bemoans girls' low enrolment in educational institutions at national, faculty, and department levels, respectively. Monga's observation (above) that education is not a master key to life sobers the views of these three otherwise adept gender empirical theorists. Back to Dzama's (1998) point of departure; it depicts theoretical confusion: Dzama is searching for the 'substance' (p.1) in gender noise or the reality about gender as such yet he defines or wants to conceptualise gender as a 'social construct'. In other words, metaphysically, as a social construct gender *per se* does not exist and is not real but 'people talk about it as if it exists or as if it is real'.¹⁴ But then, how can the same Dzama look for the real (gender) when prior to the hunting exercise his premise is that the target (gender) is not real?

H.B.P. Mijoga, writing from a biblical perspective, and using both philological (word-study) and narrative (Bible story) approaches, continues from where Dzama stops by defending the claim that "gender differentiation has nothing to do with the creation of the marginalisation of the female gender."¹⁵ The Hebrew word-study is intended to prove that gender is created by the Lord God (Genesis 2:2). This philological study takes Mijoga through three words, namely, the 'adam,' the 'ish,' and the 'issha'. Firstly, to show that creation depicts gender equality, says Mijoga:

In [Genesis] 2:22, the process of "building" of the "rib" (matter) of the 'adam into the 'issha is similar to what happened to the 'adam in [Genesis] 2:7 where the 'adam [male] was "formed" from "dust"(matter) of the 'adama [female]. So both genders are created from matter taken from a source of the opposite gender. (H. Mijoga 1999:89)

According to Mijoga, the word 'ish is introduced into biblical usage by the 'adam in Genesis 2:23 where "the 'adam expresses supreme joy at finding someone like himself ("bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh.")... Here, the 'adam indicates that the 'issha was taken from the 'ish, hence the creation of gender differentiation."¹⁶ Therefore, it is the 'adam (Genesis 2:23) and not the Lord God (Genesis 1:27, 2:7, 2:22) that introduces gender differentiation between the two like beings.

Thus casting all this philology of creation against the apparent marginalisation in male-dominated societies, Mijoga exposes the contradiction;

The later Dzama's point is important because, as shown in Section 2.2.2 above, a mere *categorical reversal*, i.e., typical of the black/white model in race questions, is too inept to tackle the gender imbalance/inequality in the public sphere.

¹⁴ For a possible definition of 'construct' see A. Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, London: Pan Books, 1979.

¹⁵ Mijoga, H.B.P. , "Gender differentiation in the Bible: created and recognized" in **Journal of Humanities** , University of Malawi, Zomba: Chanco Publications , 13, 1999, p. 87.

¹⁶ H.B.P. Mijoga 1999: 89.

that “if the process of being “taken from” means that the female gender is inferior to the *'ish*, surely the *'adam* [male] should be inferior to the *'adama* [female] from which he was taken.”¹⁷ Even the matrimonial injunction of the husband [*is*] leaving his parents to join his wife [*issha*] does not suggest that this socially obligatory movement makes the husband inferior to the wife.¹⁸ Here, Mijoga is implicitly referring to the *Chikamwini* scenario in matrilineal or bi-lineal cultural groupings of Malawi, such as the Chewa and the Tonga tribes of Central and Northern Malawi, respectively. Therefore, once more, although the word *'ish* supports the view that gender differentiation is created, it does betray itself to the marginalisation of the *'issha* or male-dominance over the *'issha*.

The word-study implies two things: (a) common originality of humanity (Genesis 1:27), and (b) gender interdependency. Mijoga arrives at this intermediate conclusion after dismissing such wild theories as the assumption that the God created an androgynous or a bi-sexual human being. Rather, the complementarity thesis displaces the thesis of androgyny, i.e., both the *'adam* and the *'ish* “have a common origin and purpose. But gender dominance is not inherent in this common originality for both are created at the same time.”¹⁹ The complementarity thesis highlights the thesis of gender interdependency. What transpires is that both genders are depended on each other for creation or existence (Genesis 2:5,7; 2:21-22): the *'adam* is a product of the *'adama*, and the “rib” taken from the *'adam* is used to build the feminine being the *'issha*.

Further, in order to dismiss male chauvinism that seeks to find legitimacy in this creation story, Mijoga considers “some interpreters” who have construed the creation of a woman as *ezer* (helper) of the man, i.e. as an assistant and hence auxiliary and secondary being to the man. Another rendering of “woman “ is *kenegddo* (his helper). According to Mijoga, *ezer* means, “helping companion” and “*neged* denotes equality of relationship,” which is a relationship of “equality and mutuality”; a symbiotic relationship. Was not, after all, the “*adam* seen by God to be lonely and helpless before the creation of the “*issha*? (Genesis 2:18).

The narrative study, which is intended to show that gender differentiation is recognised, takes Mijoga through the labyrinth of the Old and New Testaments. He dips his mind even into the feministically controversial Pauline and catholic letters. (Below, we shall only note Mijoga’s conclusions about the Gospels and some Pauline and some catholic letters.) Still in the Old Testament, Mijoga considers once more the creation narrative, mainly the passage about the Fall of Man. In short, did sin bring the realisation of gender differentiation? Male chauvinists place the whole blame on the female for having fallen for Lucifer’s deception. She, and not he, saw and touched the forbidden fruit. On the other hand, feminists share the blame between male and female because “both were present and both ate the forbidden fruit, hence both fell for the deception.”²⁰

¹⁷ Ibid. 90

¹⁸ Ibid. 90

¹⁹ Ibid. 91

²⁰ Ibid. 93

Genesis 3:7 reveals that the two discovered that they were of different sexes. Sin leads to the recognition of gender differentiation. However, Mijoga wants us to note two important things: (1) The man did not accuse the woman for bringing sin; (2) the two human beings “sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons”(Genesis 3:7).

Even in the Gospels, the evangelists recognised gender differentiation (Mijoga 1999: 96-7 as evidenced in Matthew 14:15-21; Mark 15:40-41; Luke 23:44-49). In the Pauline corpus, Paul is said to teach that marriage ensures equality of genders (1 Corinthians 7:4); he abolishes discrimination based on sex (Galatians 3:28), i.e., instead Paul establishes and promotes equal privileges between men and women; subjection or submission of wives to their husbands is christological and Godly rather than a mere gender issue (Colossians 3:18; Ephesians 5:22-24, 28-33); Paul commands silence on wives in public in order to maintain good order and avoid situations where wives contradict and then embarrass their husbands (in public) (Mijoga 1999:99). To show that Paul’s major concern is good order in public (church), he allows women to pray or prophesy (1 Corinthians 11:5), without necessarily committing the logical sin of self-contradiction.

In the catholic letters, Peter refers to women as the “weaker vessel”(1 Peter 3:7) and this remark has provoked the wrath of feminist readers. Mijoga concedes that this verse is the only one “that links gender (sex) to the relationship between man and woman. The adjective “weaker” suggests superiority of the male over the female sex.”²¹ Mijoga resolves the problem of the apparent male chauvinism by an apologetic: “But the way it [weaker] has been used here is not to contain marginalising the female sex but to uplift it” since the two sexes are “joint heirs of the grace of life” (1 Peter 3:7), meaning that both sexes have “equal opportunities in that inheritance.”²² Maybe Mijoga need not offer this apologetic if “weaker” is left off as a mere biological attribute, which can be empirically verified; naturally, women tend to be physically weaker than men.

Mijoga concludes that his philological and narrative studies have demonstrated that gender differentiation is created and recognised in the Bible, and that the apparent marginalisation of women needs a different explanation from the biblical one. In other words, a serious reading of the Bible should do away with the problems, which Bible scholars and Christians have in making sense of Dzama’s “gender noise”.

Mijoga’s paper is important because it is a patient examination of the most controversial and hence most misunderstood Bible passages vis-à-vis gender and feminism. It proffers a balanced critique of extreme poles of the gender paradigm. Both male chauvinists and feminists have nowhere in the Bible to hide. The other strength of Mijoga’s paper is its insistence on the absence of

²¹ Ibid. 102

²² Ibid. 102

justification for the apparent marginalisation of women. However, in the confines of this paper, Mijoga's paper is not helpful because he does not provide definitions of his terms, gender most of all. Worse, Mijoga's otherwise in-depth studies are indifferent to the (crucial) distinction between gender and sex (cf. Mijoga 1999:89, 91, 94, 96, 99, 102 esp.). Dzama excels over Mijoga in this respect in that the former hazards a definitional distinction between gender and sex, as indicated above. The other weakness in Mijoga's paper is that it sidesteps "the treatment of women in society in general and the Bible and the church in particular."²³ One wonders how Mijoga manages to discuss gender in the Bible and at the same time chooses not to situate the gender question in a biblical, or historical, or social context. These shortfalls notwithstanding, Mijoga's paper intellectually illuminates and thought-provokes more probing studies into gender inside and outside the Bible. But the problem of definitional inauthenticity and imprecision is not limited to Mijoga's paper.

Kayambazinthu and Chabwera decide to adopt, or simply carbon copy, the gender definition proffered by S. McConnell-Ginet (1988) and they end up with a derivative of Dzama's definition: gender is a "sociological phenomenon in terms of how society views the roles of the two sexes."²⁴ Thus, within the orientation of the author of this paper, phenomenon would mean "sensible appearance, contrasted with the real object apprehended by the intellect" or what Kant contrasts with "noumenon" (A. Flew, *A Dictionary of Philosophy*, London: Pan Books, 1979), Kayambazinthu's and Chabwera's borrowed definition takes gender as apparent and not real, depending on the disposition of one's senses in a spatio-temporal sociological (social scientific) framework. Kayambazinthu and Chabwera, just like Dzama, are restricted to a social context, and in their case, the environment. Just like Dzama, for them gender is socially constructed, it being a mere phenomenon, an event, or an '*accident*' and not '*substance*', to use Aristotle's metaphysical nomenclature. The two acute intellectuals believe that conceptualising the environment in terms of gender serves a useful purpose because it "suggests an arbitrariness or unconventionality in the socio-cultural construction of the significance of sex and sexuality" (Kayambazinthu and Chabwera 1999:2). As a theoretical term, gender is for them "pervasive" because it is ubiquitous and hence implicated in many areas of life such as "social stratification, in legal codes and practices and it also affects social and cognitive development, roles in the family and the workplace, behavioural styles, conceptions of self, distribution of self, distribution of resources and moral values." Kayambazinthu and Chabwera posit the gender question as a struggle: "Gender is of special practical interest because it is the focus of a widespread struggle to change the material conditions, the *ideological*

²³ Ibid. 87

²⁴ Kayambazinthu, E. and Chabwera, E., *The Women and Men of Lake Chilwa Wetland and Catchment Areas: A gender Profile*. State of the Environment Study No. 2., Zomba: DANIDA, 1999, p.2.

frameworks of men and women”(Ibid., p.2; *my emphasis*). The rest of their joint paper drifts into co-management by men and women of wetland and catchment (W&C) areas.

The joint paper is important because it admits that the term gender is pervasive and so no sector of life is immune to gender analysis and scrutiny. The second importance of their joint paper is the recognition of *social strata*, which need to be critically studied because of their weight on structures of society, e.g. family, employment, law, (social) justice, psychological well-being, and morality. The third importance of the joint paper of the two intellectuals is their allusion to ‘widespread struggle’ and ‘ideological frameworks of men and women’, i.e., their making reference to the words ‘struggle’ and ‘ideology’. In Section 2.2 below, it is shown that Kayambazinthu and Chabwera are advocating Dzama’s ‘attitudinal change’ all right but whereas in Dzama’s case the cause of the attitudinal change was a war which the colonialists based in Malawi did not personally declare, the struggle alluded to by Kayambazinthu and Chabwera is a war against western men declared and fought by western women. Since wars are essentially contagious, Africa has had and is having its share of the import. And since the war’s targets are ideological frameworks, it is further shown below that the war to which Kayambazinthu and Chabwera refer is not gender but feminism, which is an ideology. Thus, fundamental weakness of the joint paper by Kayambazinthu and Chabwera is that the paper confuses gender with feminism. Eventually, their otherwise systematically written and amply illustrated paper does not assist in defining gender because what it defines is feminism. Incidentally, having conceptualised the environment in feminist terms one wonders how the two intellectuals will succeed to make women and women co-manage, as equals, wetlands and catchment areas. The most likely source of their confusion is that they choose to borrow McConnell-Ginet’s western definition of gender rather than summon their acute intellects to develop their own definition of gender, as African intellectuals.

Still on the environment vis-à-vis gender, another joint paper by L. Binauli and Chipeta shows the same lack of originality in the two African gender theorists since they too conceptualise gender based on the views of westerners H. Barret and A. Brown (1995). Rather than authentically define gender, Binauli and Chipeta merely report that the latter authors [Barret and Brown] posit that gender roles are pivotal for any environmental management activities. Thus men and women may show concern for environmental degradation albeit perceived differently.²⁵

There is unity and continuity in four papers reviewed above. Dzama’s paper articulates the problem of access to a country’s goods such as education. His approach is empirical due his stress on quantities or figures; he needs to see more girls than is the present situation in schools. He reminisces on and glorifies

²⁵ Binauli, L. and Chipeta, L. *Gender, Livelihood Systems and Environment Management in the Lake Chilwa Wetland and Catchment Area*, State of the Environment Study No. 1, Zomba: DANIDA, 1999.

the pre-Independence era. To him education is the master key to the emancipation and uplifting of women in Africa. But in a recent VOA TV's *African Journal* panel discussion by three of the finest women gender thinkers,²⁶ consideration of a contribution from an African woman intellectual, Dr. Y. D. Monga, points to the contrary view of Dzama's. According to Monga, even an African woman holding a PhD, like herself, may find herself in an awkward situation where the prevailing gender roles, say in a domestic sphere, continue, amidst the prevailing gender conscientisation, to disfavour her. Dr. Monga strongly objects to her fellow panellists who suggest that the solution to such male chauvinism is, for such a woman PhD-holder, "to walk out on her husband." (*African Journal* on VOA TV, televised on 19/10/2001). The husband may dictate to her about what to do and he may choose not to participate in, or share with her, household chores. Monga is perhaps referring to social values and structures, which she thinks, cannot change in a day in Africa. In other words, Dzama would indeed be radically optimistic and too dynamic to take girls' education as the master key to women emancipation and uplifting in Africa.

Mijoga's paper, although showing no commitment to any empirical context, is continuous with Dzama's because it points to the possible cause of girl-absence or girl-drop-out from school as being religion. Religion, whether western, eastern, or traditional, or other, may and can be held partly responsible for the low numbers of girls in schools. In the case of the Bible in Judaeo-Christianity, Mijoga argues that God and his earthly representatives are not to be held responsible for low numbers of girls in schools, let alone any form of women marginalisation. One wishes similar gender studies were conducted in Malawian or African traditional religions, Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Bahai Faith, among other religions. Mijoga's paper makes the concept of gender 'equality' problematic and postulates the inclusion theory of participation as the solution to marginalisation, and he envisions that when equality is achieved marginalisation will be a thing of the past. Apparently, Mijoga does not take seriously George Orwell's fictional *Animal Farm*, in which social equality is only relevant to, binding for, and the prerogative of one class of animals, pigs only, since they (pigs) are already equal (genetically).

However, Kayambazinthu and Chabwera are less concerned with figures or equality than with social structures. Kayambazinthu and Chabwera are guided by the feminist concept of 'power' because their focus is on environmental co-management. The two acute intellects' contribution heightens the debate since for them it would not be enough to gain access and balance out numbers in institutions, workplaces, and households; further, it would not be enough for women to be equal to men (i.e. to vote on the side of men) in principle when in

²⁶ In the panel discussion on Gender the facilitator was Fawzia Yusef Adam (Founder and Chancellor of University of Hargesia). The panellists were Hibaaq Osman (NGO on Children and Women); Dr. Yvette Djachechi Monga (SAIS, John Hopkins); Dr. Shimwaayi Muntemba (World Bank). VOA TV, *African Journal*, 10/19/2001.

practice the social structures have not changed enough in order to put women in the positions of power and influence.

The first common feature of this Malawian genre of gender literature is that it recognises that gender is problematic in our social milieu and it calls for serious, committed, concerted, or group effort to be resolved. The second common feature is that the genre is weak on conceptual analysis. It is satisfied with borrowing concepts and their conceptions from western feminism and then treating them wholesale, as constituting the conceptual framework of African gender. To echo the view of Dr. Monga, conceptualisation of gender and feminism in Africa should first and foremost pay strict and due attention to conceptual analysis of these 'value-laden' western concepts before the African starts using them. The weakness can be cured if African gender theorists went back to the drawing board. What are gender and feminism in western literature, anyway?

2.1 FEMINISM AS A ROOT OF GENDER IN THE WEST

In the West, feminism²⁷ emerges out of the seeming contradiction between the differing structure of male and female life in those non-African cultures, specifically among western middle-class ranks. It is revolutionary insofar as it reacts by undermining or reducing the power of men and enhancing that of women. In its less radical tones, feminism proposes co-operation instead of subjection; it promotes equality instead of discrimination of either sex. Thus understood, feminism is a protest movement for the liberation of women, the powerless, from men, the power-holders.²⁸

²⁷ Feminism is a consecration of the moral and intellectual and hence universal values of equality purportedly denied of women by the dominance of males over women and the sacrosanct ideologies developed in society to legitimatise and perpetuate male-dominance. Thus conceived, feminism as a western reactionary and sacrosanct ideology is not African in origin and development so that the contemporary gender idiom is not a full theoretical framework and expression of the paradigm of African gender. This construing of gender invokes three important thoughts: (1) Gender does not mean and is not women. (2) Gender emerges in a specific situation depicting inegalitarianism embedded in social structures where one sex (male or female) is on the losing side. (3) Gender is a social construct of sets of behaviours, dispositions, ideas, beliefs, values, and attitudes of man and woman. (4) Gender has a strong materialistic tendency, for it grounds women's qualities or modes of action in women's daily lives in a spatio-temporal-specific resource base presumably conditioned by a sexual division of labour. Insofar as it is situationally embedded in the society's power relations, gender is a reaction to constructed, i.e. real or imagined, male- dominance and female subordination. Gender thus conceived becomes an outgrowth from feminism.

²⁸ The history of feminism is marked by two goals: equality and rights. Pioneer American feminists like Susan Anthony and Elizabeth Stanton had to battle it out with men for their right to vote as equals with men by dint of creation. In the days of old, liberalism provided the initial momentum toward the release of women from social bondage. To women's disappointment, many a revolution (like the American Revolution in 1776 and the French

But, as we enter the third millennium, their predecessors in the west are yet to conclude the fight for welfare rights including (i) abortion rights; (ii) child care provisions: state support facilities, state granted compensations including tax credits for parents, single or coupled; (iii) parental leave or family leave, for instance maternity to involve both spouses, and not just the wife; (iv) pay equity; (v) welfare for single mothers or female-headed families; (vi) just wills and inheritance laws; (vii) access to otherwise traditional 'male' jobs, like the military and heavy industry; (viii) security: safety from maltreatment of women by men including, discrimination, harassment, rape, assault, and wife battery.²⁹

Feminism is historically specific since it is an expression of female experience within specific socio-political relations from a specific social class at a specific point in space and time. In the west, feminism does not (re-) present the history of all women's experience. The incompatibility of western and African gender theories is rooted in the feminist modes in which gender thought presents itself to the African woman.

Revolution in 1789) and nationalism did not specifically rescue them from subjugation by men. Social inequalities continued to prevail in the 'new and independent' states. Britain, America and the Continent of Europe clearly illustrate the sluggish pace of women liberation progress; Switzerland is the last European democracy to grant women suffrage in 1971.

²⁹ cf. Phiri, I., Semu, L., and Madise, N. "*Violence against Women in Educational Institutions: the Case of sexual harassment and rape on Chancellor College Campus,*" University of Malawi, Zomba (n.d.). The joint study found out that "rape and sexual harassment is very high at Chancellor College. The victims know the perpetrators of the acts. The perpetrators are mostly fellow students and male lecturers with whom the students interact most. (2) The support systems are ineffective and could be termed as non-existent.... (3) Students are not aware of their rights regarding rape and sexual harassment (p.8). One of the five recommendations by Phiri, Semu and Madise was the "idea of self-defence" through "awareness, assertiveness and alertness (p.9). This posits polar-opposites in constant struggle or war. But what is relevant to this paper is that the three intellectuals uncritically used an Amnesty International definition of rape that interestingly *excludes* men from suffering "physical violation; injury, and assault on physical and mental well being" (p.1 or Amnesty International report, 1991: 18) as caused by women. In Malawi there have been cases in Lunzu in Blantyre (MBC Radio 2, 1997) and Chikanda in Zomba (MBC Radio 2, 2001), among others, where women have "raped" men or boys. The three also borrow a definition of sexual harassment from a South African Industrial Court (p.1) or from Carolien Saayman (1993:12). Although borrowed and prone to suffer criticisms from cultural relativists, this definition of 'sexual harassment' is wider because the victim is simply left off as "person"(p.1); however, the empirical surveys or researches cited on sexual harassment seem to have suffered from the same *exclusionary* tendencies as those of rape because they were done on women as they assumed only women are victims of sexual harassment (p.1). Even the survey done at Chancellor College assumed female students as the only victims of rape and sexual harassment: questionnaires were sent to "all 364 female students" and the response rate was 55%. Anyway, we are yet to witness the success of such exclusive and militant women's approaches to the pervasive gender paradigm. Obviously, the incumbent Minister of Gender, Honourable Mrs. Mary Kaphwereza Banda, MP, is critical of the potency of such all-women gender programs because she believes that "gender is not women" (2001/2002 Budget Session of Malawi Parliament in June 2001).

Despite the universality of female subordination and male domination, the African woman's situation is bound to make her suspicious of western feminist discourse, which is mostly the experience of the twentieth century middle-class woman in an industrial sexual division of labour. For the western woman of that era it was only natural for her to cry for balance of power. The feminist fight was a fight for power. She made lots of gains; her emancipatory efforts bore her more equality with men, more rights, and easier access to resources, increase in opportunities or incentives, especially in the public sphere.

The yardstick was always her 'more privileged' male counterpart in the already privileged middle-class. In labour, this historicity of western feminism has led to the misconception that women were solely fighting for the 'soft' or 'top' jobs such as company executive, manager, prime minister, parliamentarian, physician, news editor, professor, pilot; surprisingly, the women never zealously fought for 'rough' jobs such as undertaker, trench-digger, dockyard worker, heavy industrial worker, soldier,³⁰ or night-guards.

In its counter-critique, western feminism penetrated the 'rough' jobs; eventually, the west saw more women engineers, women soldiers, and policewomen, thus virtually transforming western society into a 'unisex' club. In the inter-war period, and much more vehemently after W.W.II, feminist thinkers zeroed on marriage as the champion of female subordination, and so they strongly argued that the demolition of the marriage institution would automatically lead to total women liberation. It was then a normal spectacle for a woman feminist to be decidedly non-married, although she could be attached and have children. Domesticity, child rearing, or whatever family life stands for, was looked upon as an impediment to women involvement and participation in public life, especially to public employment. The feminist propaganda so narrowly construed was reduced to a feminist fight for space and time in the public spheres of life especially the workplace, which was supposed as a predominantly male territory. Two concepts dominated and still dominate the western conceptual framework.

2.2 TWO IMPORTANT WESTERN FEMINIST CATEGORIES

Western gender categories dismally fail to provide a gender conceptual framework for the African woman. For instance, the category of 'power' cannot be used to conceptualise gender in Africa. To argue that a certain normative concept like 'power' has a gender meaning is to claim that its social usage, at least in part, is not what it ought to be for reasons that have to do with gender.

³⁰ For example, a question like "Should women be allowed to fight on front lines?" is loaded since it partly implies that within the military profession women are deemed incapable of performing in certain military operations. Cf. C-Span TV, *Washington Journal*, 1-2 p.m., 21/10/2001. This shows the danger of mixing up biological (sexual) with social (gender) differentiation. A 'biological' peculiarity need not, and may not, be a 'social' weakness.

To claim further that the usage does not command universality and objectivity, due to considerations of differing hermeneutics, i.e. interpretation as grounded in historicity and context is not to advocate gender scepticism. Although the empirical realities of women world-wide are different, this paper argues for the abandonment of gender exclusivity in the face of equally competing, urgent and appealing discourses of, say, ethnicity, racism, and 'class'.³¹

2.2.1 Power

In western traditional masculinist literature, power is viewed as repressive, poured from a leviathan above to his subjects below. The subjects are said to need the powerful leviathan because without him, they lack security, peace and well-being. In that western literary world, power is evidently and firmly associated with the male and masculinity, like virility, thus evoking the physicality of power. The correlate of man, woman, is therefore powerless.

So when feminists wrote about 'power over our bodies' and 'power of our lives' they were using the very same concept of power, which pervaded traditional masculinist discourses on power. They affirmed the male conceptualisation of power rather than providing an alternative. It comes to us as no surprise that contemporary gender thinkers mimic the same masculinist notion of power in theorising gender. They are not wary of historical, social and political situation of knowledge-claims.³² Trapped in their own ideological cocoon, the western feminist women still think that western rationality is the only rationality; that western science is superior to other forms of rationality (if any), so that in regard to, say, family planning strategy, African women have to be 'helped' by their more scientific counterparts from the west.

African women, so claim the western women, need to be conscientised because it is feared that the African women have internalised the oppression or suffering and therefore are in desperate need of awareness campaigns by women animators from the west. The western feminists already fall prey to the yet another ideology of dominance they vehemently fight in their own backyard.

Western feminists are totally oblivious to the reality of subject-object relations in research; the reality the helper and the helped are equals as they each experience the other from the viewpoint of their own situations and background knowledge and cultures. Each one (the helper and the helped) is the object of experience of the other so that objectivity is somehow tainted with subjectivity.

³¹ Oshadi Mangena argues likewise that if one is attentive to differences of ethnic origin, sexual orientation and class, the notion of gender disintegrates into fragments and cannot anymore be employed as a useful category. See K. Lennon and M. Witford, **Knowing the difference: feminist perspectives in epistemology**, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1994, pp. 275-282.

³² Annette Fitzsimons and Susan Strickland, *Ibid.* pp. 124; 265.

That the helper enjoys the exclusive right to the objectification of knowledge of the Other is an ingrained feature of western cross-cultural research, after all the helper has scientific skills or rational advantage over the helped, and this ontological arrangement make the helped redundant in the objectification of knowledge of the Other. The only danger though is that the consequent helpers' knowledge is partial or fragmentary. The implication is that western feminists cannot emancipate the supposedly un-conscientised African women.

2.2.2 Woman

Just as the concept of 'human', as narrowly presented in western literature, fails to command objectivity, the same literature fails to define 'woman'. 'Woman' is amenable to many different things; it is shrouded by ambiguities about its ontological status. It can evoke intrinsic characteristics, like caring and love, but this smacks of essentialism, which does not have many adherents in gender mainstreams. It can also evoke familial relationships as the non-male member. Both of these evocations partially conceive 'woman' for they are normative since they are descriptive of a set of social facts or relations. As such, woman has no characterizable content and hence the challenge from postmodernist thought that 'woman' is not descriptively adequate since, it is observed, 'woman' is cross-culturally different.

According to postmodernists, 'woman' imposes unity over empirical reality.³³ Postmodernism rejects the Enlightenment and the humanist presumptions of wonders of reason. The Enlightenment is rejected because of its veneration of masculine reason at the expense of sensuality; humanism is rejected because of its appeals to universal subjectivity or the human condition. Instead of seeking 'sameness' postmodernism celebrates 'difference,' partiality and multiplicity. It detests the search for coherence and hankering after the 'right' (or Platonic or Kantian) solution.

Postmodernist feminism equally opposes a hermeneutic parochialism of the present over the past or vice versa--of searching for a single given goal, a single representation of reality. This new brand of feminism transcends the historicist recognition of the inevitable peculiarity and contextuality of human thought and practice and hence it advocates the continuity of dialogue between interlocutors, between text and interpreter, and between subject and object, with no advantage, marked goal or reality. This postmodernist re-orientation of feminism is a deliberate step away from essentialism and universalism: marginalisation and exclusion of the Other.³⁴ It puts emphasis on particularity and multiplicity with due attention to difference, diversity and locale. But postmodernists also impose a tough demand on gender thinkers: why should the absence of facts for

³³ See Alessandra Tanesini, *Ibid.* pp. 211-212.

³⁴ See Susan Strickland, *Ibid.* pp. 266-7.

description of woman precludes the claim for the notion of woman, even where the possession of the notion may not warrant the description or analysis of the same?

Even the points of convergence of feminism and postmodernism are not adequate grounds for their formulation of their purported common aims because their concept-lingualities are different. For example, their meanings of a concept like 'difference' are different. In postmodernism, 'difference' is acknowledged as typical of human experience worldwide; it is at the same time evaded as a threat to dominant perspectives of understanding or interpreting reality. It is consistent within postmodernism to demonstrate that 'woman' was all along acknowledged as different but was included in universal humanity in name only by the dominating men. Feminists believe that the 'dominant ideology' in world history is the root cause of the subjection of women by men. In Rousseau's language of 'right,' the emancipation of western woman, albeit noticeably incomplete as we enter the third millennium, began as late as mid nineteenth century.

However, feminism does not argue for the mere acknowledgement of 'difference'; women's experience and perspectives should be noticed and heard along with dominant male experience and perspectives. Feminists complain bitterly that the dominant perspectives are exclusive of women because they are ideological and hence false, since they are interested and distorted. Feminists are not content with their inclusion in or numerical addition to universal humanity as read in liberal or Marxist theories. Whereas postmodernism stops at the recognition of 'difference', feminism posits 'difference' as a challenge, a paradigm of its critical dialogue with its situation, past, present and future.

The concept 'woman' is thrown into serious doubt because the notion of gender itself is slowly moulding due to its exclusiveness. What is being advocated instead of gender is a multiplicity of identities; for instance, if one widens one's horizon, one cannot fail to realise that differences of ethnic origin and class, sexual orientation (gays and lesbians), should be priority items on the liberation agenda. In spite of its usefulness in certain emancipatory projects, 'woman' as a gender category stands to question now because it has dawned on contemporary gender thinkers that 'woman' is essentially embedded in misogynist literature and that it is conducive to, and promotes, exclusionary practices.

In short, a feminist survey of western languages shows that the meaning of some words, such as 'power,' 'woman,' 'human,' 'reason,' depicts gender bias against women; the words are not universal. The concept-lingual sources of western rightist discourses, like feminism, are liberalism or Marxism in their vicious attack of their respective archrivals, authoritarianism, and capitalism. Ironically, Karl Marx did not directly address the specific situation of women. He presumed that his communism would provide liberation for women just as it would for all the exploited masses and underprivileged minorities, male and female.

Friedrich Engels (Marx's lifetime friend, economic guardian, co-author, and Marx's editor) also narrowly attributed women subjugation to property relationships of the conjugal family only in capitalist societies; he remained mute on the reality of their 'enslavement' in non-capitalist societies including communism and matriarchal societies. Marxism and capitalism cannot be plausible concept-lingual sources for the gender movement in the new millennium since both of them are ideologies of conflict: they pit man against man; the state exploits the proletariat-worker in the former, whereas the capitalist boss exploits the labourer in the latter.

The importance of authentic concepts of gender needs to be stressed. More importantly, the crucial concept of 'power' needs to be unambiguously stipulated in contemporary gender thought and practice.

The feminism of the 1970's and 1980's correctly revealed that the concepts that are presented to us as universal and trans-historically valid actually embody male biases. For example, normative concepts such as 'reason,' 'science' and 'knowledge' fail to pass the gender universalisation test, so to say. Even if these normative concepts embody ideals and express values, they nonetheless prescribe and evaluate behaviour in male-perspectives and so the values they express and ideals they embody are far from universal.

Normative concepts function as descriptions of the endorsements of a specific society, and are faithful to past usage. Hence the complaint that feminism has taken the experience, i.e. marginalisation, of white middle class women to be representative of all women. The glaring weakness of these normative concepts is that they leave little or no room for disagreement or difference within a situation like a community. Conformity is the order of the day since they are treated as truth-conditions, instead of being emendations of current thought and action. These contemporary feminists fear that these values and ideals are codifications of norms regulating masculinity, where the woman's 'normal' is locus of the domesticity of the family, i.e. the private sphere of life. What current gender thought needs is the evolution of ongoing social practice. It should engage in evaluation of these concepts and influence the evolution of social practice in regard to concept-usage.

3. GENDER AND FEMINISM: THE AFRICAN SCENARIO

The argument that African women cannot identify with doctrinaire western feminism comes with cogent force because the knowledge and experience of African women have been ignored or marginalised by a feminism that reflects only the perspectives of white western middle-class women; that it indulges in false universalism and lacks critical awareness of its situation are simple inferences drawn from the argument. Its conception of 'woman' remains problematic and therefore vacuous because its 'woman' is intended to deny self-evident differences between woman and woman in situation and experience,

privilege and power. It is apologetic of the peculiarities of 'woman' since it misconceives them as functional and not as formal differences (from 'man').

As a result, its content and purpose are not based on actual commonalities between women but on the experience and interests of some women who have the position and ability to impose upon 'other' women their own idiosyncrasies, terms and definitions, i.e. what they mean for themselves and others. For instance, when western feminism seeks to balance or reverse the social scales, it employs conceptual polarities such as nature-culture, strong-weak, reason-intuition, public-private, male-female-neuter sexual division of labour. To explain the position of women, it says women are closer to nature; they are more intuitive; they are more private or secretive, etc, not knowing that it simply endorses masculinist (and hence exploitable) viewpoints about 'woman'.

Indeed feminism lacks a critical awareness of its situation. Feminism is not in dialogue with its context, past and present, and therefore cannot be used to forge emendations to any society, which cries for transformation of social relations. Feminism is engaged in a monologue, which mistakes its own ventriloquism for effectiveness since it is falsely generalising and insufficiently attentive to historical and cultural diversity.

Another unwelcome feature of western feminism is that, although it borrows critical tools from other emancipatory theories like Reformation, liberalism and Marxism, it does not put itself forward to challenging other forms of subordination like slavery, colonialism, racism, and their accompanying prejudices and complexes, which affect women as well. Its exclusiveness to the western middle-class woman's experience undermines its universality and objectivity, and therefore puts to serious doubt its relevance to the African woman of the same era.³⁵ Worse still, its silence could easily be interpreted as its assent to slavery, colonialism and racism, experiences that western middle-class men caused on both African women and men.

Though not unique, the situation of the African feminist and that of the Western feminist would not replicate. An African woman generally finds herself in a social setting where 'power' might not be the paradigm of interpersonal life. Jobs are just as hard to get for a female as they are for her male counterpart. In a marital situation, for example, she may dispense with the battle of balancing it out with her allegedly dominant male partner in terms of sexual division of labour, involving child-care and domestic chores due to the scenario of dependency, a creation of the extended family. Dependants fill in as auxiliary or surrogate mothers or fathers and as unofficial maids or cooks, etc. Even if dependants were not around, hiring domestic staff would be more affordable in her society than it would be in the west. As is well known, in the west, it is almost impossible to hire domestic staff.

³⁵ See Alessandra Tanesini, *Ibid.* pp. 204-5.

3.1 TRADITION VERSUS MODERNITY: SOCIO-POLITICS IN CONTEMPORARY AFRICA

Transformation is a rare occurrence in Africa. Perhaps devolution, rather than evolution or revolution, is the *modus operandi* for social transformation in Africa. The interface of the past and the present may not be conducive to the development of radical gender even among urban or elite women. Past attitudes and values tend to phase out far too slowly under the weight of new attitudes and values. The usual conceptualisation of ‘woman’ both among the rural and urban folk might have more conservative undertones than radical gender theorists wish. In Malawi, for instance, even after the legal repeal of the ‘indecent dress code,’ the woman in trousers or mini-skirt risks categorisation as a champion or promoter of moral turpitude. The continuing scenario of stripping off mini-skirted city women by vendors is testimonial enough of these slow-dying conservative undertones even in the urban or modernised areas of Malawi. Radical gender might be undaunted by this current negative public reception of trousers and mini-skirts in Malawi, dismissing it as a primary reaction of a bunch of male savages. Time alone will heal this negative attitude; gender activists console themselves. At this stage though, these attitudes should be of great concern because it is not unusual for radical gender women lobbyists to experience opposition and ‘disapproval’ from fellow women.

Another reality that might prevent replication of western gender in Africa is the social history of Africa. It is difficult to identify the dominant ideology for African societies outside Africa’s recent experience of slave trade, colonialism, and nationalism. However, anthropology and archaeology, which pretend to dig deeper into Africa’s past, and re-construct the Antique Africa antedating the three recent experiences of Africa, reveal to us that there are matrilineal and patrilineal societies in Africa. In the patrilineal societies, for example, *Ngoni*, *Tumbuka*, *Sena*, *Ngonde* in Malawi, males are dominant. However, broadly speaking, in matrilineal societies women are more ‘powerful’ than men, an issue that is accentuated by the husbands’ settling in their wives’ villages upon marriage. One would expect that in a setting where land is the most valuable property, due to reliance on agriculture, a landowner would command a lot of power and influence. Husbands, as co-opted landowners, will in principle and practice have less power and influence than their wives. Therefore, if the western gender’s ‘power paradigm’ is anything to go by, the matrilineal society depicts a reversal of the western gender model. In Malawi, *Chewa*, *Yao*, *Mang’anja* and *Lomwe* societies are largely matrilineal in principle. The *Tonga* of the northern shore of Lake Malawi can be included in gender-wise peculiar ethnic groups although the *Tonga* are bi-lineal.

In these ethnic groups, one must distinguish the formal from informal power structures and modes of social organisation; in the formal power setting, that is the traditional chieftaincy, chiefs hold only symbolic power since what they execute in public is largely the consensus, or the *communis sensus*, of the ruling

council; the consensus views include decisions, advice and suggestions from women, say the chief's siblings, aunts, mother, spouse. The chief can only underrate the women's decisions at his/her peril. For example, in *Chewa* society, there is a special all-women council that nominates and elects the heir to the throne upon the demise of a chief. Its choice is irrevocable.

In the informal power setting of marriage, women are very strong, so that most marriages are wife-headed. The women not only have land but also a certain edge of power over males on reproductive issues. Most often than not women make unilateral decisions on family planning. Moreover, it is not uncommon for mothers (-in-law) to issue family planning hints to their daughters (-in-laws). The children belong to her. In a poor economic environment, children are priceless assets, and so a large number of children are an increase in wealth for her. Woe to the husband who outlives his wife while he is based in her village and cultivating her land!

To a tolerable level, the more applicable pitch of gender gymnastics is the middle class African marriage, a poor and faint imitation of the western nuclear marriage. In this darkly glass-image of the western nuclear family, decisions can be (i) syncretic, i.e. both modernised African spouses reaching open consensus on an issue; or (ii) autonomic, i.e. one spouse making their decision with little or no consultation; or (iii) autocratic, whereby the husband or wife issues decrees. The latter two modes of decision-making may cause tension and lead to ephemeral, delicate and symbolic trial marriages.

4. CONCLUSION

The conceptual framework of feminism, as a reactionary ideology, basically consists of 'power,' 'woman,' 'rights,' and 'equality'. The same can be said of African feminism, which has on its priority list such goals as self-determination, which have economic overtones sewn on a materialistic metaphysic. African womanism, despite its pretensions to seeking co-operation or its advocacy for interdependency between men and women, uses a model of (Marxist) conscientisation of women that is foreign to Africa, and runs the risks of obscurantism, vulgarism, inauthenticity, and irrelevance. To put it cryptically, African womanism 'can't want and can't not want' men at the same time. Although gender has made tremendous strides in conscientising women about their plight *vis-à-vis* male-dominance, its future in Africa demands that it re-position itself appropriately in the third millennium. At least it must re-think three theories:

1. Labour theory, which would have to articulate exactly what feminism seeks in the public sphere and then justify that its target is better than what the private sphere may provide. This new labour theory would have to conduct a

- detailed profit and loss account of total or partial de-domestication of African woman
2. Economic theory: to ensure women's economic empowerment, rather than trapping them in the vicious circles of credit and loan by pro-women lending organisations, as is the case in Malawi today. A systematic and coherent gender-sensitive theory of goods and services would be required so as to improve planning, production, distribution, ownership and disposal of social goods and services
 3. Social theory: to re-define woman's social status and role in the 'gendered' African society, given the gradual pace of the transformation of African-cum-westernised attitudes and values.

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