



# CODESRIA

**12th General Assembly**  
Governing the African Public Sphere

**12e Assemblée générale**  
Administrer l'espace public africain

**12a Assembleia Geral**  
Governar o Espaço Público Africano

ةي عم جلا ةي موم علا ةي ن اثل ا رشع  
حكم الفضاء العام الإفريقي

**Women's Moral Agency, Governance and the Quest for  
Justice in Africa**

**Puleng LenkaBula & Karabo Mpeane Makofane**  
University of South Africa



07-11/12/2008  
Yaoundé, Cameroun

## **Abstract**

This paper explores women's moral agency in post apartheid South Africa and Africa. It explores the intersections of governance and the public space and African women's agency from the perspective of African feminist social ethics. The paper first situates the discussion on African post-colonial state. It thereafter, evaluates the portrayal of African women's agency in the dominant human sciences discourses, particularly in South Africa. The purpose of the above is to unearth the ways African women's agency is expressed, perceived, interpreted and understood. It is also to evaluate whether African women inhabit or reject their negative portrayal. The second part of the essay identifies and discusses African women's agency and demonstrates the ways they agitate for justice and claim political agency and citizenship. The essay then calls for emancipatory and transformatory justice in the public sphere and in human sciences which reject the objectification of African women and or their treatment as objects of research by others. It calls for human sciences approaches which affirm and understand African women as agents and subjects in their own lives and those of their societies as well as in the private and public spheres.

## **Introduction and situating the discussion on governance and the public sphere**

This paper aims at discussing governance and the public sphere in South Africa and Africa and their interface with African women's agency from the perspective of African feminist social ethics. Amina Mama rightly notes that African feminist scholarship on the post-colonial state or its governance has to seek to understand its link to the violent and destructive manifestations and the persistence of patriarchy in Africa.

She states,

A feminist analysis of postcolonial states links the violent and destructive manifestations of modern statecraft with the persistence of patriarchy, in all its perversity. It approaches authoritarianism in a manner that draws insights of feminist studies, building on work that begins to explore the complex resonances and dissonances that occur between subjectivities and politics, between the individual and the collective. It offers a powerful rethinking of national identity, and opens up possibilities for imagining radically different communities.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Mama, Amina. Subjects: Gender and Power in African Contexts 2001:7

Mama, like many African feminist scholars, suggests that in order to understand the dynamic of governance in Africa, we must subject its evaluation to its linkages with violence, domination and the persistence of patriarchy in order to envision constructive and or just governance of the public sphere. This, as she suggest, is due to the observation that, oftentimes, African women or their scholarship tend to be relegated to the domestic. Focusing on African women's agency in relation to the governance of the public sphere is necessary in order to unravel the complex political configurations and cultural politics of the nation state "imbued by power imbalance shaped by race, class and gender."<sup>2</sup> It is an important epistemological task that aims at understanding how lived experiences and knowledge, shaped by the intersections of race, gender, place of origin, sexuality, ability/ disability and social location impact on women's public presence, participation and agency in the political, social, economic and or educational spheres. Being attentive to the gender and power in the governance of the publics reclaims African women's agency in milieu where African women "have long been constructed as objects of study."<sup>3</sup>

Mamdani<sup>4</sup>, Mama<sup>5</sup>, and Olukoshi<sup>6</sup> point out that any constructive attempt to understand the governance of the public sphere in Africa has to take into consideration the complex experiences of the formation of the nation state in Africa in order to understand and envision a creative, balanced and contextually relevant governance of the public sphere. This is due to the fact that, the emergence of the state in Africa and its attendant governance systems developed out of a history of conquest and in the context of a bifurcated colonial state whose legacies still largely remain evident in the postcolonial state. Because colonial power faced the problem of legitimacy, it reformed the pre-colonial governance systems and instituted 'direct and indirect rule as the basis for consolidating its hegemonic rule in the African colonies.'<sup>7</sup> Put differently, the bifurcations of the colonial state, which included among other things, racialised, ethnicised and gendered citizenship still mark the governance systems of African states today. Understanding the historical and geo-spatial genealogy and/ or the

---

<sup>2</sup> Kwok, Puilan. *Unbinding our Feet: Saving Brown Women and Feminist Religious Discourse* 2002: 65.

<sup>3</sup> Salo, Elaine. *Making Our Voices Heard: The Politics of Writing and Publication in African Higher Education* in <[http:// www.gwsafrica.org](http://www.gwsafrica.org)>

<sup>4</sup> Mahmood, Mamdani. Preliminary Thoughts on the Congo Crisis 1999:55 in *Social Text*, 60, vol 17 no 3, fall 1999: 53-62

<sup>5</sup> Mama, Amina. *Subjects: Gender and Power in African Contexts* 2001:7

<sup>6</sup> Olukoshi, Adebayo, *Governance in West Africa: A Survey of Trends* 2006:5 also in <http://www.Codesria.com> Accessed on August 20<sup>th</sup> 2008

<sup>7</sup> Mamdani, *Preliminary Thoughts on Congo* 1999:54

formation of the nation states is fundamental to understanding the nature, struggles of the state and governance systems today.

As Mamdani points out, the colonial state reorganised colonial power into two distinct authorities which used different legal regimes, “one civic and the other ethnic.”<sup>8</sup> In such a context, civil power resided in the state while ethnic power lay in the governance of the state through native authority tasked with the administration and implementation of customary law. The distinction between civic and ethnic power, suggests Mamdani was accompanied by ethnically differentiated customary laws for each ethnic group. Customary law distinguished between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples, and based its governance and the distribution of socio-economic resources, especially land on these distinctions. A clear example that attests to this theory is the history of conquest of the South Africa for example. Apartheid government distinguished between the various ethnic groups and delimited their access to socio-political and economic rights, as well as their geo-political and spatial location. It created a racial hierarchy of settler people which placed caucasians on top and people of other descent, for example, from Asia at the bottom. South African citizenship was not only ethnicised through the creation of Bantustans, but a ranking system was put to order or position them within society. These bifurcations resulted in a situation where many African countries, a person could be a civic citizen and not everyone had ethnic citizenship.

Olukoshi stresses the point that the colonial state reconstituted the governance of most pre-colonial states through the delimitation process (drawing of maps) and “reconstituting many of them according to the imperialist calculations of opportunity and advantage.”<sup>9</sup> This meant that,

Colonial governance was, in spite of various ideological justification proffered for the European intervention, a project that was by definition replete with internal contradictions [which entailed]... the denial of the basic rights of the populace and the imposition of a systematic regime of racialised exploitation and exclusions on them that found its ramifications in the coercive nature of the colonial state system.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 1999:54

<sup>9</sup> Olukoshi, Adebayo Governance in West Africa: A Survey of Trends 2006:4 also in <http://www.Codesria.com>  
Accessed on August 20<sup>th</sup> 2008

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, 2006:4

Mama, further elaborates on these by highlighting the gendered binaries which were involved in the configuration of the nation state and governance by the colonial project stating that majority of Africans, if not all, generally know that women were and still continue to be pervasively governed by the dictates of patriarchal kyriarchy<sup>11</sup> to the extent that they are “less able to realise the rights afforded to citizens-in-general through the trope of civil law.”<sup>12</sup> This has implied for many African women that citizenship and governance are largely based on and draw from the colonial practice and its legacies. These legacies, which Mcfadden rightly points out, “attached the status of a citizen to whiteness, maleness and to the ownership of property.”<sup>13</sup>

This is most obviously so where customary laws still afford women only minor status , and customary practices can be said to violate the physical and emotional integrity of women. What this means is that if the state is indeed bifurcated along tropes of civil and customary legal systems, the implementation of both are also deeply gendered.<sup>14</sup>

The marginalisation and or discounting of African women as agents and full citizens according to Mama has led African feminist/ women’s scholars and activists, particularly feminist jurisprudence to involve itself in activism aimed at seeking and enabling more gender justice and equitable access to civil law as integral parts of just-governance. It has, as well include the use of other vehicles of African women’s agency including “the protection of women’s rights and the realisation of their citizenship.”<sup>15</sup>

A concurrent point highlighting that women have not always been treated as equal citizens, and that they have been marginalised from governance and decision-making processes of their countries even after independence is also underscore by White, a feminist scholar from Algeria reflecting on the post independence state. She suggests that unlike many African men,

---

<sup>11</sup> Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza coined the neologism patriarchal Kyriarchy in theological scholarship to describe the notion that patriarchy is not only hierarchical organisation that values men and devalues women, but it is a socio-political and historical hierarchy based on Lordship and domination of men. Patriarchal Kyriarchy therefore refers to the rule of the emperor, master, Lord, father over his subordinates. It also equates the perceived ‘subordinates’ as the property of the master/ lord, man or father. An example that demonstrates or clarifies patriarchal kyriarchy for example, is the practices of human trafficking for sexual exploitation with or without consent, or the systematic erosion of the dignity of people which occurs with the commoditisation of all life, based on control, dominion of all life and of women.

<sup>12</sup> Amina Mama, *Subjects: Gender and Power in African Contexts* 2001:7

<sup>13</sup> Mcfadden, Patricia. *Becoming Post Colonial African Women Changing the Meaning of Citizenship* 2005:4

<sup>14</sup> Mama, Amina. *Challenging Subjects: Gender and Power in African Context* 2001:6

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 2001:7

many African women generally lack the opportunities to express and act on their gender-specific grievances. They are generally inhibited from governance structures because they are often treated as legal minors in many of their communities. Their related absences from an early state, including in the decisions regarding the leadership of revolutionary organisations and or states, particularly with regard to “their absence from the circle of intellectuals drafting positions papers and advising organisations on policies have continued to exclude them and their insights from the public space.”<sup>16</sup>

African women’s exclusion from the public space and from in informing governance policies of their countries has also been perpetuated through the centralisation of masculinities and the entrenched patriarchal- kyriarchy within some customary elements of governance. These, she suggests, can be seen as elements that continue to disable and inhibit African women from active citizenship, access and participation in the public, politics and economy in the post colonial state. For example, she states,

With militarised masculinities intact—and in public office—most state sideline women’s issues after the revolution, retain discriminatory customary law as part of their legal systems, support cosmetic legislative reforms that are not enforced, facilitate changes in the electoral systems that increase only a token number of female parliamentarians, reward a few high ranking women combatants in government positions, and engage in other symbolic gesture that do not essentially change structural gender inequities.<sup>17</sup>

The liberation struggles of many African societies which gained independence before South Africa, argues McClintock, made it clear for many South African women, even before the dissolution of apartheid, to be aware that the emancipation of women was not always a clear or direct product of national or liberation struggles for democracy. This therefore compelled women and their allies to mobilise themselves in order that such inequities or injustices are addressed by “the mass democratic movement and the society as a whole.”<sup>18</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> White, Aronette. *All The Men Are Fighting for Freedom; All the Women Are Mourning Their Men but Some of Us Carried Guns: Fanon’s Psychological Perspectives On War And African Women Combatants*. Boston Consortium On Gender, Security and Human Rights, Working Paper No 106 (unpublished). 2003:13

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, 2003:23

<sup>18</sup> McClintock quoted in McEwan 2000: 5

Thenjiwe Mtintso, the former deputy general secretary of the African National Congress (ANC) has also reiterated the importance of the agency and thus the participation of women in the public sphere and governance. She has argued that women's participation ought not to be limited to the domestic and or private space only, but it ought to become a constitutive and critical aspect of inclusive democracy, citizenship and governance, stating,

Without gender equality in politics, there is not democracy. Only when political parties and national legislation are decided upon jointly by men and women with regard to the interest and aptitude for both halves of the population, will democracy in southern African assume true and dynamic significance.<sup>19</sup>

In order for the public sphere to become vibrant, dynamic, balanced and to seriously attend to the needs and aspirations of citizens, the state structures, publics and governance ought to allow and not inhibit women's decision making process within the government and public space. It equally requires that gender justice and equality are embedded in the public processes, institutions and systems.

It is important to note therefore, in the light of the fact that the African nation-state, emerged as a bifurcated state, in which the bifurcations have to a large extent, influences the shape of the public space, citizenship and governance, it is also equally important to identify and understand how these have influences governance today and what are some of the current challenges to governance of the public sphere so that we can imagine, just and life-affirming governance for the public, humanity and ecological wellbeing today. Olukoshi, in a report developed for the evaluation of governance in west Africa in 2006 suggests that the challenges to governance are not only limited to the colonial and post-colonial bifurcations, they are also exacerbated by a number of factors which require radical and constructive formulation of interventions. These challenges include among others, the following areas;

a) the persistence of the political systems marked by the 'hegemony of the ruling party' where virtually in most countries in Africa, the ruling party is so strong and over-whelming such that, it ends up coo-opting or subverting key opposition sometimes through the use of persuasion, and or direct and indirect violent harassment; b) the challenges of the executive

---

<sup>19</sup> Mtintso, Thenjiwe quoted in McEwan, Engendering Citizenship 2000: 6

and legislature, particularly the principles of the separation of powers central to the consolidation of democratisation. In many countries for example, the legislature as an autonomous system that has exercise oversight role, encountered many problems; c) the prevalence of political violence, and insecurity marked by numerous incidences of political conflicts; d) the contradictions of military and Civil relations; e) the contradictions within Policing and Security systems, which are crucial to governance and yet fraught with problems including extortionary practices and abuses of power; f) Judicial Independence is also one of the governance areas that require urgent attention as one of the pillars of governance of the state; g) Media; h) the challenges of centralisation and decentralisation of governance; i) the politics of succession; j) the electoral system; k) deficits in social citizenship and social injustices—particularly poverty and Peace.<sup>20</sup>

Although these are not fully exhaustive of all the challenges of governance issues related to the publics in Africa, they summarise some of the most evident and pressing challenges in the political sphere in Africa. They urgently point to the need for citizen's agency in transforming governance and influencing governance of the publics for a better life for African's peoples and their ecologies.

It is in the light of the above that a discussion on governance, the public sphere, African women's agency and the quest for justice is essential. An assertion of African/ black women's agency in this context (described in the above) runs the risks being associated to the very complex and systemic injustices they seek to contest and or overcome. It is a risk worth taking as it a component of the quest for justice in relationality and the production of knowledge in Africa. It is aimed at constructive and sustained effort to untangle the complex relations of oppression and injustices which have marked the public sphere and governance. This is particularly true to the context of South Africa where the legacies of apartheid oppression and expressions of domestic patriarchal kyriarchies are still evident. Participating in social structures and or influencing the governance of the public sphere constitute some of the structural features of active political agency. It involves among others, the right to participate in decision making process in social, economic, cultural, political and ecological

---

<sup>20</sup> The listed challenges to governance in Africa, are adapted / gleaned or drawn from Olukoshi, Adebayo Governance in West Africa: A Survey of Trends 2006:8-17 also in <http://www.Codesria.com> Accessed on August 20<sup>th</sup> 2008



life. It is a component of justice in which people utilise their agency or subjectivities within and for social citizenship, public participation and governance.

### **On Governance, the Public Sphere and African Women's Agency**

The articulation and assertion of African/ black women's agency and their naming of their marginalization in political power are counter-cultural to mainstream human sciences, particularly theological and ethical epistemologies which tend to make these absences normative. Centering research on agency of African women is sometimes an ambiguous process which is fraught with academic risks of isolation and or censure. This is because scholarship seeking to engender justice for all, by African women can easily be reduced to oppositional attack on white women and or African male academe who write about black women. It can also be taken as a dismissal of analyses of processes and generic discourses that have sought to present a common front about women's experiences in sexist and patriarchal cultures. It can also be seen as though it is an attempt to separate African women from common African experiences of oppression and dispossession during colonialism and or Apartheid, or in the context of globalisation, particularly its current form with their attendant abuses and marginalisation of Africans/ blacks. The discussion of governance associated with the affirmation of African women's agency and voice is therefore important in order to appreciate how governance can be promoted in fractured and bifurcated public sphere and how governance and women's agency can influence 'good/ just governance that facilitates the wellbeing and fullness of life for all citizens in the public sphere.

The public sphere is used in this essay to describe a variety of spaces and or expressions of governance, citizenship and or politics in which people express their ontologies and insights to express themselves, formulate opinions and collaborate on processes related to their society, community and or the world. The state or government are central to the concept of the public sphere as it is upon the sphere of governance or the creation of democratic spaces that democratic societies emerge, and are maintained or nurtured. Where the freedom of citizens is limited, the public space ability to manage governance, and or the agency of people gets limited.

The governance of the public sphere is necessary for the promotion of more effective and equitable public spheres within the nation state in Africa and within the world, including in

the provision of frameworks for the just administration and implementation of justice, including in among others, the following: a) the advance, provision and distribution of opportunities, b) vibrant democratic processes, c) social justice, e) economic development, g) the care of the earth/ or universe for ecological wellbeing; f) the development and creation of equitable and effective public spheres; g) legitimate, free and just governance which attends to supporting citizens, information, h) the assistance and or preferential option for the poor and marginalised, unheard and or muted voices, including those of African women; i) the development and support of deliberative systems/ structures which enable life (not collapsing social systems that condemn and dispose of African life; j) the promotion of just and fair interactions between the powerless and the powerful, poor and rich and bifurcated citizens, and the development, recognition and engagement of broad citizenship in which civil society, government and the private sectors, as well as diverse members of society work for the betterment of society and are allowed thrive.

In order to promote a vibrant, transformative public sphere where the active agency of citizens is encouraged, creative, just and life-affirming governance must be developed and or nurtured. Governance generally refers to the exercise of political power to manage the affairs of the state. In its broader sense, it entails numerous processes relating to leadership, such as the formulation of laws, policy making, the protection of the rights of people, the relations among and between the public, private and civil sectors, as well as transparency, accountability, in the exercise of power. Governance can thus stretch beyond the parameters of the nation-state, to include among others, international / global relations.

It is important to note that whilst some scholars want to limit the discussion of governance only in relation to the state, other scholars have tended to use its more expansive explanation, which includes the distribution of leadership or exercise of political power within and outside the government. For instance, some scholars suggest that, the context of economic globalisation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century has to a large extent pressed human and social scientists to include governance to international and multilateral relations, and transnational discourses where political power is interrogated broadly. This, it is argued, has come about because many African governments are now being pushed by the coercive, domineering and imperialistic forces of globalisation to transfer policy functions and political authority to supranational entities (for example, the United Nations (UN), financial institutions such as the world bank (WB) and international monetary fund (IMF) and multilateral organisations such

as the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and or private consultants offered by these institutions.

In the context of economic globalisation, African governments are not only pressured by the 'empire' to devolve some powers to the powerful multilateral institutions such as the WTO, WB and the IMF, they are also being squeezed/ pushed to hand some responsibilities sideward, to the private sector and some not-for-profit actors through neoliberal socio-economic reforms, especially liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation, etc. For instance, many African countries, including South Africa, have been heavily coerced to embark on adjustment measures, including structural adjustment programmes of the 1980, the poverty reduction strategies, and lately, through the NEPAD processes, liberalisation and other measures to adopt governance strategies that are prescribed. Sometimes these coercive conditionalities are used to enforce implementation of neoliberal economic measures even without regard for their failures in Africa. The pressure to liberalise many responsibilities which have in the past been understood to be central to the public role of governments, has to a large extent posed its own challenges to many African countries.

When the governance of the common good is removed from the nation-state, and rests to a large extent on private entities, it creates governance contradictions for the publics that are fraught to challenges, including the pervasive marginalisation of the poor, those who fall through the cracks of life, and women in particular, as stated in the above. In contexts where the humanity, dignity and wellbeing of citizens are undermined, whether by the abrogation of responsibilities, privatisation of state functions, or the ascent of economic ideology that commercialises all life, then political agency and the quest for justice for all, and for women in particular has to be encouraged or propelled.

Agency, whether in the social, political, ecological, and economic spheres, is generally understood to entail some aspect of moral consciousness, awareness that 'something is wrong somewhere and it has to be transformed'. Moral agency refers to a "state or capability to determine oneself and one's own action in an individual, collective, or otherwise social sense."<sup>21</sup> It describes the condition of being present or active in community despite any system which disregards or excludes this ability. It also entails the performance of socio-

---

<sup>21</sup> Ortiz, Lisa, M. *Encyclopaedia of Postmodernism* (2000)6

political, religious, ideological, philosophical selfhood or being. As a conscious state of activity or being, agency suggests a distinct yet culturally variable impulse toward self-consciousness with the intention to subvert or undermine socio-economic, ecological, gender and or political oppression. Agency is “power or potentiality for action.”<sup>22</sup>

In ethics, agency describes the capacity for the transformation of selves in, through, and for individuals, communities, society and or social structures that govern their lives. Young defines social structures as multi-dimensional space of differentiated social positions, systems, institutions, and or processes amongst people in which services, life and or population is distributed. “The social associations of people provide both the criterion for distinguishing social positions and the connections among them that make them elements of a single social structure.”<sup>23</sup> A further point she makes is that,

Social structures are not merely the actions and interactions of differently positioned persons, drawing on the rules and resources the structures offer, take place on the basis of past actions whose collective effects mark the physical conditions of action; these actions and interactions also often have future effects beyond the immediate purposes and intentions of the actors.<sup>24</sup>

Agency is influenced by the ontologies of people as rationale and feeling human beings. It also propelled by human being’s yearning or making decisions that affect their lives and or surroundings. In some situations though, agency arises out of the anger against pervasive injustices and power relations within a community, society and *politia* which generally marginalise women and others from access to the resources, processes, institutions and structures that enable life in its fullness. In other words, African women’s agency is sometimes spurred by their refusal or resistance against structural injustices. Young suggests that

Structural injustices exist when social processes put large categories of people under a systematic threat of domination or deprivation of the means to develop and exercise their capacities, at the same time these processes enable others to dominate or have a

---

<sup>22</sup> Ryan, A. Maura “Agency” Dictionary of Feminist theologies edited Russell, L., M., and Clarkson, Shannon, J. (Kentucky, Westminster John Knox Press 1996)4

<sup>23</sup> Young, Iris. Marion Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model 2006:112

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 2006:114

wide range of opportunities for development and exercising their capacities. Structural injustices are a kind of moral wrong distinct from the wrongful action of an individual agent or the wilfully repressive policies of a state.<sup>25</sup>

Resistance to oppression and political agency by African women can be attributed to their dissatisfaction with the passive roles that are assigned them in scholarship, public spheres and life. It is the expression of countercultures and the pursuance of alternatives to the dominant conceptualisation of governance of publics and theories of citizenship based on the marginalisation, oppression, exploitation and injustices. It prompts women to explore and manifest their potentialities, epistemological insights and being in order to ensure that formal and informal publics, as well as knowledge production are productive. It is underscored by among other things, the principles of justice and the understanding that our African women's identities are never outside social structures and thus require them to continually "interrogate political practices for exclusions and omissions that may be obscured by our social location."<sup>26</sup> This implies therefore, that agency is a component of active citizenship which stretches beyond civic duties and human relations, but is inclusive of right relations with the web-of-life and is inextricably bound to what it means to be human.

A constructive understanding of moral agency therefore in the context of South Africa and Africa involves resistance to discourses and praxis that undermine others, no matter whether these are based on social location, place of origin, gender, sexuality, race, ability and economic status. Such an approach locates strategies of subversive representation which "challenge norms and conventions by showing how their constitution and organization are social and hegemonic, rather than neutral or natural."<sup>27</sup> Agency is a critical component of the pursuance of justice whenever and wherever is not done.

The quest for justice marked by active agency involves among other things, the development of a constructive cultures of creative justice and resistance to oppression. It does not simply consign those pursuing justice to adaptive mechanisms but embodies creative impulses and praxes which counter life-denying and oppressive production and reproduction, and value

---

<sup>25</sup> Young, Iris. Marion Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model 2006:114

<sup>26</sup> Applebaum, Barbara., "Social Justice Education, Moral Agency and the subject of resistance", Educational Theory 54, no 1(February 2004),59-72

<sup>27</sup> Applebaum, Barbara., "Social Justice Education, Moral Agency and the subject of resistance", Educational Theory 54, no 1(February 2004),59-72

systems. In essence, agency is the critical and corrective knowledge production and ontological manifestations, critical of the oppressors as well as of the internalisation of oppression that Fanon referred to as “*epidermalisation of inferiority*,”<sup>28</sup> by those who are marginalised, silenced or limited from being and or utilising their talents and knowledge. Agency is thus akin to what the Kenyan feminist linguist and theologian, Kanyoro describes as the ‘active quests for justice.’

An often cited example in South Africa, which exposes agency in the public sphere especially relating to the constitution and governance of the state, relates to the attempts by women, and feminist activists and scholars to claim space, mobilise and campaign for national liberation, and mainstreaming if gender discourse for transitional arrangements for the democratisation process. The pursuance for inclusive governance and justice, including gender justice, relates to an incident that took place, during negotiations for democratisation, known to many South Africans, is told by McEwan, She writes,

In March 1993, in a little publicised event, ANC women’s activists stormed the negotiations and blocked the talks until women were allowed into the negotiations. Amazingly, all 26 parties accepted a gender quota, a decision that, as Seidmen notes, reflected the extent to women on all sides had already raised issues of gender and representation in the construction of democracy. The result was that one in every tow person team of negotiators had to be a woman, which meant that women constituted half of the negotiators new constitution.”<sup>29</sup>

The agency of women, and their confrontation of the sexist, patriarchal exclusion, not only ensured that the constitution was gendered, it also propelled the different political parties that were involved in the negotiation processes, to ensure guarantees against gender and sex discrimination to be inscribed in the constitutions, albeit, with the resistance of the traditional leaders, especially, council of traditional leaders in South Africa (CONTRALESA). Equally important, is the fact that it forced the political parties represented in the negotiations to constitute the representation in ways that assured gender equality and justice.

---

<sup>28</sup> Frantz Fanon quoted in White, M. A. All The Men Are Fighting For Freedom, All The Women Are Mourning Thier Men, But Some Of Us Carried Guns: Fanon’s Psychological Perspectives On War And African Women Combatants Working Paper No 106 Unpublished (2002-3)3

<sup>29</sup> McEwan , Cheryl, Engendering Citizenship : Gendered Spaces of Democracy in South Africa 2000:6

Reflections on the agency of African women, if they are to be transformational, ought not to only be limited to the public as the private patriarchal-kyriarchies, to a large extent, often limit women's access or participation in the public. For example, if women want to access the public space but are exposed to high levels of violence in the home or locale, they may find it impossible or uncomfortable to speak out, hence the feminist affirmation that, the domestic impacts on the public and vice-versa.

Precisely because the 'personal is political', it is equally important to examine those aspects of life, which inhibit women's agency, and thus contributes to the systematic marginalisation from the public sphere. An examination of black women's agency in the private and public spheres calls for women to be seen, understood and treated as whole people, who are diverse, and in their actual complexities as individuals, human beings, rather than as a monolithic, homogenous and undifferentiated or one of those problematic but familiar stereotypes. Reflecting on African women's agency not only asserts their full humanity, it also promotes scholarship that is not complicit to unjust representations or relationships. Keeping silent would result in the negation of African women's responsibility to proclaim justice and to resist collusion with knowledge systems and ideologies which undermine our ontology and sacredness. For the reason that stereotypical representations and traditional conceptions of moral agency can "distort the way people interpret the basis of social inequality and what they choose to attend to take seriously, remember and act upon,"<sup>30</sup> it is imperative to demonstrate black women's agency where such agency has been denied, especially in contexts intransigently committed to their trivialization.

The next section in this essay attempts to evaluate the ways in which African women in particular are depicted, represented and or perceived in the dominant discourses, in ethics, publics or governance in South Africa and Africa. The rationale behind this is to demonstrate the intersections of public and private experiences of marginalisation and agency in order to demonstrate that these concepts are not always as clearly demarcated in lived contexts and they may be, when they are theoretically conceptualised.

### **Representations of African/Black Women's Agency in the Dominant Human Sciences Discourses in/ about Arica**

---

<sup>30</sup> Applebaum, Barbara., "Social Justice Education, Moral Agency and the subject of resistance", *Educational Theory* 54, no 1(February 2004),59-72

The dominant conceptions of democracy and or citizenship have tended to separate the private and public. The public sphere is often generally perceived as the sphere of justice where everyone is treated equally and the private is often understood as the sphere of the family where citizens live out their personal ideas and or expression their notions of what it means to be human. This contrast between the public, private and or domestic, to a large extent, sometimes negates the fact that, in real life, the rape of a woman in a home, for example, is a public or governance issue that has to be addressed by the juridical system, which is public. Put differently or using another example, the violation of the rights of a child through trafficking for example, or being subjected to under-age labour, is or ought to be a concern for the public. These examples, whilst not detailed, demonstrate the reason why the private and public spheres must be held together like a mosaic is differentiated and yet remains connected. The notion of democracy and or citizenship separating the public and private as described in most social sciences literature, ought to continually become one of the focus of feminist criticism. This is because, in spite of claims to justice and fairness for all people, many women are still relegated to sub-human status and or appear to be second class citizens in the countries and in much of the world. This criticism propels the quest for multi-dimensional theories of governance, citizenship and agency which include social citizenship, civil, political *et cetera* articulated by a number of feminist theorists.

Despite the active initiatives and agency by African women in the private and public as demonstrated to some extent in the above, and their quest for justice and for the fullness of life in their lives in Africa and South Africa, the dominant human sciences discourses have tended to generally negate, limit and or discount their agency. This has been promoted through a depiction of African women, in male-stream and white scholarship which presents African women's agency as nominal, lacking, absent or sometimes dependent on white women or black men. As agents socialized in an age of apartheid, post-apartheid/ colonial period, (late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century) it would be impossible for African/ black women to be unaware of, or be influenced by exclusionary racist, colonial, and sexist discourses.

An urgent concern for the social sciences in the context where the agency of African/ black women's is discounted, or presented as lacking, absent, nominal and or inadequate, the urgent question is to ask how and what strategies would be viable to allow African women (as well as others who are on the underside of production of knowledge and publics) who have



previously been silenced or silent? How might their issues be exposed and how might they be encouraged to claim their voices, agency, spaces and publics in order to move from repression, silence and obscurity to active participants in life and public? How do human sciences and or research sites enable marginalised groups, or those whose voices have been muted for long to affirm and assert their full ontologies, creative knowledge? How might these be enabled and sustained? It would seem to me that a response to these questions would necessitate processes and openness to unearth the voices that remain neglected, marginalized or outright forgotten, such as the voices of African women, particularly “black women’s voices and ways they have and continue to shape their subjectivities.”<sup>31</sup>

Carby notes that black women’s critique of sexist or racist knowledge has not only involved us in coming to terms with the absences of black women in human sciences knowledge production and or political spheres, but it has also made African/ black women “outraged by the ways in which it [sexist, racist and colonial discourses] has made us visible, when it has chosen to see us.”<sup>32</sup> The tendency is often to trundle African women onto the stage “only to perform as victims of barbarous, primitive practices and barbarous primitive societies.”<sup>33</sup> This is often entailed in depicting or representations of black women in the works of mainstream and male-stream social sciences scholarship in direct or indirect ways, the views that, black women are unable to account for the changes in their lives, they are dependent on black men and white women for their liberation; they are survivalist; servant like situations; etc.

An example that can be used to demonstrate the above, is reflected by an article dealing with women’s development and theology “Gender, Development and Faith.”, In this article, Haddad a feminist theologian in south Africa comments on the results of her empirical research and interactions with black women she was researching in Nxamalala in Vulindlela, Kwazulu Natal, South Africa. She writes that women in Vulindlela “literally attribute their survival to God. In times of dire need they are unable to ‘explain’ how they managed to provide meals for their children or to pay their school fees. For them, God provides these

---

<sup>31</sup> Motsemme, Nthabiseng Gendered Experiences of Blackness in Post-Apartheid South Africa August 2002 <<http://www.wiserweb.wits.ac.za>

<sup>32</sup> Carby, V. Hazel. White woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood. (Routledge 1997) 45

<sup>33</sup> Carby, V. Hazel., White woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood. (Routledge 1997) 50

material needs.”<sup>34</sup> In addition she remarks that black women are survivalists who often live their lives without fully accounting what and how their lives are sustained. For instance, she records that, one of the women shared that, “my husband passed on in 1988, I worked and I lost a job but God always gives me food to eat... I am at home, I’m not working... here are the children they go to school, but God always help me to get food to eat ... Janet Nzimande, 27 may 1999, Nxamalala;”<sup>35</sup>

One other view that is made in support of, or in limiting black women’s agency in knowledge production and or full participation in citizenship is the idea that African women are dependent, irresolute people who are unable to choose whether to be in solidarity with other feminists in the struggle against patriarchy and sexism or whether to align themselves with black men because of a shared history of racism. In their study resources book on *Women, Society and Church* Kretzschmar and van Schalkwyk make the following comment regarding black/ African women;

Black women are often faced with the difficult choice of either seeking support from white women (gender loyalties) to overcome oppression, or seeking the support of black men (racial loyalties). If black women take sides with white women, their men accuse them of ‘diluting the struggle’, or ‘betraying the cause’. If they take sides with black men, they are faced with the question whether a patriarchal society will release power into the hands of women.<sup>36</sup>

Kretzschmar and Van Schalkwyk in a covert manner present black women as indecisive and unable to liberate themselves.

They further ask,

[S]hould black women in South Africa, for example, seek strategic alliances with white, “coloured” and Indian women, and jointly expose and resist gender

---

<sup>34</sup> Haddad, B. “Gender, Development, and Faith The church and women’s struggle to survive”, *Missionalia* 31:3 (2003),441

<sup>35</sup> Haddad, B. “Gender, Development, and Faith The church and women’s struggle to survive”, *Missionalia* 31:3 (2003),441-442

<sup>36</sup> Kretzschmar, Louise, and van Schalkwyk, *Women, Society and Church*”(University of South Africa 2003)36

discrimination and abuse, or should they look to black African men to grant them full equality, both in law and practice?”<sup>37</sup>

Subsuming the experiences of black or African women within the works of African male-stream scholarship under the guise of generic language use such as ‘man’ to refer to human beings and in the works of white women’s or feminist scholarship continues to perpetuates their marginalisation from the public’s, and a perpetual domestication of their works, thoughts and being. In addition, it creates an impression that black women are not moral agents on their own.

Apart from presenting black/ African women’s agency as nominal, dependent, inactive in their transformation or subjectivities, dominant human sciences discourses present black women’s places as limited to the domestic, private and thus not publics. Carby for example states that “ideologies of black female domesticity and motherhood have been constructed through their employment (chattel position) as domestics and surrogate mothers to white families rather than in relation to their own families.”<sup>38</sup> In South Africa, for example, limiting of the agency of African women to the domestic sphere white settler women to domestic governance are evident in the lingering image of an “iconic figure of the white madam and her garden boys and the maids [which] remains a forceful image in both the past and the present.”<sup>39</sup>

One other prism in which black women are portrayed is through the imagery of the suffering matriarch. Motsemme observes for example that, during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hereafter the TRC, the TRC privileged African/ black women’s experiences as victims. This, she asserts, was apparent in Antjie Krog’s book *Country of my skull*. In this book, Krog declared that “she was in awe of this African woman who cares endlessly... sitting behind the microphone, dressed in a beret or kopdoek and her Sunday best, everybody recognizes her. Truth has become the woman. Her voice distorted behind her rough hand has undermined man as the source of truth yet nobody knows her.”<sup>40</sup>

---

<sup>37</sup> Kretzschmar, Louise, and van Schalkwyk, Women, Society and Church”(University of South Africa 2003)35

<sup>38</sup> Carby, V. Hazel. White woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood. (Routledge 1997) 47

<sup>39</sup> Motsemme, Nthabiseng Gendered Experiences of Blackness in Post-Apartheid South Africa August 2002 <<http://www.wiserweb.wits.ac.za>

<sup>40</sup> Krog quoted in Motsemme, Nthabiseng Gendered Experiences of Blackness in Post-Apartheid South Africa August 2002 <<http://www.wiserweb.wits.ac.za>

In summary, stereotypical and or the negation of African women's agency by the dominant human sciences discourses contribute in the following: a) the reinforcement of the gross stereotypes which negate their vitality, veracity and the diverse experiences they go through in life; b) it encourages static understandings of African women's experiences and subjectivities; c) distort and entrench the negative imagery of black woman; d) obscures the acknowledgement of the complicity of those in the mainstream to process of injustices and oppression; e) and disables social sciences scholarship from being engaged and organic, in the sense of addressing the silences and marginal discourses of those who have systematically dehumanized and or relegated to the underside of knowledge construction and praxes and public.

### **Addressing the Negative Representations of African Women's Agency**

Heldke suggests that writers who are over-privileged, such as white feminist theological or ethical scholars in South Africa and African males ought to do more than read and report on the ideas of others. They should unlearn "the belief and value systems that make them feel as though their over-privileged positions are 'natural and inevitable'"<sup>41</sup> This is so that they can begin to deal with their complicity with oppression. Evading an evaluation of privilege, by negating or discounting the agency of black women are not constructive and do not contribute to the pursuance of justice in production of knowledge and the wellbeing of humanity as they are they are grounded in powerful ideological structures that ensure that people, those who have no prejudice or intention to harm "are innocent of any responsibility in sustaining systems that constitute and marginalize others."<sup>42</sup> This, she argues, is important for cultivating agency of solidarity with those who live and are denied their fullness by injustices and oppression in the quest for justice. It is also important for the promotion of radical African feminism which is predicated on "opposition to all forms of oppression including class exploitation, racism, patriarchy, homophobia, anti-immigration prejudice, and imperialism"<sup>43</sup> This is because "gendered patterns of exclusions interact with other axes of social division

---

<sup>41</sup> Lisa , Heldke., *On Being A Responsible Traitor: A Primer* (Routledge 1998) 93

<sup>42</sup> Applebaum, Barbara., "Social Justice Education, Moral Agency and the subject of resistance", *Educational Theory* 54, no 1(February 2004),59-72

<sup>43</sup> M. A. All The Men Are Fighting For Freedom, All The Women Are Mourning Their Men, But Some Of Us Carried Guns: Fanon's Psychological Perspectives On War And African Women Combatants Working Paper No 106 Unpublished 2002-3 Pg 6

such as class, race, disability, sexuality and age in ways which can be either multiplicative or contradictory, and which shift over time.”<sup>44</sup>

Motsemme argues that negative portrayals of black women which refuse to ground and contextualise their experiences of marginalisation by an oppressive system, and disconnects them by presenting them as individuals and or strong people who can endure suffering and be pitied, is destructive as it exploits “black female trauma and strategically uses it to construct a nation born out of tears.”<sup>45</sup> This portrayal, then spurs Motsemme to ask;

What kind of truth is a black woman’s truth? Is it one that is negotiated, consensual and collusive with patriarch or a women’s truth defined on its own terms? [She contends that]... Simply elevating the black women’s voice to truth fails to open the production of knowledge that deepens our understanding of her historical expulsion. Fixing and framing her feminine in this way fetishes and institutionalizes her marginality, once again eroding her agency.<sup>46</sup>

Stereotypical representations of African women in human sciences represent what Donaldson refers to as ‘epistemic violence’. According to Donaldson, “epistemic violence describes one of colonialism’s most insidious yet predictable effects: violating the fundamental way that a person or people know themselves.”<sup>47</sup> Discourses which stereotype ‘the other’ tend to function in similar way to colonising and colonial ideology which tends to “camouflage the violence and brutality of colonialism by sugar-coating it as a form of social mission.”<sup>48</sup> Epistemic violence which discounts and undermines the agency of black women, confronts those of us black women in human science, particularly ethics and theology, to rethink and reconstruct conceptions of black women’s moral agency in their diverse forms. They, according to Dube, remind us to be cognisant of the fact that “colonizing frameworks are still,

---

<sup>44</sup> Lister, Ruth *Citizenship: Toward a feminist synthesis* 1997:38

<sup>45</sup> Motsemme, Nthabiseng *Gendered Experiences of Blackness in Post-Apartheid South Africa* August 2002 <<http://www.wiserweb.wits.ac.za>

<sup>46</sup> Motsemme, Nthabiseng *Gendered Experiences of Blackness in Post-Apartheid South Africa* August 2002 <<http://www.wiserweb.wits.ac.za>

<sup>47</sup> Donaldson, L.E. *The Breast of Columbus: A political Anatomy of Postcolonialism and Feminist Religious discourse* (Routledge 2002)51

<sup>48</sup> Kwok, Puilan. *Unbinding our Feet: Saving Brown women and Feminist Religious Discourse* (Routledge 2002)62.

by and large, in place and unless one deliberately chooses to be a decolonizing feminist, one is likely to operate within these oppressive paradigms and consequently reproduce them.”<sup>49</sup>

As it has been stated before, the quest for justice and transformative epistemologies by African women occurs within the context of a ‘struggling states’ where citizenship is bifurcated. As Mamdani has rightly pointed out, in spite of the postcolonial states’ attempts to deracialised civic identity and promote civic citizenship which stopped recognising any difference based on race or place of origin, it continued to promote and “reproduce African identity as ethnic, and therefore resulting in a “double bifurcated citizenship; one civic the other ethnic.”<sup>50</sup>

While Mamdani makes a good point that enables us to understand the marginalisation of ‘the other’, based on ethnicity, place of origin and as well, on the promotion of dual governance, that is, civil and customary law in the formation of citizenship and or state, he remains silent about the marginalisation of women from citizenship. The silence regarding the marginalisation of women from citizenship through customary and civil law, with its consequences of bifurcation, ought to be attended to by feminist scholarship, as Mama, McFadden, Mtintso and others have stated in the earlier sections of this paper.

In South Africa, key institutions and organisations which have promoted the momentum of ensuring that gender justice in the public is evident, (at least in the law) are the commission on gender equality, the human rights commission. Although they are state sanctioned institutions, their work is collaboratory and strategic, and thus help in monitoring government politicise to ensure that the law is not contravened, either in the private spaces or public. Equally, there have emerged numerous advocacy and or policy making and monitoring organisations, such as the women’s budget or the people’s budget initiatives, which promote the flourishing and expansion of access to public spaces and or positions that women would otherwise be excluded or were excluded from, thus ensuring that meaningful participation and activism is understand as a component or process of extending and enriching democracy.

---

<sup>49</sup> Dube, Musa, W. *Postcoloniality, Feminist Spaces, and Religion*. (Routledge 2002)104 -105

<sup>50</sup> Mahmood, Mamdani *Preliminary Thoughts on the Congo Crisis 1999:55* in *social Text*, 60, vol 17 no 3, fall 1999 pg 53-62

In contexts which clearly undermine and marginalise the production process of knowledge and ontologies of black and or African women in the private and publics, what is the role of human sciences, what methodologies are resourceful in spurring political agency and citizenship that is enabling and relevant to the fullness of life for Africans, their communities and ecology? What must African women do? Ought African women or feminist scholarship to limit itself to naming the ills of racism and or patriarchal kyriarchy which undermine their production and how would they do this without being caricatured or limited into small epistemological boxes to production of knowledge on gender and race only? How do we create [a] worldview, a consciousness, an identity, a standpoint that ... not only... opposes dehumanization but a movement which enables creative, expansive self-actualization? Opposition is not enough... the process of becoming subjects emerges as one comes to understand how structures of domination work in one's own life, as one develops critical thinking and critical consciousness, as one invents new, alternative habits of being, and resists from that marginal space of difference inwardly defined."<sup>51</sup>

The task of African feminist scholarship, whether on governance, the public and or private spheres, ought to claim and affirm their agency. Freedom and justice are often never granted, or sold, but they are claimed through actions of constructive transformation, corrections, resistance, and subjectivity. In the section below, we identify some of the ways in which African women claim their subjectivity, actively through public and small scale advocacy claim the private and public spaces and contest ideologies, practices and knowledge systems that mute and or discount their being and their scholarship.

### **Claiming and Affirming African Women's Agency and Justice**

The discussions on the inherited discriminatory practices and or life-denying aspects of citizenship in the post-colonial state, there are some concerns by African feminist scholars that in spite of the formal political processes, including democracy or votes, their deficiency is that they do not to a large extent confer substantive political equality for all, including minorities and women. They tend to become rituals which continue to disproportionately contribute to vibrancy and viable social and or political sphere. African women recognise the

---

<sup>51</sup> Bell Hooks quoted by Espin, Oliva On knowing you are the Unknown: Women of Color constructing Psychology ( The Harrington Park Press 1995)129

importance of involvement at both the public, private, local and international levels in order to challenge the remoteness of formal and or public politics.

It is precisely because of the reasons of exclusion, silencing and oppression which have been outlined in the various sections of this paper that African feminist scholarship must problematise life-denying aspects of the abuses of the publics or political power and stereotyping of agency of African women in both male-stream scholarship or white women's scholarship in order to claim their own agency as scholars, citizens and full human beings. These include, expanding the sources of knowledge, creating knowledge systems attentive to the needs, experiences and lives of Africans, and of specific groups, including women, overcoming the divide of exclusion, and bifurcations based on gender, race, ethnicity, place of origin, social status, et cetera. By being active agents, African women provide their "self-expression" as subjects and not objects of history, as well as active players in the public and private spheres.

The notion of agency the majority of African feminists/ women is comprehensive, multi-layered exercise, and being, which "incorporates notions of rights and responsibilities as well as democratic accountability and political action, through both formal and informal channels."<sup>52</sup> An understanding of agency such as the above is able to overcome the polarisation or binaries of 'the public –private,' personal, political, formal and non-formal democracy, but as the interconnectedness of the web-of-life, in which private and public spheres influences and impact on each other. It includes historical, political and apolitical expressions of agency in public life, including politics, in ways that reflect the cultural, historical, contextual, ecological and contextual power dynamics and or issues between and amongst the or different social groups in society. Its creative potential does not only lie in contesting the limiting of African women's participation in the public sphere only, but in engenders active involvement constructive epistemologies, particularly social/ human sciences. It aims at correcting internalised notions of oppressions which are entangled in colonising or colonial knowledge production in Africa, by destabilising sexist and racist knowledge systems, as centres and sources of African publics and or knowledge and it claims space in order to promote multiple and diverse voices in existing scholarship on and about Africa and the world.

---

<sup>52</sup> Lister, Ruth *Citizenship: Toward a feminist synthesis* 1997:38



As rightly stated, African women are not just docile objects, they are creative and active in contesting life-denying contexts and social structures. One of the modes of being which is contested by their scholarship is the usurpation of the public space by the non-democratic, managerialist governances of the social and or public spaces and challenges the ascent of market supremacy over and above other values of life, such as wholeness and wellbeing, democratic participation, just and fair systems, processes and mechanisms of using and or sharing ecological resources and their benefits. Mama for example, states, it is important for African scholars to begin to analyse the depletion of the powers of the state. She states, “ the ‘market forces’ quietly deplete the sovereignty of the state and corporate cultures infuse the public and the civic spheres of organisation with the style and ethos of a well knowledge ‘global’ fast food outfit, applying the same management systems, procedures and practices.”<sup>53</sup>

African feminist or women’s scholarship should not be limited to the political sphere only, but must address the depletion of the state, alluded to in the above. This is due to the fact that, social goods such as education, health, housing et cetera, which are necessary for the wellbeing of African communities have tended to be compromised by the ascent of the market in the political economic planning of many countries. The result, according to brown is the restriction of access to the public or to the necessary resources that enable life. Instead, the public becomes the spaces or place for converting public goods and benefits to private hands, via a number of ways, including education.

The resistance of corrective discourse and praxes, such as reparations discourses, justice, community, wellbeing and ecological justice in liberal discourses, and the promotion of individualism, merit, which are undergirded by patronising ideologies, particularly by economic globalisation or the market system, it would seem to me, also restrict African women’s holistic access to the political sphere or justice. For instance brown makes the following claim in concurrence to the vies stated in the above, when he says,

The ideology of meritocracy has been superseded by the ideology of parentocracy; that is the market system of education dressed in the language of choice, freedom, competition and standards...[with] education increasingly based on the wealth and

---

<sup>53</sup> Mama, Amina Challenging Subjects: Gender and Power in African Context 2001:

wishes of parents rather than the individual abilities and efforts to students...the emphasis on the market reforms in education reflects the constricting or constraining of access to public participation based on positional competition or conflict in a climate of insecurity and competitive individualism and concern about educational standards and public access especially for the poor and women generally get delimited.<sup>54</sup>

This situation functions as, and produces hierarchically delimited social and or political spaces which limit and or apportion opportunities for access or space in the public sphere. This situation consequently leads to the usurpation of the public or market space by the social élites who already play by these rules, and who may not be willing to level the playing field.

The entrenched notion of the winner takes it all, that the ascent of the market in governance and public planning in African states have promoted, is also one of the forces of exclusions and marginalisation of women from the public which require more rigorous and elaborate alternatives. The conversion of the public and of politics to notions of private property is clearly observable in the forces of economic globalisation which generally make it difficult to promote social democratic alternatives to access and transformation of the public for the wellbeing of all citizens, including women.

The marketisation of the public space, and the commodification of education, social services *et cetera* which are concentrating and transferring the public to the private, are phenomena that have to be attended to or creatively addressed if women's agency and their quest for full life is to make sense in Africa. This is primarily because, in the context of South Africa where neo-liberal prescriptions on governance have been applied, the results have tended to exacerbate the exclusion of women, particularly the poor, from governance and the distribution of resources that enable life. McEwan rightly observes,

The harsh economic reality in South Africa could be considered a diminution of women's citizenship rights and anti-democratic, with some groups unable to participate beyond the ballot box. It could also be argued that unless these structural problems are addressed, democracy in South Africa will have little meaning to both men and women alike. There are hard facts to support such contentions. Unemployment in particular

---

<sup>54</sup> Brown, Phillip *The Globalisation of Positional Competition?* 2000: 643

hits women hardest. In 1997, 78 percent of African women and 65 percent of African men aged between 15 and 65 did not have a job.”<sup>55</sup>

African women have stated that citizenship and the public sphere encompass more than formal political rights, and thus the acknowledgement of barriers of socio-political, economic, religious exclusion with informally and formally exclude women, and certain groups should be tackled. In addition, they have not limited their agency to the call for gender justice only but substantive and broad notions and or expressions of justice in governance and in the public sphere. This is because justice is important in promoting non-exploitative, just and fair equitable sharing of resources and knowledge. It encourages the creation and promotion of the respect of the other. It is also central and essential to the sustenance of African communities and African ecologies.

Justice has variety of philosophical, social and ethical/ moral expressions. It refers to a multiplicity and plurality of values. It includes concepts such as, fairness, freedom, liberty, equality, community, wisdom, impartiality and egalitarian relationships, freedom of opportunity, equality of benefits and equality of participation in societal life. Justice can also refer to, a variety of forms of sharing and distributing the material and ecological resources within and between societies. As well, it may also include the ideas, procedures, mechanisms and strategies that are used by societies to allocate social goods to all members of society.

Within the discourses of ethics, justice, agency and governance to a large extent, are understood as interwoven or interrelated concepts which allow citizenry to thrive, whilst the nation-state protects their being and their ecology. This implies that, not only the promotion of social and political participation is important, but the emancipation and freedom of humanity to pursue life and express their being are assured. Equally related to justice and governance, is the recognition that the nation-state, citizenry and their flourishing are related to the flourishing of their ecologies/ earth. Put differently, the good governance of society will understand justice as an essential condition for the exercise of agency and freedom. Justice does not limit its concern with the present. It also concerns itself with the future and thus demonstrating an inter-generational threshold.

---

<sup>55</sup> McEwan , Cheryl, *Engendering Citizenship : Gendered Spaces of Democracy in South Africa* 2000:8

Just governance of the public in Africa facilitates constructive and harmonious relationships of citizenry and the state, civil society, and the private sector, and ensures that decisions about the meaning of life are aimed at the fullness of life for all, and not their marginalisation, oppression or injustice. When, for instance, communities and or life are threatened, justice seeks strategies, guidelines, principles and or value systems which set the legal and operational limits of life-denying activities, ideologies within the public. The intersection of governance of the public and the agency of women in the public, are justice concerns that entail philosophical and value systems including the moral claims that there is an overarching moral imperative for human beings to pursue what is “ecologically fitting and socially just, and to do so in such a way that each is supporting of each other”<sup>56</sup>

## Conclusion

African women’s scholarship encourages justice, multiplicity of voices and representations of women as “justice is undermined by domination not multiplicity.”<sup>57</sup> Moreover, active quests for change, justice and multiplicity and equality do not centre only on “the oppressive situations which we [African women] seek to escape, but that piece of the oppressor which is planted deep within each of us, and which knows only the oppressors tactics, the oppressor’s relationship.”<sup>58</sup> Precisely because race and gender representations are contradictory for many African women, they remain an existential, ontological, political and socio-economic thorn, in the socio-political landscape of Africa which must be tackled to advance constructive transformation. African “women do not want to be attached onto human sciences and the publics as “exotic sideshow,”<sup>59</sup> and or in tokenistic manner as colourful diversions to ‘real’ problems. Human sciences have to be transformed they are to produce life-giving, constructive and ecologically sound knowledge systems, that seek the wellbeing and common good for all Africans. This has the potential to take place if African women are known, treated and respected as treated “as equals in the task of building a new world for humanity. If we

---

<sup>56</sup> Bakken et al (1995: xvi).

<sup>57</sup> Flax, Jane. *Displacing Women : Toward an Ethics of Multiplicity* (Routledge 1998)153

<sup>58</sup> Lorde, Audre., *Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference*, in Frazer, E, Honsby, J., and Lovibond, S. (eds) *Ethics: A Feminist Reader* Oxford: Blackwell (1992) 220

<sup>59</sup> Aziz, Razia., *Feminism and the challenge of racism* ( Routledge 1997) 70

continue to be treated as objects when acknowledged at all, we will never be known by others and even perhaps by not even fully by ourselves.<sup>60</sup>

It is my contention that there is more to African women's agency and production of knowledge as well as public presence than it is accounted for in mainstream and male-stream dominant human sciences discourses. African women's academe and scholarship is thus one of the strategies and or tools of means to re-define and challenge mainstream cultural production. The act of speaking out and reclaiming our agency is the manifestation that frees the creativity and contributions of women in the private and publics. It is an active expression of rage against injustice, humiliation and dehumanization we have and continue to face. This, Kanyoro suggests, is important because "much of what has passed for theology from Africa for years was written either by men of all races or white women researchers...The first hand experience of African women is still untold"<sup>61</sup> and that which has been told is not always listened to fully. Justice and agency therefore are resourceful in acknowledging the helpful tension between nihilism and hope in an attempt to encourage emancipatory and transformative discourses which seek justice for all women and men in Africa.

Mcfadden beautifully conjures the importance of African feminist quest for justice in the human sciences, academe and political life when she says,

African women do not want to be pitied; they do not want to be studied and interrogated as victimized subjects whose agency is rarely acknowledged, let alone politically supported, at the global level. What afraid women have wanted for the past half century since independence is the opportunity to create their futures and to define their own since independence is the opportunity to craft their own futures to define their own destinies...cleaning up the mess of the past three hundred years of supremacist rule...can not be easy or pleasant task however it is an opportunity that women are making the most of, a movement that is changing their lives forever.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Espin, Oliva On knowing you are the Unknown: Women of Color constructing Psychology (The Harrington Park Press 1995)129

<sup>61</sup> Kanyoro, Musimbi, "African women's Quest for Justice: A Review of African Women's theology" Pacific Journal of theology no.1(1996)1

<sup>62</sup> Mcfadden 2005:17 quoted in white 2003:25

This has implied that, African women have spoken out, contested, acted in solidarity and spurred their agency as subjects and not objects. Subjectivity, has broadly been understood to include among others, the act of articulating and protecting one's being and that of African communities and biodiversity, a consciousness against all forms of oppression and exploitation and marginalisation and the search for justice, dignity, wellness and wellbeing for Africans, humanity and ecology.

This essay has sought to contextualise the relevance of the governance of the public sphere in Africa, by using as its framework, the evaluation of the roles in the public spheres, as well as the portrayal of African women's agency in mainstream social sciences. It provided examples of some of the dominant stereotypes which limit, undermine and discount African women's, agency. This was followed by the socio-ethical analyses of the impacts of negative stereotyping of African women's agency. Following this, the author identified strategies, processes and ways in which African women in the academe claim, reclaim and affirm their agency in their daily lives and in knowledge production. The essay was conscious that a discussion of women's human agency might run the risk of presenting women as though they are homogenous, monolithic and the same, and thus reiterate the importance of avoiding universalistic generalisations.

## **Bibliography**

- Abraham Keshia Nicole Resistance Innovations in African Feminist Literary discourse (1999)6 in Abraham Keshia Nicole et al (eds) Reflections on Gender Issues in Africa. Southern African Regional Institutes for policy studies 1999
- Ang, Ien. I'm A Feminist but... "Other" Women and Positional Feminism. Edited by Lewis, Reina and Mills. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2003
- Applebaum, Barbara, "Social Justice Education, Moral Agency and the subject of resistance", Educational Theory 54(2004)59-72
- Azis, Razia. Feminism and the Challenge of Racism: Deviance or difference? In Black British Feminism: A Reader, edited by Mirza, Safia, Heidi. London: Routledge, 1997
- Bakken, P.W., Engel, J.B. and Engel, J.R. 1995 *Ecology, Justice and Christian Faith: A critical Guide to the Literature*. Westport: Greenwood Press
- Bat- Ami and Ferguson Ann. Routledge1998) 92 -99
- Bell Hooks (Watkins Gloria), The Oppositional Gaze: Black Female Spectators' Edited by Lewis, Reina and Mills. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2003

- Brown, Phillip The Globalisation of Positional Competition? *Sociology* Volume 34, No 4 pp 633 -653
- Bush, Barbara. *Imperialism, Race and Resistance: Africa and Britain, 1919-1945* New York: Routledge 1999
- Carby, V. Hazel. White woman Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood. In *Black British Feminism: A Reader*, edited by Mirza, Safia, Heidi., London: Routledge, 1997
- Donaldson, L.E. The Breast of Columbus: A political Anatomy of Postcolonialism and Feminist Religious discourse. In *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse*. Edited by Donaldson, L. E. and Kwok, Pui-lan New York Routledge 2002
- Dube, Musa, W. Postcoloniality, Feminist Spaces and Religion, In *Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse*. Edited by Donaldson, L. E. and Kwok, Pui-lan New York Routledge 2002
- Espin, On knowing you are the Unknown: Women of Color constructing Psychology. In *Racism in the Lives of women: Testimony, Theory and Guides to Anti-racist Practice*. Edited by Adleman, J and Enguidanos, G. New York: The Harrington Park Press 1995)128
- Flax, Jane. *Displacing Women: Toward an Ethics of Multiplicity* (Routledge 1998)152 In *Daring to be Good: Essays in Feminist Ethico-Politics*. Edited by Bar,
- Frantz Fanon, quoted in White, M. A. *ALL The Men are Fighting for Freedom, All The Women Are Mourning Thiers Men, But Some of Us Carried Guns: Fanon's Psychological Perspectives on War and African Women Combatants* Working Paper No 106 Unpublished 2002-3
- Haddad, Beverly. "Gender, Development, And Faith The church and women's struggle to survive", *Missionalia* 31:3 (2003) 427-450
- Kanyoro, Musimbi, "African Women's Quest for Justice: A Review of African women's theology" *Pacific Journal of theology* no.1 1996
- Kanyoro, Musimbi. *Introducing Women's Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* New York: Sheffield Academic Press 2002
- Kretzschmar, Louise, and van Schalkwyk, Annalet, *Women, Society and Church* Pretoria: University of South Africa 2003

- Kwok, Pui-lan. Unbinding our Feet: Saving Brown women and Feminist Religious Discourse (Routledge 2002: 62). In Postcolonialism, Feminism and Religious Discourse. Edited by Donaldson, L. E. and Kwok, Pui-lan New York Routledge 2002
- Lisa, Heldke, On Being A Responsible Traitor: A Primer. In Daring to be Good: Essays in Feminist Ethico-Politics. Edited by Bar, Bat- Ami and Ferguson Ann. Routledge1998) 92 -99
- Lister, Ruth Citizenship: Toward a feminist synthesis in Feminist Review, vol No 57, autumn 1997, pp 28-48
- Loots, Lilian. "Resituating culture in the body politic", Agenda no.49 (2001)9-14
- Lorde, Audre. Age, Race, Class and Sex: Women Redefining Difference In Ethics: A Feminist Reader edited by in Frazer, E, Honsby, J., and Lovibond, S. (eds) Oxford: Blackwell 1992
- Mahmood, Mamdani Preliminary Thoughts on the Congo Crisis 1999:55 in social Text, 60, vol 17 no 3, fall 1999 pp 53-62
- Maluleke, Tinyiko, S., What if we are mistaken about the Bible and Christianity in Africa? Edited by Ukpong, J. et al. Cape Town: Society of Biblical Literature 2002
- Mama, Amina Challenging Subjects: Gender and Power in African Context 2001, Plenary Address, Nordic Africa Institute Conference: Beyond Identity: Rethinking Power in Africa, Uppsala, October 4-7<sup>th</sup>, 2001
- McEwan, Cheryl Engendering Citizenship: Gendered Spaces of democracy in South Africa in Political Geography Vol 19, Issues 5 pp 627
- Mcfadden, Patricia Becoming Post Colonial African Women Changing the Meaning of Citizenship in Meridians: Feminism, Race, Transnationalism, 2005, Vol 6, No 1, pp 1-22
- Motsemme, Nthabiseng, Gendered Experiences of Blackness in Post-Apartheid South Africa <<http://www.wiserweb.wits.ac.za> > (August 2002).
- Njoroge, J. Nyambura Reclaiming our heritage of Power: Discovering our Theological Voices. In Herstories: Hidden Histories of Women of Faith in Africa, Edited by Phiri, I.A., Govinden, D. B. and Nadar, S. Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications 2002
- Olukoshi, Adebayo Governance in West Africa: A Survey of Trends 2006:4 also in <http://www.Codesria.com> Accessed on August 20<sup>th</sup> 2008
- Ortiz, Lisa, M. "Agency" Encyclopaedia of Postmodernism 2000
- Ronan, Miriam in <http://www.aril.org/ronan.htm>



- Ryan, Maura, A. "Agency" Dictionary of Feminist theologies edited by Russell, L., M., and Clarkson, Shannon, J. (Kentucky, Westminster John Knox Press)
- Salo, Elaine. Making Our Voices Heard: The Politics of Writing and publication in African Higher Education in <[http:// www.gwsafrica.org](http://www.gwsafrica.org)>
- Schussler-Fiorenza, Elisabeth. 1995 Jesus; Miriam's Child, Sophia's Prophet: Critical Issues in Feminist Christology, <http://www.pinn.net>, Accessed in June, 20<sup>th</sup>, 2002
- Tulloch, Sara (ed) The Reader's Digest Complete Word finder Montreal: The Reader's Digest Association Limited 1990
- White, Aaronette, M. All The Men are Fighting for Freedom; all the women are Mourning their men but Some of Us Carried Guns: Fanon's Psychological Perspectives on War and African Women Combatants. Boston Consortium On Gender, Security and Human Rights, Working Paper No 106 (unpublished). 2002-2003
- Young, I. M Responsibility and Global Justice: A Social Connection Model in Paul, Ellen, Frankel, Miller, Fred, D and Paul Jeffrey (eds) 2006 Justice and Global Politics Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Zeleva, P. T. The Politics and Poetics of Exile: Edward Said in Africa in Research in African Literatures vol 36, no3 Fall 2005, pg 1-25