Reconceptualizing Gender: Critical Investigations into Assumptions of 'Modernity'

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Abstract

This article discusses different ways of conceptualising gender including a critique of dominant Western/European gender concepts in terms of male dominance/female subordination. It takes off from the author's experience in northern Mozambique in the early 1980s, where local women refused to acknowledge proclaimed advantages of the newly independent Mozambican state's move from 'tradition' to 'modernity'. Key points of contestation were the traditional rituals of initiation, denounced by Frelimo and the National Women's Organisation (OMM) as women-oppressive, but passionately defended by local women. In attempts to understand this apparent contradiction, the article subsequently presents decolonial perspectives on gender and power, questioning usual valorisations of 'tradition' and 'modernity'. Doing so, it draws on African and Latin American feminist conceptualisations. In the final sections – in a move to historicise and de-universalise dominant gender conceptualisations – the article traces the very specific European/Western roots of presumed universally valid 'modern' gender concepts, also showing how these lines of thought are reflected in the work of Simone de Beauvoir and embedded in international development discourse. The resulting model of 'gender equality feminism' is denounced as 'colonial feminism'. The conclusion sums up limitations of presumed 'modernity' while pointing to potentials for women in re-interpretations of so-called 'tradition'.

Keywords: Tradition/modernity, rituals of initiation, decolonial theory, enlightenment thinking, the international development regime

Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that conceptualisations are important. How are things conceptualised? By whom? In which contexts? With what implications? Concepts are not innocent; often, reconceptualisations are needed. According to Sylvia Tamale in her editorial for a recent issue of *Feminist Africa*, "we need to reconceptualize normalized concepts, such as gender and sexuality, patriarchy, rights, equality and development that are essentialist and binaried. These fundamental ontological and epistemological transformations constitute the prelude to inventing new stories of African feminist activism" (Tamale 2024, 2–3). In this article I take up this challenge in a double sense: first by offering an 'ontological and epistemological critique' of existing 'normalized concepts' of gender, and second by taking as a point of departure 'African feminist activism' as enacted forty years ago by rural women in northern Mozambique. Feminist activism here should be understood as acts of disobedience against prevailing powers (in this case the post-independence ruling party: Frelimo), in defence of women's spaces and perceived rights. The women in question were peasants in Cabo Delgado, northern Mozambique. These women had been active in the recent war of liberation against Portuguese colonialism; they supported Frelimo guerilla soldiers by carrying war material over long distances, and by providing food and shelter for the guerillas. After independence, they were confronted with campaigns by Frelimo and Organização da Mulher Moçambicana (OMM, the post-independence national women's organisation) against traditional rituals of female initiation. And they refused to comply, not by direct action, but by 'civil disobedience'. When party cadres visited their villages, organising meetings and shouting party slogans, such as "abaixo ritos de iniciação" (down with initiation rituals), the women shouted along; but after the party people had left the village, the women continued with their rituals.

At the time, in the early 1980s, I worked in the OMM as a *cooperante*. *Cooperantes* were solidarity workers employed on a local salary directly by Mozambican authorities. After eleven years of war of liberation from Portuguese colonialism, Mozambique had finally gained independence in 1975. Post independence, the country was run by a socialist-inspired government in the hands of the liberation movement, Frelimo, which in 1977

had turned itself into a political party. No Western diplomatic representations or development organisations were in place. This was the era of the Cold War East/West divide, and as a declared socialist country, Mozambique belonged to the Eastern side. However, since most Portuguese had left the country in the turmoil of independence, all kinds of civil servants with higher education were in short supply. This was where, as a sociologist/anthropologist and incipient gender scholar, I fitted in, as did my partner, who was an architect/urban planner. After a crash course in Portuguese, we arrived in Maputo in October 1980 with our two young daughters: one three years old, the other only eight months.

Having arrived directly from the vibrant New Women's Movement in Denmark (and from a junior position at Roskilde University), my aim was to work in the OMM. I had studied the speeches of Frelimo President Samora Machel; in one speech, which I found particularly impressive, Samora Machel declared: "The liberation of women is a necessity for the revolution, a guarantee for its continuity and a condition for its success" (Machel 1973). After independence, Machel became president of Mozambique. Imagine working in a country where the President could speak in such terms about women!

Everything worked out as intended; I got a job in the OMM. Initially I conducted sociological investigations in the south of Mozambique, not too far from Maputo, where we lived and where the OMM (and the Frelimo) headquarters were located. In 1982, however, I was sent by the OMM to Cabo Delgado, the northernmost province of Mozambique, bordering Tanzania, where the liberation war had been most intense. The OMM wanted to know how the struggle for liberation had impacted on the women, their lives and their visions for the future. Transformation of the society from 'tradition' to 'modernity' was the overall aim of Frelimo politics in post-independence Mozambique. OMM and Frelimo expected the war veteran women of northern Mozambique to be a vanguard in this regard: because of their experience of active participation in the war of liberation, they were expected to have left 'tradition' behind and to be all set for 'modernity'. Nevertheless, against Frelimo's and the OMM's, and also against my own expectations, the women in Cabo Delgado that I interviewed, passionately defended traditional initiation rituals, which were understood by Frelimo and the OMM as quintessentially woman-oppressive. I was incredulous and very surprised; what was this all

about? These were by far the most articulate and politically aware peasant women I had ever met. I had by then worked in the OMM for more than a year, interviewing urban and rural women in southern Mozambique, but this was something different. How could it be that that these clever war veteran women defended allegedly oppressive rituals? Maybe the rituals were not oppressive after all? Maybe they were even the opposite: empowering to women? Maybe this was the background for the women's defence of their rituals? But if so, what about the tradition/modernity divide?

Frelimo's and OMM's preconceived assumptions regarding women, gender relations and tradition/modernity corresponded fairly well to the ideas regarding women and gender which I had carried along from the New Women's Movement in Denmark, namely that 'traditional society' was oppressive to women, whereas 'modernity' brought promises and possibilities for gender equality and women's emancipation. The decisive divide was between these ideas and the gender conceptions of the Cabo Delgado women, which obviously were different, but how and why? I also started wondering about the historical background of the tradition/modernity ideas, thoughts which I shared with Frelimo and the OMM. This conception clearly had European roots, in so far as Frelimo's and OMM's ideas came from international socialism, and despite proclaimed internationalism were implicitly Eurocentric. But more precisely, through which historical twists and turns had these conceptions of gender come into being? I felt that I had to look closer into this tradition/modernity issue; what actually counted as 'tradition' and what as 'modernity', and why? I had to struggle to un-learn my own preconceived ideas and to be as open as possible to what I saw and what I was told by the Cabo Delgado women, in order to understand how they conceived their world regarding issues of gender. The valorisation of the tradition/modernity divide seemed to come out very differently from these women's points of view.

All of this took place in 1982, more than 40 years ago. Nevertheless, much of what I have been doing as an academic since then relates back to this Cabo Delgado experience in one way or another. My confrontation with the Cabo Delgado women forced me to search for other ways beyond the conventional for conceptualising women and gender.

A triple agenda: the lay-out of this paper

I realised that in order to determine what this was all about, I had to work on a triple agenda. First: female initiation rituals did take place in Cabo Delgado, in spite of the Frelimo ban, and the rituals were cherished by the women – as was the case (as it became clear later) also in other parts of matrilineal northern Mozambique. As a consequence of my experience in Cabo Delgado, I was keen to find out what the initiation rituals were all about, and why they were so important to the women. Thus after my return in 1984 to Danish academic life, I applied for funding for further research in northern Mozambique. Because of the Frelimo/Renamo war, it was only from 1998–1999 and later in 2003 and 2005 that I managed to go back to northern Mozambique, this time for research in Nampula Province, populated almost entirely by Makhuwa people. The Makhuwa have more clear-cut matrilineal systems, compared to the Makonde I had met in Cabo Delgado. Results of this research have been published in my 2011 book, *Sexuality and Gender Politics in Mozambique*, subtitled *Rethinking Gender in Africa*. They are summarised in section one below.

Second, I needed to develop a conceptual approach with which it would be possible to grasp the meaning and importance of the rituals, seen from the positions of local women. This part of the agenda was decisively enhanced when at some point in the 1990s I discovered the groundbreaking work by Nigerian gender scholars Ifi Amadiume (1987) and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí (1997). Their critique of Western thinking and their innovative ways of conceptualising African gendered realities were very helpful indeed in terms of breaking down my pre-conceived ideas of gender, and in putting together conceptual frameworks for different understandings. Aspects of this new understanding are captured in some of the chapters of the 2011 book; in this article they are taken further, supported by Latin American decolonial gender theorising.

A third issue on the agenda would be the task of historicising and de-universalising the European/Western conceptions of gender, which had been my own point of departure; conceptions shared not only by the Western Women's Movements and by Frelimo/the OMM, but also by the global development regime. The overriding question in this part of the investigation is the following: why do we in Europe/the Western world think about issues of

gender the way we do? Which are the roots of European/Western gender thinking? These questions are not explored in the 2011 book, but some of them are taken up in Arnfred 2022. My experience in Cabo Delgado, as well as my reading of the works of Amadiume and Oyěwùmí, showed that 'the universal subordination of women', which in the New Women's Movement we had taken as a basic fact of life, was not universal at all. People in other places conceptualised gender in very different ways.

Over the years, I have become increasingly critical of the global development regime and the gender conceptions embedded in it. Ideas of gender with specific roots in European history have been globalised based on a conviction that these ideas are universally valid – but I have gathered evidence enough to be convinced that such is not the case. Like an increasing number of scholars from Europe and the US, such as de Sousa Santos (2014), and others from the previously colonised world, I have come to see so-called development work as a neo-colonial enterprise that imposes certain lines of thinking and ways of life on other peoples; in short as a continuation of colonial dominance. As noted by some of these scholars, colonialism was "not only economic and political, but fundamentally epistemic" (Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 137). The proliferation of development thinking regarding gender is an example of such epistemic colonialisation. For this reason, I have divided part three of the triple agenda into section (a) which deals with the historical background of European conceptions of gender, and section (b) which focuses on contemporary conceptions of gender in the international development regime.

Section One: Re-interpretations of northern Mozambican female rituals of initiation

During the time I worked in the OMM (1981–1984), the documents from the 1976 second OMM conference served as basic political guidelines. In these documents, rituals of initiation were listed as number one among 'women's social problems'—the most ominous and repulsive aspect of rural life, perceived to privilege men and subordinate women. The rituals were described as "imposing in women a feeling of total submission and dependence in relation to men" (OMM 1977, 90). "The point of these rituals," the document added, "is to prepare the woman just in order to serve the man —as a means of

pleasure, as a force of labour, and as a source of even more forces of labour" (OMM 1977, 90). According to these texts, the rituals "violated and traumatized" women, turning them into "passive beings without capacity for initiative" (OMM 1977, 91). Seen from my present position, this description is entirely out of touch with women's lived realities. *First*, men have nothing to do with women's initiation. If men appear at all, they will be under the command of the *nacimbusa* or *namalaka* (different names depending on location) – a specially trained and gifted older woman master of the rituals. *Second*, indeed the young initiates are supposed to be submissive, and they are bossed around, but this a submission to seniority, to older women, not to men. Not at all. The *third* important aspect of the rituals is the *reinforcement of the community of women*, the unity and solidarity of women vis-à-vis men, across possible hierarchies (e.g., in terms of age). Participants in the celebration of the rituals of initiation are not just the young initiates, but potentially all adult (i.e., already initiated) women of the community. The female rituals of initiation may be seen as *women's rallies* – where women get together in order to confirm and reinforce their unity and their collective strength and power as women, vis-à-vis men. Such women's solidarity and mutual support seemed increasingly important in the situation of the 1980s to 2000s – the period of my field research into these matters – when rural life in northern Mozambique was threatened by 'modernity'. 'Threatened by modernity' because modernity implied male takeover, including in areas where previously women had been in charge.

Contrary to the impression given by Frelimo and the OMM, I came to see the female rituals of initiation as a key institution for protection and continuation of women's positions of power in these matrilineal communities, where such traditional positions were now threatened by modernity – and by male power. All 'modern' positions of power, institutionalised by Frelimo, in terms of provincial governors, district secretaries, secretaries of urban neighbourhoods etc., were taken up by men. The whole system of institutions signalling modernity, was (and is) male dominated. In terms of practical politics and guiding ideas, Samora Machel's early praise (1973) of women's participation in the revolution stood alone. Or rather, women had been welcomed as guerilla soldiers, but otherwise Frelimo's politics implied a male takeover. Seen through women's eyes, all previous aspects of women's power

now came to be placed in the realm of 'tradition' and social structures to be left behind. 'Modernity' was equal to male power, disregarding women.

Section Two: Decolonial understandings of issues of gender and gender power relations

The general European/Western understanding of gender conforms to the idea of male dominance/female subordination; in the New Women's Movement we took 'the universal subordination of women' as a given fact. We struggled to change this situation, but the perspective of our struggle was fatally limited by its conceptualisation. Perceived through Western gender concepts, women's 'traditional' power in a place like Mozambique becomes invisible. Ifi Amadiume writes against the conceptual limitations with which she was confronted when, in the late 1970s, she started out as a student of anthropology at the University of London's School of Oriental and African Studies. In the preface to her book, *Male Daughters, Female Husbands* (1987), she voices her critique of 'classical' British social anthropology, of feminist anthropology, and of feminism as such. She writes: "The ethnography used in the university was that collected by old 'masters' of anthropology during the colonial period … justifying conquest and the subjection of indigenous peoples and their cultures to foreign rule" (Amadiume 1987, 1). Feminist anthropologists were no better than their male colleagues: "To them the universal social and cultural inferiority of women was a foregone conclusion: 'sexual asymmetry is presently a universal fact of human life'. This kind of global presupposition is in itself ethnocentric," (Amadiume 1987, 4). Similarly, writing ten years later, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí is also very critical of Western gender conceptualisations. "I came to realize," she says in the preface to her book, *The Invention of Women* (1997), "that the fundamental category 'women' – which is foundational in Western gender discourses – simply did not exist in Yorubaland" (Oyěwùmí 1997, ix). People were not classified as 'men' or 'women'; they were distinguished in terms of social positions and relations such as linage, seniority and parenthood – but not as body-types. Man/woman was not a dichotomy, gender boundaries were changing and floating, and gender was not a dimension of power. Gender was perceived as situational, i.e., not dichotomised, not hierarchical – and often not important at all. But with colonialism, Western categories and lines of thinking

took over; "body-reasoning and the bio-logic that derives from the biological determinism inherent in Western thought have been imposed on African societies," Oyěwùmí says (1997, x).

Amadiume and Oyěwùmí are both Nigerian. Amadiume is from Igboland in the east, Oyěwùmí from Yorubaland in the west. They agree on many issues, such as the basic insight that gender is not determined by biology; it is socially created. Amadiume is an anthropologist, her writings particularly polemical vis-à-vis Western anthropological thinking; Oyěwùmí is a sociologist, her writings tuned more towards a critique of Western feminist theorising. Amadiume and Oyěwùmí complement each other, and they are both indispensable for decolonial understandings of gender in Africa. At an early point as a male African scholar, Jimi Adésinà (2010) acknowledged the groundbreaking contributions of Amadiume and Oyěwùmí.

Socio-cultural creation of gender is what the Mozambican rituals of initiation are all about; what takes place in the female rituals is the creation of women. Biological age alone will not turn a young girl into a grown-up woman, because adulthood is not a question of years of age. Rituals are needed; rituals through which specifically enabled older women create from the raw material of uninitiated girls, adult women of this particular culture – Makhuwa or Makonde, as the case may be. This also means that gender and adulthood are socially created. Male and female are not rooted in bodies, and male/female is not in itself a dimension of power. Power may be assigned to other differences, such as seniority – who is older, who is younger? – and lineage; some families are more powerful than others. But power is not located in 'gender' itself. Motherhood is, however, seen as a powerful social position, as noted by Amadiume as well as by Oyěwùmí. I shall return to issues of motherhood below. Spelling out decisive differences between African and Western gender thinking, Oyěwùmí (1997, xii) provides a list of Western taken-for-granted assumptions regarding gender; 'assumptions of modernity' in the context of this paper. Oyěwùmí sees these assumptions as specifically Western. To Western feminists, however, they are presumed to be universal.

- Gender categories are seen as universal and timeless.
- Gender is a fundamental organising principle in all societies.
- There is an essential, universal category: 'woman'.

- The subordination of women is universal.
- The category 'woman' is precultural, fixed in historical time and cultural space in antithesis to another fixed category: 'man'.

It is important to note that all of these assumptions still prevail in the language and the conceptions of the international development regime, as discussed in section three (b) of this article. Western misunderstandings regarding issues of gender are also reflected in mis-translations. As an example, the Yoruba distinction between *oko* and *iyawo* is usually translated as 'husband' and 'wife', where *iyawo* marks a subordinate position. Importantly, however, the reason for subordination has nothing to do with gender; it marks the difference between those who are birth members of a family/a lineage and those who enter by marriage. "This hierarchy is not a gender hierarchy, because even female *oko* are superior to the female *iyawo"* (Oyěwùmí 2004, 5); the category of *iyawo* includes both men and women. In a patrilineal society, those who enter by marriage will be women; in a matrilineal society those who enter by marriage will be men.

All of this was difficult to grasp for European minds; often they did not even try. Amadiume writes about how Europeans "kept looking for man as father or man as the axis around which all rotated … The invisible, transitory or distant role of man as father in African kinship was extremely difficult for the European mind to accept" (Amadiume 1997, 80). Similarly, "the very thought of women's power being based on the logic of motherhood has proved offensive to many Western feminists" (Amadiume 1997, 114). No wonder, Amadiume says, since in Western/European conceptualisations gender equality is understood as women's equality with men on male terms, turning tasks of motherhood into impediments to equality, whereas in the African system "motherhood was women's means of empowerment" (Amadiume 1997, 114). The focus on motherhood is shared by Amadiume and Oyěwùmí. Amadiume: "At no period in the history of the patriarchal cultures of Europe has motherhood been accorded the same status and reverence it has had in African cultures" (Amadiume 1987, 3). Oyěwùmí: "In all African family arrangements, the most important ties within the family flow from the mother … The idea that mothers are powerful is very much a defining characteristic of the institution and its place in society" (Oyěwùmí 2000, 1097). Amadiume conceptualises

motherhood by talking about 'a motherhood paradigm', thus also pointing critically to the often implicit patriarchal paradigm in social science: "The recognition of the motherhood paradigm means that we do not take patriarchy as given, or as a paradigm" (Amadiume 1997, 21). In Amadiume's 'motherhood paradigm', the focus is not on 'women' as such, but on the mother-child relationship. Importantly, by doing so she conceptualises not an individual social position, but a social relationship, the relationship between mother and child(ren).

In pre-colonial African societies, women as well as men could be rulers. With colonialism, however, all of this started to change.

> The very process by which [with colonialism] females were categorized and reduced to 'women' made them ineligible for leadership roles. ... [Thus] for females colonization was a twofold process of racial inferiorization and gender subordination. ... The creation of 'women' as a category was one of the very first accomplishments of the colonial state (Oyěwùmí 1997, 124).

This passage from Oyěwùmí was later taken as one of the points of departure for Latin American feminist philosopher Maria Lugones' coining of the concept, 'the coloniality of gender' (Lugones 2007, 197). According to Lugones, the very idea of women as a coherent category, and as a category subordinated to men, is a *colonial imposition*. Applying this European conception of gender in African settings changes realities and distorts what might remain of pre-colonial social structures. Male power is everywhere presumed; female power remains unseen. It was my experience in the process of making sense of my data from northern Mozambique that seen through Amadiume's and Oyěwùmí's conceptualisations, it all fell into place. I could now see the rituals as sessions of reinforcement and celebration of the community of women, in addition to being educational sessions that introduced the initiates to this community; I now understood very well the women's reluctance towards the male-dominated 'modernity' of Frelimo.

Latin American feminist thinking

Much later – in the 2020s – I discovered Latin American decolonial feminist thinking beyond Maria Lugones. I was particularly impressed by the thinking of Lorena Cabnal. Unlike university-based Amadiume, Oyěwùmí and

Lugones, Cabnal is an activist whose thinking and activism are closely interconnected. A Maya-Xinka woman from Guatemala, Cabnal has co-founded a number of feminist associations and networks in Latin America – or *Abya Yala*, which is the name she and others use for this part of the world. She calls herself a communitarian feminist, defining communitarian feminism as an epistemic proposal, which has emerged from daily life, not from academia. Two innovative concepts are centrally positioned in her thinking: *territorio cuerpo-tierra* and *senti-pensar*. Cabnal understands the body as intimately related to the land; land is not an object to be possessed or appropriated, land is connected with human life in a mutual relationship, including ancestors and coming generations. This resonates well with the African contexts with which I am familiar. In the conceptualisation *territorio cuerpo-tierra*, land and bodies are connected, implying that land is not just land and certainly not a commodity. Food comes from the land. Land is related to ancestors and to who you are as a person. Even after moving to the city, you still belong to your ancestral land, and given the opportunity, this is where you go when you grow old, to be buried with those who went before you, and where you belong.

Another important Cabnal concept is *senti-pensar*: feeling-thinking. Here she goes up against the very foundation of European Enlightenment thinking with its dichotomies and hierarchies: minds distinct from bodies, and rationality from feeling, with minds and rationality in command. Cabnal insists on thinking including feelings, and since she is not a writing person, she often communicates to an audience through video talks, many of them available on YouTube. In most of these YouTube videos you see Cabnal in front of some greenery or sitting on a mat on the grass while speaking. Very rarely does she sit at a conference table; never at a podium. Significantly, in some of her talks she involves the audience as active participants in her performance, turning her lecture into a kind of ceremony. Often she talks about her recuperation of historical memories from her mother and grandmothers back in time, in order to put togeher what she calls a *cosmogonia*, a coherent vision of the world and of human lives.

Section Three (a): Which are the historical roots of European/Western gender thinking?

To return to the discussion of European/Western conceptions of gender: Why do the gender concepts look the way they do? From where the patriarchal dominance? From where the downgrading of motherhood and women's power? From where the body-focused male/female dichotomy? To answer these questions, I have drawn particularly on two works by Marx-inspired European/Western gender scholars: Maria Mies' *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (1986) and Silvia Federici's *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), both groundbreaking books with profound critiques of mainstream conceptions of gender.

Marx has nothing to say on gender, and his major work, *Capital*, was published more than 150 years ago (1867) – so why Marx? The answer is that Marx's analysis of the inner mechanisms of capitalism is still valid, with the bottom-line insight that in capitalist economy human beings act as the means for the goal of economic profit, not the other way round. And capitalism is still with us, more global and more powerful than ever before. Thus, beyond all shortcomings and blind spots (such as regarding gender), critical scholarship still draws inspiration from Marx. Federici particularly draws on one chapter in *Capital*, the chapter on 'So-called Primitive Accumulation'. Here Marx describes the beginnings of capitalism in Europe in the last part of the 15th and in the 16th century, with the 'enclosure of the commons', when peasants were forcefully removed from access to the land on which they had grown the crops and kept the animals that gave them subsistence. These peasants were "robbed of all their own means of production … The history of this, their expropriation, is written in the annals of mankind in letters of blood and fire" (Marx 1867/1990, 621).

Previous peasants were turned into wage workers for emerging industrial production. Federici, who spent some years in Nigeria during the World Bank Structural Adjustment Programs (SAP), has written about what took place under SAP, which she sees as very parallel to 'Primitive Accumulation': through violent means subsistence production is turned into capitalist production, and previous peasants into wage workers – even when

there was no wage work to get (Federici 2012). Marx is aware that a precondition for the establishment of capitalism as such, was:

> the discovery of gold and silver in America, the extirpation, enslavement and entombment in mines of the aboriginal population, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting for black skins ... These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation (Marx 1867/1990, 651).

But Marx does not go into details; colonialism is not his subject. Marx is concerned with the development of capitalism in Europe and his focus in this chapter is how previous peasants were turned into wage workers—proletarians. Mies and Federici look into the aspects of gender, not included in Marx's analysis. According to Mies, "the process of proletarianization of the men was accompanied by the process of housewifization of women" (Mies 1986, 69).

In the pre-capitalist peasant household – in England as elsewhere in Europe – there had been a complementarity of gender tasks: men were responsible for a particular range of tasks, women for another. Neither a man nor a woman could run a farm alone; a man as well as a woman were needed for making things work according to expectations. Similarly, for craftsmen in town: "The ideal economic and social unit in the guild was the family workshop … the wife would be responsible for purchase of raw material, for sale of the products of the workshop and for catering for and taking care of workmen, apprentices, maids and children" (Jacobsen 1986, 121). Historian Grethe Jacobsen highlights the equal value of the work of man and woman respectively: "There are no indications that the work of one sex was more highly valued than the work of the other. The work of either was equally important and necessary for optimal function of family and society" (Jacobsen 1986, 109).

However, with industrialisation the worlds of men and women were torn apart; men as wageworkers, women as housewives. With wage work and factory production, types of male and female work, which previously in the farm as well as in the urban workshop had taken place in the same unit, were now divided. The industrial 'public' sphere was seen as male, the private sphere as female. This public/private division turned out to be decisive for conceptions of gender in the Western world, and an important background for Enlightenment philosophers' conceptualisations of gender.

Maria Mies: Motherwork – a feminist conceptual strategy

Marx's analysis in *Capital* focuses on industrial production, where wage workers (generally male) produce surplus value for capital. Marx's definition of productive work is work that produces surplus value. Maria Mies takes this concept – 'productive work' – and applies it controversially to women's act of giving birth to new human beings – a phenomenon Marx takes for granted as a fact of nature. Mies insists on expanding the idea of 'productive work' to include the act of giving birth. Giving birth is work, she says, exceptionally productive work:

> Out of their body [women] produce new children, as well as the first food for these children. It is of crucial importance … that women's activity in producing children and milk is understood as truly human, that is conscious, social activity.… The activity of women in bearing and rearing children has to be understood as *work* (Mies 1986, 53, italics in original).

Similar to the difference Marx (in another chapter of *Capital*) describes in the distinction between the architect and the bee – "what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality," (Marx 1867/1990, 154) – mothers have ideas regarding their children; human hopes and aspirations, human culture, consciousness and imagination contribute extensively to the project and the product.

In the processes of giving birth, breastfeeding, care and maintenance, nature and culture are intertwined in unique and important ways – particularly so since the process of producing new human beings is a protracted affair, seven years a minimum. The concept of 'motherwork' – covering Mies' description above but coined by Patricia Hill Collins (1994) – is an important contribution to feminist theorising. The theoretical implications of the concept of 'motherwork' are comparable to those of Amadiume's 'motherhood paradigm'; by revealing the implicit male focus of social science, these conceptualisations point to the potential for more gender-inclusive lines of thinking.

Witch-hunts and Enlightenment thinking

Maria Mies' line of thinking regarding 'motherwork' highlights the damage done by the witch-hunts, which took place in the early centuries of capital accumulation, as a "war against women" (Federici 2004, 88). Women targeted for prosecution as witches often had particular knowledge of motherwork; they were birth helpers and midwives, the 'wise women' of medieval society. Mies shows how the European witch-hunts in the 16th and 17th centuries, backed by Enlightenment thinking, were instrumental in creating the image of subordinate women. "Only after centuries of most brutal attacks against their sexual and productive autonomy, European women became the dependent domesticated housewives that we are in principle today" (Mies 1986, 69). These processes paved the way for seeing women's contribution to society in terms of producing children as well as the first food for these children "as purely physiological functions, comparable to other mammals, and lying outside the sphere of conscious human influence" (Mies 1986, 54); as plainly and simply 'fertility'. Even today, this is how this immensely important contribution is perceived the world over by demographers and population planners. For feminists, it must be imperative to combat this simplified and distorted view.

The 16th and 17th centuries were times of turmoil in Europe, with emerging capitalism, peasant uprisings and protracted wars. In pre-capitalist times, according to Carolyn Merchant in her book, *The Death of Nature* (Merchant 1980), 'nature' had been perceived as a living organism with inherent creative power. In the 16th and 17th centuries, however, the dominant metaphor binding together cosmos, nature and society changed from the organism to the machine. Previously, "the image of the earth as a living organism and nurturing mother had served as a cultural constraint restricting the actions of human beings. One does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold or mutilate her body" (Merchant 1980, 3). But commercial mining would soon require exactly that. An entire worldview was under transformation – a transformation with explicitly gendered overtones. New lines of thinking were needed; these were provided by philosophers such as Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and René Descartes (1596–1650).

British philosopher Francis Bacon was close to King James I, who was a keen witch-hunter; he had even written a book *Daemonologie* (James I 1597) on the topic. A few years later, the King's protégé, Francis Bacon, drafted a manuscript titled *The Masculine Birth of Time* (Bacon 1603), with a programme for investigation of nature, inspired by methods of torture and trial of presumed witches (Merchant 1980, 168–170; Hammil 2020). According to Merchant, in Bacon's thinking, nature is transformed from a creative and life-giving power, to be treated with reverence and respect, into a resource to be mastered and controlled. At the same time, male dominance is emphasised. Men are the ones to enact the mastering and control of nature – including women, who are categorised as close to/part of nature.

With French philosopher René Descartes, a man/woman gender hierarchy, reinforced through witch-hunts and housewifisation, is built into the very concepts of his thinking. Descartes' emphasis on rational thought, expressed in his *Cogito ergo sum* ("I think, thus I exist") is spoken from the position of a male ego, the Man of Reason (European, white). Descartes' world is organised in terms of hierarchical dichotomies: mind/body, reason/feeling, human/nature, man/woman. Mind is rational, human, masculine; body is nature, feeling, feminine. Man is master of nature and of women.

At that time, patriarchy as such was not a new phenomenon, but in the thinking of people like Bacon and Descartes it was cemented and reinforced. The idea that 'nature' should be mastered by Man had been around for a long time. Indeed, this is what God says to Adam in *Genesis*, chapter 1 of *The Holy Bible*. Likewise, in classical Greece, patriarchal ideas were afoot, as expressed by Aristotle, who attributed gestation to men, while women, by giving birth, only supplied raw matter. Thus, patriarchy as such was nothing new; what is at issue is its form and shape, and to what extent it is socially dominant. Even under conditions of patriarchy, in the pre-capitalist, pre-industrial era in Europe, there was a parallel line of women's knowledge, particularly connected to healing, procreation, midwifery, and birth-control. Knowledge about sexuality, giving birth and how to prevent pregnancy was a female domain – precisely the kind of knowledge which became eradicated with the witch-hunts.

Section Three (b): Conceptions of gender in the international development regime

The situation now in the 2020s is that, in spite of consistent critique from scholars and activists from the Global South, these European/Western conceptions of gender with roots in witch-hunts and male-focused Enlightenment thinking continue to be guiding ideas and paradigms for gender aspects of Western-funded development programmes and institutions. Development work on gender promotes European/Western conceptions, as shown, for example, by the series of UN World Conferences on Women (1975–1995). Through this string of conferences, running over two decades, a globally uniform vocabulary of gender was established – a vocabulary rooted in Western understandings of gender in terms of male dominance/female subordination. This was also the conceptual framework for the *World Development Report 2012: Gender Equality and Development* (World Bank 2012). Power is perceived as male, subordination as female; 'gender equality' is perceived as women being enabled for entering male domains of power, politics and knowledge. A closer look reveals that in development contexts so-called 'women's empowerment' is frequently about money: women's involvement in 'income generation' and/or 'micro credit schemes'. Whatever power women might have had in so-called 'traditional society' is invisible.

Western feminist thinking was greatly revitalised when the New Women's Movement, the so-called 'Second Wave' emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the US and in Europe. This Movement was connected to the 'New Left', i.e., to Marxist/socialist thinking and to movements disconnecting Marxism/socialism from what took place in the Soviet Union. The so-called 'First Wave' of feminism had been the movements for women's voting rights in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; women's suffrage in Scandinavian countries was achieved around the time of World War I. The suffrage movements were women's movements for equal rights with men within the existing system; no critique of capitalism was involved. In the New Women's Movement in Denmark, we struggled with developing a Marxist feminist thinking, albeit without much success – mainly (as I see it now) because we looked for answers to our questions regarding women and gender in Marx's *Capital*, where such answers are not to be found. Meanwhile American

feminists had pointed to Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949) as the foundational text of the 'Second Wave' women's movement (Nicholson 1997). We in the socialist-inclined part of the Danish New Women's Movement felt this was a step backwards into the 'First Wave' feminist movement, but we did not have the conceptual tools to argue convincingly against it.

In hindsight, de Beauvoir as a feminist still thought in terms of Descartes' hierarchical dichotomies of mind/body, human/nature and man/woman. In de Beauvoir's project of women's emancipation, Man is the model. The conceptual pair she took over from Jean-Paul Sartre, transcendence/immanence, fits perfectly into the Cartesian hierarchical dichotomies: transcendence stands for creativity and all interesting and worthwhile activities; immanence for the body, nature, domestic work, menstruation, and giving birth. De Beauvoir wanted to get rid of it all, in order to join the men in their exciting transcending activities. Substantial parts of de Beauvoir's writing in *The Second Sex* move along these lines, her language rich in phallic metaphors:

> Homo faber has from the beginning of time been an inventor: the stick and the club with which he armed himself to knock down fruits and to slaughter animals became forthwith instruments for enlarging his grasp upon the world ... he set up goals and opened up roads toward them … he burst out of the present, he opened the future (de Beauvoir 1949/1997, 95).

This movement of bursting out of the present, and of opening the future is always a movement forwards, upwards "given that the basic image of the project remains male erection and ejaculation" as acknowledged by de Beauvoir's otherwise very loyal interpreter, feminist philosopher Toril Moi (1994, 152). In contrast to this creative activity of the archetypical hero, 'immanence' is described as passivity and repetition, the drudgery of domestic work, in which giving birth, breastfeeding, and motherhood are included.

> The woman who gave birth ... did not know the pride of creation; she felt herself a plaything of obscure forces, and the painful ordeal of childbirth seemed a useless and even troublesome accident. But in any case, giving birth and suckling are not activities, they are natural functions; no project is involved; and that is why woman found in them no reason for a lofty affirmation of her existence – she submitted passively to her biological fate (de Beauvoir 1949/1997, 94).

This value hierarchy – along the lines set out by Descartes – leads de Beauvoir to proclaim that "it is not in giving birth but in risking life that man is raised above the animal; that is why superiority has been accorded in humanity not to the sex that brings forth but to that which kills" (de Beauvoir 1949/1997, 95–96).

A welcome feminist counter-voice to de Beauvoir is Ursula le Guin, in her short and spot-on 'male hero'-critical essay: *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (le Guin 1986). "So long as culture was explained as originating from and elaborating upon the use of long, hard objects for sticking, bashing, and killing, I never thought I had, or wanted, any particular share in it" (le Guin 1986, 153). Le Guin's alternative to the sticking, bashing, killing 'hero story' is the one about the carrier bag, the container for collecting and gathering food to share; not heroic, but good for life. Anyhow, she says, "it is the story that makes the difference" (le Guin 1986, 153). "The trouble is, we've all let ourselves become part of the killer story," we have to get into "the other story, the untold one, the life story" (le Guin 1986, 154).

De Beauvoir, however, tells the killer story. To her the female body is a handicap, turning woman into "the victim of the species" (de Beauvoir 1949/1997, 52). Never ever is the female body with its capacity for pregnancy, childbirth and lactation seen as a positive potential. To de Beauvoir the female body is always and only a curse, a drag and a burden: "Parturition in cows and mares is much more painful and dangerous than it is in mice and rabbits …. From puberty to menopause the woman is the theatre of a play that unfolds within her and in which she is not personally concerned" (de Beauvoir 1949/1997, 60). De Beauvoir continues over many pages her descriptions of the horrors of the female body, all connected to the ordeal of childbirth and woman's enslavement to the species (de Beauvoir 1949/1997, 55–65). With her story enclosed in the Cartesian narrative of hierarchical dichotomies, de Beauvoir lacks le Guin's insight that "it is the story that makes the difference."

Storytelling is what theorising is all about: how issues are perceived, described, conceptualised. Most of the horrors of womanhood described by de Beauvoir are conditioned by post-witch hunts capitalist society and the resulting female subordination. Mies' and Hill Collins' concept of motherwork makes room for different stories; stories of motherhood connected to pleasure

and pride. These kinds of stories also emerge from African feminist thinking as developed by Ifi Amadiume and Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí.

However, in the contemporary political scene of most Western countries, it is de Beauvoir's approach that leads the way for stories and conceptions of gender equality: women's equality with men on male terms; an equality which can only be acquired by disavowing the female body – and handing over some of its functions and tasks to lower class women, as it has happened since the days of the early capitalist bourgeoisie, with working class wetnurses and maids. Nowadays in the Western world these women often are racialised others, women migrants from the Global South.

The World Bank's approach to gender equality as articulated in the World Development Report 2012: *Gender Equality and Development*, as well as in strategy documents and action plans, such as the 2007-10 action plan: *Gender Equality as smart Economics* (2007), is based on de Beauvoir's 'Man the model' idea. The same applies to the notion of gender embedded in the UN *Sustainable Development Goals*. In these contexts, 'women's empowerment' is about integrating women into capitalist economic circulations. Seen from the positions of decolonial Latin American feminists, this Western dominated international feminism is colonial feminism:

> This feminism wears heels, suits and uses bankcards. They look at themselves in the mirror as 'actresses' of a society and not as subjects of collective political change. It is a feminism, which has disposed the spontaneous organizing of women, and neutralized it in nongovernment organizations, foundations, academies and political parties. … It is a feminism that does not construct autonomy but asks for equality, assimilating the feminine world into the masculine (Gargallo 2014, cited in Rodrigues Castro 2021, 4).

'Colonial feminism' is an extended version of the 'corporate feminism' denounced by Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya and Nancy Fraser in their *Feminism for the 99% – A Manifesto* (Arruza et al. 2019, 1).

Sylvia Tamale is precise and eloquent in her critique of 'gender equality feminism', juxtaposing it with ideas of complementarity and gender justice: "The concept of 'equality' is predicated upon fundamental but flawed notions of liberal individualism and universalism," she says. "Values such as equity, social justice and *Ubuntu* resonate much more with the traditional

understandings of most African people" (Tamale 2020, 132). *Ubuntu* means something like "I am because you are", pointing to reciprocity and interconnectedness, very different from the individuality and rationality of the Cartesian "I think, thus I exist". "Interdependence and compassion are the bedrock on which communities are built," Tamale says (2020, 140). It is important "to unwed our conceptual thinking from Western social ideas, particularly the emphasis on individualism, and begin viewing our indigenous cultures as legitimate analytical frameworks … Our tradition equips us with useful tools that we can use to achieve gender justice; *Ubuntu* is simply one of them" (Tamale 2020, 142).

Conclusion

By looking into different conceptions of gender, first conceptions embedded in traditional female rituals of initiation, and second conceptions of gender as developed and espoused by decolonial African and Latin American gender scholars, a platform has been established from where to look critically into the development of 'modern' ideas of gender in the context of early capitalism and industrialisation. The analysis reveals a close connection between early capitalism, industrialisation, witch-hunts and Enlightenment thinking, all of which paved the way for ideas of gender in terms of hierarchical dichotomies of male dominance/female subordination. In this context, women's equality is understood as women's access to male domains, while pregnancy and childbirth block the road to equality. This conception of gender has come to be seen as a basic ingredient in European modernity, first imposed by colonialism and later appropriated by the international development regime, including the UN and the World Bank. The point of the paper has been to encourage, through critical investigations of 'modernity', re-interpretations of so-called 'tradition' from women's points of view.

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