

The Discomfort with Knowledge Authority – Multiple Feminist Readings of Minna Salami’s *Sensuous Knowledge*

By Signe Arnfred, Sandra Manuel, and Carmeliza Rosario

Abstract

This collective review offers a layered feminist engagement with Minna Salami’s *Sensuous Knowledge* (2020), a text that ambitiously attempts to reframe epistemological authority from a diasporic African feminist standpoint. Prompted by the discomfort of a young African feminist scholar who declined to author a conventional review due to multiple concerns, the editors of this *Feminist Africa* issue decided to write a joint reflection piece. Drawing from contrasting positions—continental, diasporic, and European—the authors interrogate the book’s conceptual contributions, including its poetic method, its critique of “Europatriarchal Knowledge,” and its centring of Yoruba (and other African) knowledge systems. The review explores the friction between Salami’s call for epistemic liberation and her frequent returns to Western philosophical frameworks and raises questions about the limits of epistemic liberation using “the master’s tools.” While acknowledging the book’s shortcomings, the reviewers ultimately acknowledge its value as a provocatively accessible text that contributes to ongoing conversations within African feminist discourse. The review also reflects on the need for a critical space where emerging scholars feel empowered to engage with influential work, even—and especially—when they remain unconvinced by such scholarship.

Keywords: Europatriarchal knowledge, Sensuous knowledge, African knowledge systems, African feminism, Epistemic authority

Introduction

Minna Salami's *Sensuous Knowledge* (2020) has been widely discussed in Black and diasporic literary circles since its publication. Its academic reception, however, particularly within African (feminist) scholarly communities, has been limited. To date, the only formal academic review appears to be Janice Lazarus' (2021) contribution in *The Sociological Review*, a UK-based journal and therefore not situated within African feminist scholarship.

In response to this absence, we as *Feminist Africa* issue editors sought the perspective of a young African feminist scholar, a member of the demographic to which Salami's work is presumed to speak. Our assumption was based on the fact that the book was rooted in Minna Salami's influential blog 'MsAfropolitan' (<https://msafropolitan.com>) – a feminist blog focused on African feminist thought, which has been running since 2010. However, the young scholar's reply to our invitation was marked with hesitation and critical unease.

Given her reluctance, the editors of this issue decided instead to engage in a collective conversation about the book, offering differing perspectives from:

- a senior European feminist (Signe Arnfred),
- an African feminist based on the continent (Sandra Manuel), and
- an African feminist based in Europe (Carmeliza Rosario).

The book emanates from a metaphor about two explorers encountering the same mountain from different sides who give contrasting reports of what they saw. It is structured into nine core chapters: Knowledge, Liberation, Decolonisation, Identity, Blackness, Womanhood, Sisterhood, Power, and Beauty.

From a European feminist perspective

While Arnfred acknowledges limitations in the book, particularly the minimal engagement with African feminist thinkers and the lack of proper referencing – which makes for an easier follow up on interesting ideas – she appreciates the broader conception of knowledge Salami attempts to explore, beyond

Europatriarchal Knowledge with its roots in Enlightenment thinking. For example, when describing ‘sensuous knowledge’, Salami talks about intellectual and emotional intelligence – inspired by Yoruba language and myths – also describing ‘sensuous knowledge’ as “a poetic approach” (2020, 15).

As for Europatriarchal Knowledge, Salami points out that it has “resulted in significant achievements” (2020, 20) – but also that this kind of thinking is “not rooted in the rational thinking it promotes,” but in a “biased narrative that brazenly centres whiteness and maleness” (2020, 20). Further, along the same lines, Salami discusses “Enlightenment-era philosophers who established the Europatriarchal Knowledge narrative by encoding their biases into the field of science” (2020, 31). Arnfred reads all these statements as being to the point and undermining any claimed ‘neutrality’ of a ‘scientific’ view. She also likes Salami’s statement that “there is no other ideology – not socialism, not Marxism, not black radicalism, or white Western feminism – that at core has created liberation theories for addressing class, gender and racial discrimination combined” (2020, 25).

Arnfred, however, is critical of Salami for reproducing the common misunderstanding that African cultures are inherently patriarchal. This is not the case, Arnfred avers. Some African societies have patrilineal kinship systems, but matrilineal systems are widespread on the continent. As explained by Christine Saidi in her book, *Women’s Authority and Society in East-Central Africa*, “much popular writing and many popular ideas about gender in Africa continue to rest on the belief that women in all societies in the entire world are oppressed, and that African women are particularly oppressed” (2010, 12). In actual fact, as Saidi contends, “the labor of young women, and young men for that matter, in many East-Central African societies ... was historically controlled by the older female matrilineal kin of the young women, not by the men” (2010, 16). In many places this is still the case.

Overall, Arnfred appreciates the book’s engagement with figures such as Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Patricia Hill Collins; she emphasises Salami’s critique of Europatriarchal Knowledge and her advocacy for emotional intelligence, poetic method, and creative expression.

From a continental perspective

Manuel's engagement with the thematic of *Sensuous Knowledge* was through Salami's blog. She tends to agree with Arnfred's assessment. Neither scholar had the expectation that the book would be an academic piece; both thought that its merit was to make complex thought accessible to a wider public, a point that Lazarus also makes. Indeed, Salami has stated that the role of "sensuous knowledge" is to challenge dominant epistemologies, not to establish itself as the dominant epistemology. Salami uses multiple sources to challenge and resist Eurocentric frameworks mainly by giving pride of place to African indigenous philosophies, especially Yoruba thought, with which she is most familiar. She shows profound knowledge of thinkers from across Africa, including Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Alamin Mazrui (Kenya), Wole Soyinka, Ifi Amadiume, Oyèrónkẹ Oyèwùmí, Bibi Bakare-Yusuf, Nwando Achebe (Nigeria), Pumla Dineo Gqola (South Africa), Yvonne Vera (Zimbabwe), and Kofi Awoonor (Ghana). However, she also uses scholarship from the diaspora, perhaps giving it more prominence than works from Africa, and positions herself as a diasporic African feminist. This is what shapes her central critique of Europatriarchy.

From a diasporic perspective

Rosario, reflecting on some of the points raised by the young scholar, finds merit in concerns about an undue substantial engagement with authors centred within Europatriarchy. Such engagement runs contrary to Salami's early statement that her primary motivation was not to battle with the Europatriarchal view. "That would place him, yet again, at the center of the narrative" (2020, 2). And yet, this is precisely what she ends up doing. It has been a common exercise, among decolonial African feminists to decentre dominant epistemologies by purposefully not starting with them. This is something that Salami fails to do.

Salami's most significant contribution is the concept of "sensuous knowledge," a mode of knowing that engages "mind, body, and soul" (2020, 14). The book misses the mark by invoking seventeenth century British poet, John Milton, to articulate a concept meant to challenge dominant epistemologies. In doing so,

Salami ends up using the master's tools to attempt to dismantle the master's house. Yet again, it is necessary to acknowledge that she does address the issue of the master's tools by stating that "there is so much emphasis on the word tools that we have missed the significance of the word house" (2020, 34). Ultimately, she proposes that we leave the master's house by removing the mantle that creates the illusion of its integrity.

Furthermore, her referencing Israeli-American psychologist Daniel Kahneman's two internal systems as equivalent to *ogbon* in Yoruba philosophy seems too aligned with Western binary obsession. She does present the differences. The *ogbon* (translated as knowledge) is considered by the Yoruba to be formed of two separate but equally important parts: *ogbon-inu*, or knowledge of the gut; and *ogbon-ori*, knowledge of the head, whereas Kahneman, while acknowledging the duality, still presents a hierarchy between the two. This is the starting point of Salami's argument against dominant epistemological preference for a knowledge system that favours the rational over the emotional; and which forms the basis of the structural bias of Europatriarchy. While one can appreciate the contribution and the parallels with arguments presented by a Nobel prize laureate (Kahneman), it seems that instead of decentring a dominant epistemology, Salami felt compelled to find parallels in one to give credence to the point she was making.

Troublingly, Salami states that we would not have "encyclopaedias, maps, trains, planes, modern universities", if it were not for the "scientific, industrial, and information revolutions" ushered by the Enlightenment (2020, 19). And while Salami does recognise that the Enlightenment is problematic, decolonial scholars are unlikely to affirm her assertion, which ignores the systematic destruction of knowledge systems that could have contributed to and enhanced such advancements. Additionally, maps and encyclopaedias have systematically been criticised as being part of a knowledge system logic that separates and classifies in profoundly biased ways.

Ironically, at the same time that Salami advocates a challenge to the way we think about knowledge, through a collective story, she refers to this resetting as a "tabula rasa"—a known proposition by British Enlightenment philosopher, John Locke. Setting aside the feasibility of cleaning the slate and starting anew, we are left with the same dilemma of returning to the master's tools

(terminologies) when attempting to tear down his house. This is not to say that her proposition to change perceptions of a dominant knowledge system by changing the narrative about that system is without merit. In fact, it echoes overall decolonial thought.

In addition, in commending efforts to counter Europatriarchy, Salami conflates black and African feminist contributions. There are commonalities, but also important differences between the oppression of Black women in settler societies and that experienced by African women elsewhere, not least because of the latter's heterogeneity. This is coupled with some essentialised ways of representing African culture and women. This proclivity is visible in the presentation of African philosophy as a "philosophy of interbeing" (Salami 2020, 36), suggesting a cohesive "essence" placing African and other "indigenous" knowledge systems in opposition to Europatriarchal knowledge.

The juxtaposition of Socrates and Orunmila, who represent Western and Yoruba philosophies, is very potent. Salami proposes that African myth and philosophy should be integrated into global knowledge in the same way Greek mythology and philosophy have been used to "apply insights to contemporary European life" (Salami 2020, 39). While we would not contradict Salami's proposition, it should be remembered that the seamless integration of Greek philosophy into everyday European life and beyond has been made possible by its continuous presence within education systems globally, facilitated by the colonial enterprise. Before pursuing global ambitions, we might need to consider how we integrate our mythologies and philosophies into our African education systems.

In conclusion

One of the young scholar's concerns was that in the current climate of polarised academic discourse, her review would "sidestep crucial problems or risk contributing to unproductive forms of critique." By engaging in this debate, prompted by this scholar's concerns, we wanted to revive the tradition of the academic debate that can carefully consider the role that critique should play in such conversations. We find that overall, and in spite of whatever critique we might offer, the book is well written and with compelling contributions to

African feminist discussions. Salami remains visible and influential. She has supplemented her contribution with a standpoint in the *Feminist Africa – African Futurism* (2021) edition and a recently published book entitled, *Can Feminism Be African?* (2025). Our hope is that, in the future, young scholars such as the one who generated this discussion amongst the editors of this *Feminist Africa* issue will feel safe to share their misgivings about these and other writings. The feminist space, and especially the highly critical African feminist space, should give them strong models of debate to be able to do so. Their perspectives can only enrich all of us.

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