

***Women in Africa* by Toyin Falola and Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso. London: Routledge, 2025.**

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Scholarship on African women, although a subject so vast and consequential, is so persistently marginalised within the disciplines that claim to explain the African world. This textbook, *Women in Africa* by Toyin Falola and Olajumoke Yacob-Haliso, arrives as a deliberate correction to this erasure. In this comprehensive single-volume work, Falola and Yacob-Haliso state that the “book explores the various ways in which gender has been constructed in different African cultures across history and how this has impacted the lived experiences of women ... [and] invites us to think again about the changing roles, identities, and contributions of African women across space and time” (iv). In 22 chapters spanning the pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial lives of women, the textbook covers an extraordinary range of topics, from history, health, religion, and sexuality to economic life, migration, feminist theory, popular culture, peacebuilding, and social media.

The textbook is divided into four parts: African women in history; social lives and livelihoods; bodies and being; and political and social agency. Part I traces women’s agency from ancient Egypt, the Kingdom of Kush, Nok culture, and Bantu societies through colonialism and apartheid, closing with a genealogy of African feminisms. Part II covers topics on motherhood, marriage, education, economic activities, science and technology, racism and colourism, religion, and popular culture. Part III addresses gendered sexualities, women’s health, sex work, and gender-based violence. Lastly, Part IV, which examines politics, conflict and peacebuilding, women writers, social media, and migration, is the most generative, especially for scholars working within African feminist frameworks. Considering the editorial concerns of this volume, our review assesses the extent to which the textbook contributes to African feminisms, feminist decoloniality, and Black feminist epistemologies, with specific emphasis on intersectionality (Crenshaw 1989, 1991).

The textbook's overarching argument is that African women are not passive subjects of history but the architects of it. The theoretical positioning regarding the construct of gender is declared early and ambitiously. The authors situate gender in their theorisations and show how, on the African continent today, "gender is taken to be a pervasive and deeply embedded social structure" and that the category of "women" must never be homogenised but must instead be analysed through the intersecting pressures of race, class, ethnicity, religion, age, sexuality, nationality, and (dis)ability (2). They are equally explicit in naming the epistemic injustice that has kept African women marginalised in the Western hegemonic academy, the androcentrism of African Studies itself, and the way feminist scholarship has historically centred the concerns of white, Western, middle-class women while rendering African feminist intellectual traditions invisible.

The textbook demonstrates a clear commitment to African and feminist decoloniality frameworks. The engagement with African feminisms in Chapter 5 is a genealogical intervention that dismantles the "waves" metaphor that is a feature associated with the linearity of Western feminist tradition. Instead, they situate and trace African feminist thought in the pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial times in Africa. The genealogy of African feminisms, such as womanism, Africana womanism, STIWANISM (Social Transformation Including Women in Africa), motherism, negofeminism, and snail-sense feminism, is surveyed with admirable breadth. The approach of treating topics in Part II as interlocking systems is a refusal of the linearity associated with Western hegemonic knowledge production. Rather, they are presented as interlocking sites where patriarchy, colonial legacies, and women's agency are continually negotiated. This is exemplified in the chapter on motherhood where the authors draw on the work of some Black and African scholars, including Patricia Hill Collins and Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí, and refuse the glorification and the victimisation of African mothers. Rather, they expose the outsized social costs borne by women, a consequence of what is described as the "superwoman" expectation. The chapter on economic activities makes a similar structural argument, naming colonial dispossession and the devaluation of feminised labour as causes of the positioning of women in African society today. Their theorising of gender within feminist movements sets a decolonial

standard that is crucial for understanding and centring the lived experiences of women on the African continent today.

The textbook's most significant strength lies in its systematic recovery and affirmation of African women's historical agency across all of its four parts. Chapter 22 resonates strongly with this issue's concern for how gender and class intersect and mediate who moves, how they move, and what resources and opportunities are available to them. Chapter 20 on African women writers covers themes of migration, racism, identity, and cosmopolitanism in contemporary African women's writings. Chapter 21 on women's agency and social media traces how African women have used social media platforms both as spaces of activism and as economic tools. These chapters reflect the authors' attentiveness to mobility not only as a physical phenomenon but also as a social, cultural and digital phenomenon. Together, they offer a rich picture of African women navigating and contesting the boundaries of movement.

The textbook's account of colonialism as a gendered project is rigorous and politically clear and shows affinity with the extensive African feminist scholarship. It shows how religion, the cash-crop economy, indirect rule, and colonial education worked jointly to dispossess women of land, political authority, and active participation in the public sphere. It foregrounds women's resistances to the processes of political domination, dispossession and extraction, from Empress Taytu Betul at Adwa to the 1929 Women's War in southeastern Nigeria. It applies intersectional analysis to apartheid South Africa, which was cast as a region with marked differences from the colonial histories of other regions of the African continent. Falola and Yacob-Haliso's conception of African women and their experiences transcends the geographical boundaries of the continent and, in that framing, guides their analysis of African women in the diaspora, racism, and colourism (Chapter 11).

Chapter 19 on conflict and peacebuilding is a standout, as the authors take the time and care to distinguish between the formal mechanisms of institutional inclusion (United Nations Security Council Resolution 1325, quota frameworks) and the organic, community-rooted peacebuilding that African women have historically practised long before such formal mechanisms existed. Examples such as Leymah Gbowee's movement in Liberia, the

grassroots women's coalitions of post-genocide Rwanda, and the women peacekeepers of the African Union Mission in Somalia are not presented as exceptional cases but as structural expressions of African feminist agency. Chapter 21 tracks how African women have used digital platforms and social media as sites of feminist activism, including #BringBackOurGirls, #EndSARS, and the North African uprisings, as new terrains of solidarity and resistance.

The textbook is not without its tensions, and a decolonial feminist reading makes several of them visible. The most structurally significant is one that the authors acknowledge, noting that the book was “tough to write partly because disagreements and debates in the scholarship often mirror real-world social divisions and partly because Western gender discourse and experience have evolved differently from those of African women” (xxvii). Yet, the conditions of this textbook's own production partially reproduce the hierarchies it critiques. This is not a reason to diminish its value because it is a productive contradiction that African feminist scholarship has long inhabited. But it is one that, as critical reviewers operating with a decolonial lens, cannot be left unremarked.

A related tension concerns the recovery of pre-colonial women's agency in Chapter 1. While honestly situating these recoveries within live scholarly debates about patriarchy, women's agency, and gender complementarity, the authors are careful not to slide into hagiography by acknowledging that “while society was far from being uniformly egalitarian, women had privileges and opportunities” (48) that colonialism would systematically dismantle. While they acknowledge that “all known precolonial states represented patriarchies” (48) even as it stresses women's remarkable agency within them, the analytical tension between these two positions needed to be more fully worked through. This is partly a historiographical constraint that the authors inherit rather than create, as African historical writing has long privileged heroic, exceptional narratives over the everyday stories of agency that characterised ordinary women's lives. Consequently, individual exceptional figures such as queens, warrior leaders, and priestesses end up carrying a disproportionate share of the evidentiary weight for claims about women's agency more generally. The structural conditions under which ordinary women lived, not as queens or priestesses but agricultural labourers, market women, enslaved women, and

women in subordinate kin positions, receive far less attention. Elite women's exceptional power thus risks becoming evidence for all women's agency, precisely the homogenisation they caution against. Chapter 22 on migration opens productively, but frames women's migration through a predominantly middle-class lens, leaving working-class women's experiences of precarity insufficiently theorised. Hence, an explicit acknowledgement of this constraint, and its implications for what kinds of recovery are possible, would have strengthened the chapter considerably.

The genealogy of African feminisms in Chapter 5 illustrates a further tension. The survey format, which moves briskly through each variant, tends to obscure important differences, thus producing an effect of intellectual abundance without deep critical engagement. For instance, motherism is noted to be "limited by its emphasis on a woman's obligation to society in a role that sometimes perpetuates her marginalisation" (125), but this critique occupies a single paragraph without further analysis. A more searching interrogation of how some of these frameworks, particularly those that centre biological motherhood or African values, run the risk of reinscribing essentialist notions of womanhood that African feminist scholarship has worked hardest to dismantle, would have been helpful. A similar unevenness appears in Part II in the depth of engagement with heteropatriarchy as a structural category. Particularly on motherhood and marriage, the description of patriarchal arrangements occasionally outpaces their critical interrogation. The authors acknowledge the "glorification" of motherhood to "such an extent that its responsibilities and expectations became outsized to human ability" (146), yet the structural question of how working-class women specifically experience these burdens under economic precarity surfaces only in pockets. The critique names the burden without fully theorising the class-differentiated ways in which it is distributed and lived. Similarly, masculinities remain largely in the background and not sustained throughout the textbook. Men and masculine norms appear as the conditions against which women's experiences are defined rather than the subjects of rigorous gendered analysis.

Chapter 10 on science and technology nearly repeats the very thing it critiques, limiting its celebration of women in STEM to those with Western credentials while overlooking how science and technology operate in the domestic spheres of women's lives. Despite the authors' firm commitment to

the principle that Africa is not a country and their warning against “homogenising, decontextualising, and over-generalising” (6), the continent-wide scope produces a gravitational pull towards West African and South African case studies, leaving women from other regions appearing only sporadically.

Lastly, the book commits explicitly to intersectionality as a method, foregrounding race, class, ethnicity, sexuality, and age throughout. Yet (dis)ability, which the authors name in the introduction as a necessary axis, did not make it to the rest of the substantive analysis. Given how they argue against single-axis explanations, this is a significant gap.

We want to emphasise that our critiques have been generated by holding the textbook to the demanding standards set by the authors. *Women in Africa* provides students and scholars with the most accessible and comprehensive entry point available for the study of African women. It foregrounds African feminist intellectual traditions and refuses continental generalisation while attempting to achieve a continent-wide scope. It also consistently insists on intersectionality not as a rhetorical gesture but as an analytical practice. Readers seeking a theorised account of migration and social class as organising frameworks will need to supplement it with more focused scholarship. Importantly, this textbook serves as a foundational text that maps the terrain on which such theorisation must occur. Specifically, the textbook offers a theorisation that recovers and recentres the historical agency of African women, names the structures that have constrained such agency, and reimagines the agentic power of African women as one that does not require liberation but rather remains part of African women’s lives and identities.

References

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