

Book review:

***Gendered Voices From The Gambia*, by Pierre Gomez and Isatou Ndow**

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“Gender” as a social construct, is a widely accepted unit of social, political and economic analysis among scholars and “development” practitioners alike. Gender scholars usually proceed from the presumption that socially ascribed roles based on sex and binary identities, typically associated with being “male,” or “female,” are socially constructed and not biologically determined. Coming of age in the 1980s, “Gender” analysis was heavily influenced by “Liberal,” “Standpoint,” and “Post-modernist/structuralist,” Feminist epistemologies, which in turn sparked debate and public policy outcomes centered around: (a) Women in Development (WID), (b) Women and Development (WAD), and (c) Gender and Development (GAD).

In general, “Western” and “liberal” gender scholars challenge “domination,” and “oppression” of women by men, and seek modest institutional reforms to ameliorate their presumed subordinated status; whereas “Standpoint” feminists view capitalism as the root cause of “oppression.” Thus, capitalism, it is argued, must be overthrown to stem gender exploitation. Post-modernist/structuralist scholars, on the other hand, especially those from the Global-South, contest universalized liberal feminist constructions of non-western women as “oppressed,” and “passive” which they view as both elitist and racist.

For scholars and activists who subscribe to the Post-modernist/structuralist views of gender, it is male privilege, - which for decades have shaped the “development,” “modernity” and “globalization” discourse (s) of the “West,” generally, and transnational

corporations, specifically. International Financial Institutions (IFIs), and the World Trade Organization (WTO) are often singled out for criticism because of their unexamined gendered decisions and prescriptions to insure capitalist domination and Western hegemony.

Gendered Voices From The Gambia employs a liberal approach to subject a gender analytic frame on key Gambian literary texts. The creative writers, both men and women, employ various genres to imbue their characters with lived experiences. Accordingly, Gomez and Ndow, unpack the tapestry of gender constructed views, prejudices, and identities in these texts. In the end, they reveal power dynamics and “operational codes,” often associated with “men” and “women” in Gambian society, and Africa in general.

Chapter one of *Gendered Voices* is concerned with “Gender and Gambian Literature,” “Gender and Literature,” and “Gender and Masculinity.” In chapter two, Gomez and Ndow provide summaries of; *The Rebellion* (1968) by Augusta Jawara, *Costly Price* (2005) by Ramatoulie Othman, *The Sun Will Soon Rise* ((2004) by Sallie Sadie Singhateh, and *The Repeal* ((1999), a collection of poems by Juka Fatou Jabang. Dayo Forster’s 2007 novel, *Reading the Ceiling*, Michael Hamadi Secka’s, *The Shock* (2004), and Baba Galleh Jallow’s, “*Ultimate Conflict*,” (1999).

In chapter three, Gomez and Ndow, undertake an interesting expose on ways in which both male and female characters are depicted in Gambian Literature. Chapter four focuses on gendered themes and their manifestations in: “education,” “motherhood,” “domestic violence,” “female circumcision,” “power and decision making,” which are all important signifiers of gender in their own right. Chapter five uses other signifiers: “marriage, sex and sexuality,” “promiscuity,” “male dominance,” and “religion” to further analyze the selected texts. Chapter six is a thematic and theoretical synthesis, with the latter proving the glue to the authors’ narrative.

Gambian Literature, Ndow and Gomez conclude: “follows a common trend where the issues in society tend to be replicated, challenged, and renegotiated in literary texts” (p. 98). They also contend that Gambian women writers, reposition women, so as to invest them with attributes often associated with men- strength, resolve, sexual prowess to subvert

patriarchal, and other gendered expectations. By contrast, these women writers depict male characters as severely flawed, and who fail consistently to meet societal and gender-specific expectations.

This is not the case for Secka and Jallow, who cast men in strong roles while women characters in their novels, are rendered passive, marginal, and are cast in stereotypical roles lacking the power, agency and will to change their circumstances. These images of women are in stark contrast to the self-willed Nysata or Nyima in the works of Jawara and Singhateh. Gomez and Ndow argue that trends in Gambian Literature are consistent with broader continental themes.

Whilst *Gendered Voices* is insightful, its scope is too narrowly conceived. More significantly, Gomez and Ndow fail to push the analysis beyond gender to consider the class, ethnic, regional, “traditional” and “modern” dimensions of the selected characters. In failing to include some of these categories, Ndow and Gomez stripped these characters of complexity, and thus reducing them to simple and one dimensional characters who are inescapably trapped in their gender-constructed roles. By contrast, female characters in *Reading the Ceiling* are assertive, urbane, middle class, well-educated, confident, vocal, sexual, and possibly of Yoruba (Aku/Aku Marabout) descent. They represent more complex characters that embody gender and more.

Regrettably, *Gendered Voices* reads like a draft-chapter for a more nuanced work that would include the dimensions/categories discussed previously. At another level, the book also reads like a compendium of book-reviews, or a supplementary study-guide for a course on Gambian Literature. This is because those reading the book will need to be familiar with the selected texts to fully appreciate the characters and the authors’ resulting analysis.

Thus, the book’s limited scope and depth, scanty primary and secondary sources, and the authors’ failure to include other sources on Gambia from related disciplines severely weaken its substantive base. Reading the book also leaves one wondering what methodology/criteria or rationale Gomez and Ndow utilized to select the texts they included in *Gendered Voices*. Why, for instance, was Ebou Dibba not included? Why was there a selection bias of novels written in the late 1990s and beyond?

Ultimately, *Gendered Voices* exhibits numerous weaknesses in its theoretical, substantive, and methodological grounding (s). It could have been more broadly conceived, comprehensively researched, and subjected to a more rigorous peer-review process than it perhaps received. Therefore, the rush to publish must be tempered by adherence, on the part of both authors, and publishers, to exacting academic and scholarly standards to assure quality of the final product. *Gendered Voices* may well serve as a supplementary text on Gambian/African Literature (s), but not as a standalone expose academic text.

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