# Media and Gender Discourse through Feminism: A Critique

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## Abstract
*This is a positional paper that critiques the discourse of media and gender through the binary prism of feminism. The paper takes an expositional angle of critiquing the act of discourse of media and gender through the premise of feminism paradigm. The paper highlights the fact that feminism as a methodology and alien ideology is embedded with foreign values which are not in tune with the realities obtainable in our contemporary Nigerian societies. Through exposition of the various conceptions of feminism literature, the paper explains how ideas of feminism should not be the primary idea of media discourse about gender conceptions. The position of this paper is that gender discourse in media should be from pluralistic perspectives rather than for the media to continue being the megaphone of feminist thinking in societies whose philosophies are at variance with those of feminist thinking. Further, following the principles of Immanent Critique, this paper theorises ways through which gender discourse in the media can be holistic and more encompassing. The paper concludes that media as a society wide institution of societal mobilisation and enlightenment should not be a restrictive institution that limits gender discourse to only ritualisation of feminism and feministic thinking.*
***Keywords:*** *Media, Gender, Discourse, Feminism & Immanent*

## Introduction
Media are not only a platform for public ideas (Forde, 2015; Kaplan, 2015; Polownikwo, 2015), where discourse, cognition and exchange of collective ideas are undertaken, but also a society wide space where new ideas are introduced, negotiated, pushed and maintained (Copeland, 2003). In the media, old conceptions about societal meanings are continuously interspersed with new perspectives about how societies collectively assign responsibilities to their members. Media is a reference institution where claim makers try to push their claims for public acceptance. Discourses about social issues through the space and time of the media bring out the pros and cons of such discussed social issues. One such discourse that has permeated the media field for long is that of gender. Media have for long served as an avenue where gender discourse: gender definitions, gender framing and gender constructions, is debated for society wide acceptance. However, gender

definitions, framing and construction come in contested public space. Gender definitions, frames and construction in both popular media like newspapers and academic literature are done through perspectives and the dominant perspective through which gender issues are constructed and framed is that of the feminist parlance (Nagoshi, Nagoshi & Brzuzy, 2014; Ingram, 2008; Barret & Davidson, 2006).

Gender and gender discourse are about social definitions, roles ascription and subtle dominance in cultural and communicative endeavours (Pryzgoda & Chrisler, 2000). Gender, as a field of study, entails an understanding of how society defines and constructs roles and meanings over time. It entails not only studying construction of male and female concepts over time but also assessing how these two concepts are constructed and assigned roles by cultural expressions through communicative means. By engaging in communicative definitions of social and gender issues, media "constitute rhetorically induced social knowledge" (Schiappa, 2003, p. 3) that latently puts a stop to how society understands, appreciates and accepts intersex attributions and roles.

Gender, as with other social scientific and humanistic terms, is not a neutral word or concept. While the word 'sex' may denote physiological characteristics, gender comes with infused values and socially ascribed connotations. Gender, according to Zobina and Christodoulu (2009, p. 1),

> refers to *social* attributes that are learned or acquired during socialization as a member of a given community. Gender is therefore an acquired identity. Because these attributes are learned behaviours, they are context/time-specific and changeable (with increasing rapidity as the rate of technological change intensifies), and vary across cultures. Gender therefore refers to the socially given attributes, roles, activities, responsibilities and needs connected to being men (masculine) and women (feminine) in a given society at a given time, and as a member of a specific community within that society. Women and men's gender identity determines how they are perceived and how they are expected to think and act as men and women.

From the above understanding of the term gender, it is a little bit clear that gender and gender expectations are mostly products of culture infused by societal communication patterns either through spoken or written texts. Also, the clear demarcation about understanding gender is not on the concept itself but on what the concept stands for in inter-sex relations within any given society. It is at the point of gender discourse within any given society that points of contest emerge. What runs through all points of contest on gender discourse is that the way gender values are communicated over time and transmitted from one society to another may make gender discourse a one-way monologue (Gallagher, 2014). Many scholars (Tonny & van Bauwel, 2015; Blechner, 2009; Healey, 2003) are of the view that gender discourse and narratives are enshrined to dominate both physical and social spheres of human relationships because texts come with values. To understand on whose instance gender discourse through feminism seems to be a monologue across societies means a call to understanding gender politics and politics of gender and how such politics affects how scholars of media and gender peruse the concept of gender discourse through feminism parlance.

The understanding is that gender discourse is value laden; gender discourse is a cultural artifact that comes with values of gender claim-makers. The values learned about gender within any given society can change over time, subject to whether the discourse is sustained by communication patterns of dialogue or monologue. In this instance, this paper is of the view that the widely sustained media discourse of gender issues through feminism perspective is problematic. It is so because other paradigms of gender discourse are not given equal scrutiny and may have even been side-lined. This problematic discourse of media and gender is a minus on demands of media pluralism and holistic approach to understanding social issues. Also, it is problematic because it defeats the essence of media being communication avenues that are geared towards promoting meaningful dialogue about social issues.

## Conceptualising Feminism

At a glance, feminism is the belief in complete social, economic and political equality for both women and men. It is a movement that largely emanated from Euro-American traditions that restricted the rights of women. Feminism is a globally complex mutation of theories, movements and social upheavals that tend to have multiple differences in meaning and perceptions to different people from different backgrounds, identities, orientations, classes, nationality, and faiths. Feminism as a paradigm is not a static concept; rather, it evolves as an emancipatory

global push, as Hooks (2000 p. viii) puts it, as "a movement to end sexism, sexist exploitation, and oppression." Feminism as a global movement is founded, according to Ropers-Huilman (2002), on three main principles: women have something valuable to contribute to every aspect of the world; as an oppressed group, women have been unable to achieve their potential, receive rewards, or gain full participation in society and that feminist research should do more than critique, but should work toward social transformation of women. At its core tenets, two terms are sacrosanct to feminism drives. These terms are Equality and Equity. No matter the strands of feminism, each is prompt towards promoting equality and equity between and among sexes.

Also, conceptualizing feminism is mostly done through what scholars call waves of feminism. Basically, there are three to four waves of feminism. The first wave is that which was said to have originated with the Irish activist Frances Power Cobbe in 1884 who shared that movements "resemble the tides of the ocean, where each wave obeys one more uniform impetus, and carries the waters onward and upward along the shore" (Hewitt, 2010, p. 2). The first Wave of feminism occurred during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It involved some of the progenitors of liberal feminism that sought to advocatee for divorce laws to protect the rights of women. On the other hand, the second wave of feminism started during the 1960's and ended in the 1990's. It unfolded in the context of the antiwar and civil rights movements and the growing self-consciousness of a variety of marginalized groups around the world. This wave differed from the first wave because it "drew in women of colour and developing nations, seeking sisterhood and solidarity and claiming 'women's struggle as class struggle'" (Rampton, 2008, p. 8).

Further, the third wave is considered as the timeframe from 1990's to 2012. It is informed by postcolonial and postmodern thinking. The aim of the third wavers was transformation of traditional notions of sexuality and calling for societal acceptance of women's feelings about their sexuality. It pushed for intersectionality through laying much emphasis on race, ethnicity, class, religion and minority issues of gender concerns. In relation to the above, the fourth wave feminism is a resurgence of interest in feminism which started in 2012 and is associated with the use of social media like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Tumblr, and blogs. It focused on justice for women, opposition to sexual harassment and

violence against women. Major issues included street and workplace harassment, campus sexual assault and rape culture. Fourth wave feminism still reckons with intersectionality that criticizes White privileges and bringing to the fore the rights of transgender, gay and lesbian people.

In all these, what becomes glaring is the fact that feminism has its perspectives, methodologies and approaches from Euro-American forceful push for global individuality. Also, being an emancipatory drive for global emancipation of women from what the feminist's term as oppression based on victim's gender, feminism and feminists hardly take cognizance of the normative instances and nuances of different societies that they tend to emancipate. In doing that, feminism ends up doing what it accuses others of: oppression of alternative perspectives towards understanding gender conceptions.

**Discourse as a Social Concept**

Discourse refers to how we collectively communicate about social issues for common understanding and acceptance. It is the process whereby members of a given society give structure and order to language of societal cohesion. Discourse typically emerges out of society wide institutions like the media. It therefore shapes how members of a given community think and act about social issues, gender inclusive. Discourse, in its real sense, produces strong perspectives and sustained truth. It legitimizes and rationalizes certain perspectives, tastes, opinions and ideas. Discourse represses other perspectives into less important ones. Discourse does not only provide powerful forms of compelling reasoning and compelling narratives but it also represses certain ideas into the unthinkable alternatives. To understand the concept of discourse, this paper relies on the arguments of Michel Foucault as cited by Matheson (2005, p. 9) that:

> we should not study texts as documents that are *about* something else but as discourse that is *part* of a network of relations of power and identity. Texts aren't to be interpreted, to be puzzled over like crosswords or Bible passages, within which some deep meaning is hidden, but should be studied as part of the ongoing oppression, prejudice, struggle to gain power by knowledge and so on in society, all the things that people engage in through these texts.

As such, discourse is about constructing reality within a particular context that evolves over time. Discourse is about collectively talking, writing, speaking and

communicating our ideas about particular concepts of reality in order to contribute towards the eventual shaping, defining and acceptance of a particular issue of discussion. Discourse is vital to the process of reality construction because it is "the way objects or ideas are talked about publicly that gives rise to widespread perceptions & understanding" (Lull, 2000, p. 173). To this end, constructionist scholars such as Weatherall (2002) point to the centrality of societal discourses in the process of reality construction because "it is possible to see human subjects as not fixed but constantly in process, being constituted and reconstituted through the discursive practices they have access to" (Davies, 1993, p. 11).

Discourse rationalizes social concepts and gives such concepts pedestals of acceptability. Therefore, social discourse exploits culturally shared and understood signs and symbols to pass on messages to members of sub divisions within a societal enclave. To this end, discourse is about inclusion and exclusion of normative societal facts. Discourse is mostly not factual representations of events. In this line of thinking, gender derivatives should not be centred on a particular continuum of the discourse. Discourse is a collective and society wide regulated way of communication that defines and produces objects of knowledge (Baker, 2001), which influence our relationships in a given society. In this sense, it can be observed that gendered discourse plays a crucial role in the construction of society's collective meaning making and knowledge production. To Foucault, objects can only become meaningful and fully understood within discourse. Thus, discourse, particularly discourses through the general paradigm feminism could only mean one thing: a one-way monologue.

Discourses are means by which the world of human experience can be promoted, reconstructed, rearranged, and re-imagined. They are ways of organizing, framing, and directing gender experiences and knowledge about gender roles and ascriptions. Discourses are ways through which ideas about social relations can be promoted to dominate other ideas about such relations to a global level. Hence, discourses properly crafted can become an absolute truth while other contending narratives about such truths can be relegated to the periphery of social discourse. As such, discourses of media and gender are ambassadors of their societies of origin, they come with values of their claim-makers and they are machinery with

capabilities of continual monopoly of understanding gender derivatives through feminism paradigm.

**Media and Gender Discourse through Feminism**

Media gender discourse is currently subsumed under Feminist thinking and Feminist scholarship. What permeates the current scholarship about media and gender is all about the negativities that media do to only one binary of the gender spectrum; that of the female gender. The current crux of academic line of thought about media and gender discourse is that of feminists' perspectives where the discourse is generally about the female gender. The central plot of such discourses is that media portray women through male's gaze (see Lindsey, 2016; Trier-Beirieth, 2015; Mendes, 2015; Carter & Steiner, 2004 and Kilbourne, 1999). Women are framed as sex machines to satisfy male desires (Carter, Steiner & McLauglin, 2014; Calogero, Tantleff-Dunn & Thompson, 2011; Segal, 1999) and that women are identified as commercially viable objects to be used and be discarded as man so wishes (see Haris-moore, 2014; Sarkar, 2014; Ross, 2012; Buikema & Dertuin, 2009; Zaslow, 2009; Thornham, 2007 and Gauntlett, 2002). The trend has created the impression that media and gender discourse is synonymous with media and women studies as the majority of the discourses dwell more on what media negatively do to the gender binary of women.

At face value, the feminists and feminism discourse have two concepts that are central to the goal of achieving a just and emancipatory society for the women folk. These two concepts are Equality and Equity (Meyers, 2014; Bolzendahl & Meyers, 2004). Though feminists are of different orientations ranging from liberal, radical, Marxist-socialists, psycho-analytic, cultural and cyborg-feminists, one thing they both have in common is about examining social relationships and construction of meanings that put women and other minority groups in sublime and disadvantaged positions in the society. Specifically, cultural feminists insist that women and other minority groups should be provided with ways of being, thinking, and speaking that allow for openness, diversity, and difference. Such shift in thinking by the cultural feminists (also known as post-modernists feminists) focuses on questions about construction of meaning and identity via society's communicative practices. The cultural feminists contend that gender and identity are fluid concepts rather than fixed ones, and that men and women may perform characteristics of either gender, or even slide between gender identities subject to how gender roles are constructed and meekly enforced. What matters most here is not the regurgitation of these

different strands of feminism approaches to analyzing inter-sex relations rather the acceptance of such approaches by most media and gender scholars. This should not be so because "feminist-inspired scholarship, even if it does not cover the whole field of gender and media studies has generated the largest body of research on the construction of femininity in the media" (Buonanno, 2014, p. 7).

Therefore, when gleaned from deeper perspectives, discoursing media and gender from the premium of feminists thinking and scholarship is also a continuation of what the feminists claim to be fighting against: domination. Indeed, while discussing gender issues through the glasses of feminism brought to the fore the subjugation of women, feminism, on the other hand, subjugates other alternative facts about media and gender. This stance becomes clear when feminism is seen as a subculture with its own language, concepts, tools, and credentialed practitioners and subject experts. It is in this line of thinking that Oyewumi (2005 p. 49) asserts thus: "though feminism has been presented as a liberatory ideology for women in Western Europe, the United States, and Canada, with regard to Africa, Asia and Latin America, it has been implicated in the colonizing practices that resemble and have benefited from centuries of European domination of other parts of the world." To further corroborate this origin of feminism and how it perpetuates alien cultural domination, Chis (2015 p. 2) insists that "One must look beyond the narratives of benevolence surrounding the colonial-development/aid industry, to recognize how colonial-development has fundamentally benefitted Western patriarchy and Western feminism, more than the people in the Global South." Further, Cornwall (2007) posits that the power relations between women and women in Ado-Ado in Nigeria are more complex and often troublesome on a daily basis due to social pressures, distrust and competition, than the relationship between women and men. The author posited that "men are often the least of their problems" (Cornwall 2007 p. 161). This specific context refutes feminism's generalisations r egarding the primacy of the heterosexual 196ialectic in women's lives, and shows that power is exerted by women over and with men and other women, due to wo men's relational subject positions and identities.

Also, feminism thinking assumes that in Africa men and women always enter social relations as defined and constituted: powerful, men; or powerless, female subjects. This in itself is just enforcement of alien thinking unto indigenous way of life. Not

only that, mandating the media to always discuss gender issues through the spheres of feminism school of thought is grossly limiting the spectrum of what the media should do in their reportorial responsibilities – giving pluralism of perspectives to social issues. In its discourse, media should be a megaphone of one lane story: stories sustained by a culture that comes with its inherent value system.

To buttress its value system more, feminism as brought from Euro-American thinking tend to grossly promote differences in physiological demarcations among humans of different sexes while at the same time it subliminally promotes monologue of Euro-American thoughts through pervasive methodology of understanding inter-sex relations across the globe. Feminism and feminist scholarships are a pervasive methodology that is not only alien to the principles of inclusive scholarship but also a new one that accompanied colonialism to Africa. Oyewumi (2011, p. 10) avers:

> I find that questions of gender and everyday life coalesce very tightly on the origins of gender categories in language, religion, and culture, the place of gender in the oral traditions, gender categories as a colonial imposition, the origins of male dominance in contemporary life, and the ways in which all these factors manifest in, and continue to shape, Yoruba scholarship. Elsewhere, I have shown that in regard to Yoruba traditions, gender categorization emerged during the colonial period. In identifying gender as a colonial category, my concern is not so much to displace culpability for contemporary male dominance to the British colonizers, but rather to begin to recognize and tease out the ways in which the colonial legacy has been internalized and is being reproduced.

Furthermore, to underscore the dangers 'one story' perspective about any social phenomenon such as what is obtainable in studies of media and gender through feminists thinking can do, Minh-ha (1989) asserts that:

> theory oppresses, when it wills or perpetuates existing power relations, when it presents itself as a means to exert authority-the Voice of Knowledge . . . Difference needs not be suppressed in the name of Theory. And theory as a tool of survival needs to be rethought in relation to gender in discursive practice.

What then is to be said of an ideology that perpetuates what it intends to fight against? An ideology that still prefers monolithic solution to global myriad of inter-

sex problems that have historical, religious and socio-economic variants as roots of its causation. To this and many more quests, this paper found some answers in Saadawi's rhetoric cited by Patterson and Gillam (1983) thus: "Yes, and here is a very subtle form of exploitation practised, unfortunately, by feminists-so-called progressive feminists."

What is more, feminism as a women's emancipatory thinking and movement tends to supply globally, one-size-fits-all theories and methodologies that they claim seek to empower women towards self-development. However, many scholars of social change and social movement call for context and society specific and tailor-made paradigms that take cognizance of each societal specifics. In fact, Stahl (2013, p. 1) notes that "it is not sufficient to approach social issues with a preconceived, normative standard that is justified independently of any examination of the social practices in question." In essence, rather than mandating media discourse of gender through principles of feminism, with its independently standardized theories and methodologies from Western individualism, the media should see to it that gender discourse has multiplicity of sources, angles and paradigms. This is so because the media should not be a monolithic institution that strive to propagate dominant social ideas: ideas with global push from the developed North at the expense of the developing South.

Indeed, since the media is not a self-reproducing machinery of one-lane narrative, then, it should, in terms of gender discourse, be an avenue where the rigid dogmas of feminism are subjected to what scholars of *Immanent Critique* refer to the "paradigm of dialectical thinking" (Fornas, 2013). Immanent Critique according to Stahl (2013, p. 7) "is a form of social critique that evaluates both the empirical behavior consisting social practices and the explicit self-understanding of their members according to standards that are, in some sense, internal to those practices themselves. By doing so, immanent critique aims at transformation of such practices that encompasses both actions and self-understanding." This furthers the need for the media to extend the discourse of gender conceptions to different standards of different societies instead of what is currently obtainable in form of mostly perusing gender concerns through the dogmas of feminism. When the media do that, it will turn social discourse into a transformative human activity that carries

along all observations and standards in humanity's approach towards finding acceptable solutions to myriads of gender problems.

**Theorizing Alternative Ways of Studying Media and Gender Discourse**

In theorizing alternative ways of media and gender discourse, this paper is not discarding long time studies on gender by other scholars. Rather, the paper extends the call for *Pluralizing* media and gender discourses and methodologies so that the discourse can benefit from the derivatives of pluralism in research. While most of feminism discourses emanate from the romanticism of individualism, alternative societies and relations are mostly communal in nature (Essien & Falola, 2009). The African community as an alternative community strives to collectively uplift its material and human shades together. As such, a methodology that is value-laden with principles of individuality may not be appropriate in discussing its grey areas of inter-sex relations. Unlike radical feminism thought that calls for women to abscond themselves from men entirely, "in rural agricultural and pastoral communities, marriage endows women with unrestricted access to cattle and land" (Essien & Falola, 2009, p. 122) thereby safeguarding them from the hazards of isolation. Therefore, rather than the media to continuously promote gender discourse through the thoughts of feminism, the media should beam their light and promote the discourse of gender through other perspectives, particularly perspectives that view both men and women not as individuals but as members of communities that strive for the collective upliftment of their respective societies.

Furthermore, some African languages are not patterned along gender binaries that perpetuate the division of labour along gendered responsibilities. According to Oyewumi (2009, p. 11):

> I have always appreciated the significance of the gender-free nature of Yoruba language in the light of our current gender-saturated world. I have systematically documented the fact that the language is nongendered *par excellence*: pronouns are nongendered, most names are not gender-specific, and kinship terms are not gendered; thus there are no single words translatable as the English *son*, *daughter*, *brother*, or *sister*. Most importantly, Yoruba pronouns and kinship terms do not encode gender. What they do encode is seniority, based on relative age, a reflection of the fact that seniority is the most important principle for the social organization of status and hierarchy.

Thus, reconciling a language that pays less emphasis to gendered binary with a methodology that is purely hinged on that binary may lead to confusing framework and a tyrannical approach to monopolizing methodologies through one way media discourse. This may lead to weaponization of theoretical methodologies and epistemic violence of forcing a feministic discourse on the understanding of media and gender issues among scholars who may seek alternative methods of studying and maintaining academically holistic discourse about media and gender. Instead, media and gender issues should be treated normatively within the needs and desires of the collectivistic needs of each society; this, in itself, is what plurality of research methodologies is striving to achieve.

Further, another way of theorizing alternatives of media and gender discourse is by understanding that in many societies, marriage, kinship, lineage, kith and kin linkages are the major thrusts of living. As Essien and Falola (2009) highlight, "Marriage is mainly for sustaining kinship in Sudan, and unions are perceived as an investment because they offer a form of social status and recognition in some societies. Marriage is the focal point upon which family, community and social activities are organized." Herein lies the dilemma of adopting the methodology of feminism which comes with innate values of placing a woman as an individual entity, independent of her society and at the same time using that methodology to find solutions to social problems of a society that places womanhood at the thick of community survival. To do this means doing what Lavallée (2009) calls "overlooking participants' cultural protocols." A process whereby the media favours alien protocol of discourse over its societies' cultural norms, value systems and societal needs; the media is first and foremost for the betterment of the society it serves, not enforcing an ideology that is at variance with the aspirations of the media's normative society.

In relation to the above stance Smith, in some series of studies (1999, 2008, 2009 & 2012), aver that although the Western discourse was cumulatively for the greater good of serving all mankind and societies, colonialism was far from being a finished business. According to him, invisible power practices are embedded within the Western discourse system, which is about the unequal power of defining, essentializing, labelling, and thus alienating the other alternative discourses. Smith also explains that to the discourse researcher, epistemological issues are significant.

Feminists' epistemology frames the way we see media and gender issues across borders, the way we go about conducting discourses about it, the questions we ask about media and gender and the solutions we seek to proffer concerning media and gender issues. As such, the media as a society wide institution of societal mobilisation should not be a restrictive institution that limits gender discourse to only promotion of feministic thinking.

## Conclusion

This paper took an expositional position of critiquing the act of the discourse of media and gender through the premise of feminism paradigm. The paper highlighted the fact that feminism as a methodology and alien ideology is embedded with foreign values which are not in tune with the realities obtainable in our Nigerian societies. While feminism places a woman at the fulcrum of individualism, our society's understanding of gender issues put a woman as a mother and sister within communal and collective living. Therefore, the media being our society wide institution of information, enlightenment, mobilisation and ethicisation should not always be an agent of perpetuating alien, one-lane paradigm, methodology and ideology. Hence, this paper concludes that the discourse of gender issues in the media should be pluralistic, incorporative and open to other conceptions of gender concerns and understanding.

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