

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Seeing Foucault's theory through African lenses: The discourse on sex, gender and power

Oni Peter

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts University of Lagos, Lagos, Nigeria.

Received 18 June, 2018; Accepted 15 October, 2018

**The paradigm of male domination exemplified by the social relations between the sexes is structured in a way that men dominate and women submit. As such, these socio cultural relations presuppose a dyadic conception of domination in which women are subject to men. If men are domineering and women are docile, then it is contradictory to say women have power. However, in line with Foucault's idea on sexuality, this paper explores sexuality concretely in African context. It is against this background that this paper argues that women who are seen as powerful are not but symbol of subordination and subjugation. Thus, African women see gender as a fundamental controlling power that brings about social harmony.**

**Key words:** Gender, power, sexuality, social harmony.

## INTRODUCTION

From the 18<sup>th</sup> Century to contemporary times, different kinds of ideas and representation have been made to enrich the literature on sex and gender. In philosophy, the metaphysical approach to power is expressed by the capacity of a body to effect or to undergo change. Hence, water, for instance, has the power to dissolve sugar and salt. Also, water has the capacity to solidify under certain temperature. As such, the metaphysical nature of power is connected to properties intrinsic to substances which in essence do not need any external force to be manifested. In essence, power deals with an intrinsic structure of substance, and also the laws of nature as bearers of power. The second approach closer to our focus in this paper is the sociopolitical power. That is the power of an individual or institutions to achieve a goal. It could be by right, by influence or by control. In this line of thought, political theorists such as Niccolò Machiavelli (1465 -

1527), Thomas Hobbes (1588 - 1679) and Friedrich Nietzsche (1844 - 1900) amongst others have contributed to enrich literature with power. To add to the work of Foucault, we set to examine the French postmodern philosopher's work on power, sex and gender and its relevance in African societies.

## FOUCAULT'S THEORY OF POWER

Foucault's understanding of power is different from others. In contrast to the conventional political theories which fundamentally prescribe obedience to constituted authority and the law, Foucault defines power as relation, present at every stratum of the society. He called them micro-powers. As relation, power establishes a rapport between individuals in the society which ultimately

Email. [onipeter@hotmail.com](mailto:onipeter@hotmail.com).

Author(s) agree that this article remain permanently open access under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution License 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

determines the type of influence individuals have on each other or one another. In this regard, power based on this social relationship makes an individual to do what he ordinarily would not do. What this means is that power has the capacity to influence or restrict individual's decision or will. In Foucault's view, power as thus defined is present in all human relationship. In *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault captures all these by giving an insight into his position. He enumerates five characteristics of power to convey his message (Foucault, 1980:94). First, power is not something that is acquired, seized or shared. Power is exercised from innumerable points. Second, power is not applied from exterior rather it is inherent, immanent to the relations of power and it determines their inner structure. Third, power does not come from above; it springs up from all levels of society. Hence, the binary and all-embracing opposition between the ruler and the ruled for him does not exist. Fourth, Foucault acknowledges the possibility of strategies and designs in power relationship. Fifth, these characteristics underline the possibility of resistance which to him is the dynamics of power change. He states: "where there is power, there is resistance, and yet, or rather consequently, this resistance is never in a position of exteriority in relation to power". Foucault's emphasis on human relationship is interesting as resistances are inscribed in power relation as its opposites. According to Foucault, they spread in time and space inflaming certain moments of life and behaviour. These resistances explain the dynamism of social relations (Foucault, 1980:96). However, Foucault does not limit the scope of his enquiry to the first definition as he gives a table of different types of power. As a philosopher and historian of systems of thought, Foucault enumerates other types of power such as the pastoral power, metaphorically portrayed by the shepherd and his flock as obtained in past civilizations namely, the Egyptian, Assyrian, and Mesopotamian, among other civilizations. Other types of power include sovereign power, power-knowledge, disciplinary power and bio power. For the sake of focus and brevity, we shall only be concerned with types of power relevant to the topic.

At this juncture, it is important to examine Foucault's view on the different manifestations of power in Western European societies and then similarity with his analysis on the discourse on sex. In his view, the transformation of Western European societies from a sovereign power system to society of disciplinary power is epitomized by the idea of panopticon, he borrowed from Jeremy Bentham (Foucault, 2012). The panopticon was Jeremy Bentham's architectural device contrived at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century to describe his idea of a prison under watch. The English philosopher conceived a circular building of cells in which prisoners are observed. From the central watch tower, the prisoners are watched, and as a result, they police their own behaviour. According to Foucault, this new method then was used in schools, barracks,

hospitals etc. Even in our contemporary times, the surveillance cameras all over the places are clear manifestation of this idea. Interestingly, the panopticon is a metaphor for the eye that sees one and that which one does not see. It could also be a metaphor for the Omnipresence and Omniscience of God; the God that watches everyone and that we cannot see. Invariably, in Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, the panopticon can also be akin to the superego monitoring and watching the unfolding of the unconscious wishes of man. In Freud's theory developed in the 1880s, the human personality is made up of three elements namely, the id, the ego and the superego. The conflictual interaction often experienced according to Freud between the three elements explains the behavioural pattern of every individual. Consequently, it is not surprising if the superego serves in many cases as the watchdog of the emotional and sexual perversions of the individual. In fact, it is the social, cultural and even spiritual regulator of personal behaviours (Freud, 1963).

However, it is possible to say that the monitoring and controlling abilities of the new mode of power exemplified by the panopticon can develop negative tendencies of domination if not checked. This is one of the criticisms leveled against Foucault's power paradigm. One may be tempted to ask how sex comes into play in this intellectual venture. The answer is not farfetched as Foucault establishes a comparative analysis. He argues that the transformation that permeated the repressive and punitive measures in Europe was also noticed in the discourse on sex. As a philosopher and historian of systems of thought, Foucault noticed that Europe over time had a discourse on flesh. Then, from the 18<sup>th</sup> century, it was sexuality and in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, it became sex (Sarup, 1993: 70-71). It is worthy of note that Foucault's analysis could be seen as a trigger to many other interpretations and discourses on sex and gender. As a matter of fact, he observed that the pattern of chance observed in his historical analysis of *Discipline and Punish* was similar to that of the discourse on sex. The common denominator happens to be the body, for it is the body that is punished, disciplined and made the object of desire. In essence, the overall assessment of the disciplinary practices and that on sex was bodies that were useful, docile, subjected, productive or restricted and confined. It is in this vein that we note that Foucault's primary objective was to provide a genealogy and a critique of the way modern society's control, sanction and discipline their populations. By implication, how does sex contribute to this controlling and disciplinary phenomenon precisely, the female gender? This choice is not unconnected with the social role women play in this respect. Thus, the contribution comes to our presence when Foucault's understanding of power, knowledge and sex is examined. The nexus between power and sex just like power and knowledge in Foucault's philosophy is discourse. Discourse, in Foucault's understanding, is

what has been spoken, how it was spoken and in what context is it spoken. Discourse is crucial to Foucault's philosophy as language (discourse) and knowledge are tightly related to power. In the *Archeology of Knowledge*, Foucault writes:

*Discourse is no longer the shimmering of a truth about to be born in his own eyes and when all come eventually to take the form of discourse, when everything may be said and when everything becomes an excuse for pronouncing a discourse; it will be because all things having manifested and exchanged meanings, they will then be able to return to the silent interiority of self-consciousness (Foucault, 1972: 228).*

By this assertion, Foucault suggested that a discourse has a specific meaning in the mind of the discussant. A discourse is a vessel conveying an idea which comes into being through speech. Speech is not only about communication of facts and ideas, it is as important as the originator of the idea. In this regard, Foucault opines that what is said (the discourse) is as important as the "who" that says and who articulates and decides what is said. Hence, whoever determines that which is said or talked about also determines what can be known. As such, the same "who" that determines what can be known determines also the premise of the thinking process. Interestingly, Foucault in line with other philosophers such as Hannah Arendt agrees that the identity of the discussant is as important as the discourse itself and needs to be revealed. Hannah Arendt writes: "In acting and speaking, men show who they are, reveal actively their unique personal identities..." (Arendt, 1958:179). The revelation of personal identity and the symbiosis between the personality of the actor and the action itself led Foucault to establish a rapport between discourse, knowledge, sexuality and their political inclination.

Foucault argues that sometime in the past, in the history of Western civilization, the Christian confession was the locus of sexuality. With the Reformation and the counter-Reformation, the discourse on sexuality took another form. Sexuality began to be defined in terms of the mind as well as the body. However, at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, the discourse on sex became a matter of science. In his idea, Foucault was re-echoing Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis (Sarup: 71); (Foucault, 1980:55). Indeed, it was Sigmund Freud who opened up a new window into sexuality by examining three main areas namely sexual perversions, childhood, sexuality and puberty. His theory on sexuality has an intrinsic link to childhood. This is evident as Freud, examining some women's hysterical cases with no neurological rapport, discovered the root of the pathology in disturbing memories relayed by images of sexual abuses against these women at childhood (Freud, 1963:120). Given the above, it will not be out of place to affirm that Foucault

may have been inspired by the rich Freudian investment on sexuality to develop his discourse on sex since the 17<sup>th</sup> Century beginning with an examination of the widely held belief that in the "Victorian Era", sex experiences and practices were subjected to a power of repression. In the history of the United Kingdom, Queen Victoria who led England from 1834 to 1901 transformed the country from an agrarian to an industrialized one. But the period was that of many paradoxes as exemplified by sexuality in the Victorian era. Sexuality in its normal form is restricted to the family. The family was the pillar of the Victorian society. Indeed, it was assumed in that society had it that the perfect lady, for instance, had two main assignments in life that were marriage and procreation. If educated, all her education was to bring out her natural submission to the husband's authority. The society was structured through the male/female gender dichotomy. In fact the repression was so pronounced that young ladies were trained to have no opinions of their own (Victoria, Internet). John Stuart Mill pictured the Victorian era in his work *Subjection of Women* (Mills, 1869) which helped to raise some elements of emancipation of women. Arguably, Foucault's analysis shows that the discourse on sexuality was intrinsically related to power as men had power by virtue of their gender in the Victorian era. However, the most attractive part of Foucault's work is the examination of the diverse power relation that exists on the discourse on sex. Foucault's investigation produced four cautionary prescriptions (Foucault, 1980:98).

The first prescription is the Rule of Immanence. In this, there is a connection between knowledge and power. He observes that there is nothing as a disinterested knowledge or scientific enquiry on sex (Foucault, 1980:98). What we know about sex and the techniques applied in the process of knowledge are both determined by the power relation that set our will to know something about sex. The Second Cautionary prescription is the rule of continual variation. In as much as power is power-relation, the different manifestations of power are not done in a static relation. In this regard, he identifies what he termed "matrices of transformation" (1980:99) that operate a modification in the nature of power relation. The example he gives is that of children initially excluded from the discourse on sex and later integrated on psychiatrists' advice. This is an experience prevalent in many cultures. However this is not limited to children alone, for in some African cultures, adults are concerned about sexual discourse, which in the past was a taboo before mature adulthood. The stages of initiation rites are also a testimony to this. The third prescription is the rule of Double Conditioning. Here, Foucault identifies local centres and patterns of transformation that function only through an over-all strategy. The local centres are the microscopic level and the over-all strategy is the macroscopic level for instance, the father in the family is not the representative of the state, and the state is not

the projection of the father on a different scale (Foucault, 1980:100). "The family does not duplicate the society just as the society does not imitate the family. However, the family organization can be used to support the great maneuvers of the state. The fourth and last prescription is the Rule for the tactical Polyvalence of discourse. While summarizing the four rules, Foucault states categorically that discourse is what joins knowledge to power (Foucault, 1980:101). "Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart it. Power, in Foucault thought, is like discourse as it manifests itself in different ways. The French philosopher underlines: (Foucault, 1980:102) "In short, it is a question of directing ourselves to a conception of power which replaces... the privilege of sovereignty, with the analysis of a multiple and mobile field of force relations.." Foucault asserts that power instead of taking the form of law operates at multiple social levels and in multiple ways. Thus, his theoretical and historical analysis of power invariably is a political contextualization of the concept. Power, as discourse, is a medium to talk about the relationship between individuals, ideas and societal institutions. Power is the factor operating these different manifestations.

Related to this is Foucault's submission that, power is what makes us what we are. Power is discursive and not coercive. Power pervades society based on interpersonal relationships. Worthy of note in Foucault's historical study of the concept of power is disciplinary power. Power in this regard represents a major source of social discipline and conformity. The "disciplinary power" is found in institutions such as prisons, schools and psychiatric hospitals and sexuality as earlier expressed in Bentham's Panopticon. With this type of power, discipline and surveillance that power requires, no longer demand force and violence. Indeed, Foucault is fascinated by the mechanisms of prison surveillance, school discipline, systems for the administration and control of populations, and the promotion of norms about bodily conduct, including sex. Most importantly, he took time to study psychology, medicine and criminology and their roles as bodies of knowledge that define norms of behaviour. Physical bodies are subjugated and made to behave in certain ways, as a microcosm of social control of the wider population, through what he called 'bio-power'. In Foucault's terminology, bio power is explained in line with disciplinary power. While the former deals with the actions of the body, the latter focuses on population, reproduction among others. It is the art of managing population. Disciplinary and bio-powers are interwoven and create a 'discursive practice' or a body of knowledge and behaviour that defines what is normal, acceptable, and appropriate for the society. It is a discursive practice that is in constant flux (Foucault, 1991). Consequently, at this point the focus is precisely to interrogate the body and the African discourse on this bio-power that the

female body represents and its controlling ability.

## FOUCAULT AND THE HERMENEUTICS OF THE BODY

In Philosophy, the body is not just the physical thing every individual carries along and represents the first point of contact with the world. Philosophers generally think that the body is any material object we perceive. According to them, its fundamental characteristics are extension, impenetrability and mass. However, phenomenologists distinguish the human body from other bodies. The human body is related to a subject. In this perspective, in explaining this, Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *The Phenomenology of Perception* states:

*In so far as I have a body through which I act in the world, space and time are not, for me, a collection of adjacent points, nor are they a limitless number of relations synthesized by my consciousness and into which it draws my body. I am not in space and time, I belong to them, and my body combines with them and includes them (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 162).*

While Foucault's interest on the history of sexuality and his thought are not very far away from Ponty's observations, his intention to reorganize his work on sexuality came up through the hermeneutics of the subject. The postmodern philosopher called on everyone to pay attention to their being, to dissect and reorganize themselves as subjects of desire. It is common knowledge that desire as a philosophical concept is human and an expression of human identity. We are human beings because we desire. The content and nature of our desire are difficult to define as there are many desires. Moreover, human beings desire because they are finite and desire in itself is the process through which human beings express their being into freedom. The Greeks understood this early and tailored their ethics towards the morality of sexual behaviour by making appetites and instincts subservient to reason. Interestingly, phenomenologists such as Maurice-Merleau Ponty as we earlier mentioned, took a serious option in this line of thought by giving a thorough account of the body. No doubt, the body is an object of knowledge and Merleau stresses:

*the body is no more than an element in the system of the subject and his world, and the task to be performed elicits the necessary movements from him by a sort of remote attraction, as the phenomenal forces at work in my visual field elicit from me, without any calculation on my part, the motor reactions which establish the most effective balance between them, or as the conventions of our social group (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 122).*

Merleau Ponty's approach to the study of the body is not

only to establish the relationship with the external world, but also as a means of self-knowledge. In a radio interview in 1966, Foucault adopted a position similar to his phenomenologist compatriot Merleau-Ponty on the body. He said: "Le corps est ce petit noyau utopique à partir duquel je rêve, je parle, j'avance, j'imagine, je perçois, les choses en leur place" meaning "The body is this small utopian kernel through which I dream, I talk, I move, I imagine, I perceive things as they are" (Foucault, 1966, Radio Interview). However, in *The Birth of the Clinic* (1973), Foucault takes a step back to critically examine his position on the sovereignty of the body in the world. If as Merleau-Ponty claimed there is a dependence of modern objective knowledge towards a basic corporeity, it is not a fundamental datum, rather it is a motivator for a thought on the body as a unifying factor through observation, the discourse that value the dignity of body experience and the impossibility of an external system. Foucault's greatness is to develop a new discourse based on the relations between power, knowledge and the body. Interestingly, the hermeneutics of the body critical to both the phenomenologist Merleau Ponty and the postmodernist Foucault is also a centre of interest to Africans as it corresponds to everyday technique of expression in a society of oral norms. From this perspective, individuals especially women in traditional African societies are consciously or unconsciously on a daily basis submitted to a constant mastery of body expression and the techniques of speech (Zahan et al., 1979:14). For many traditional Africans, marriage life is the ideal human state in life. It is the reason why celibacy in most African culture and specifically the Yoruba culture is not viewed with any favour. Family and family life are the climax of a long process of societal integration. This is so true and deeply rooted in the minds of Africans that single persons find no excuse to be alone (Mbiti, 1990:133). In this regard, societal norms and measures are put in place to facilitate easy conversion of status. The educational system as represented by initiation confirms the long process of transformation and the progressive passage from exteriority to interiority of the individual. Through initiation, the young neophyte (boy or girl) progressively gains consciousness of his humanity (Zahan et al., 1979:54). Women seem to understand perfectly the dialectical interplay between the status of the "weaker" sex and the potentials of the body. From this dialectical interplay, women in African societies develop a unique and strategic discourse in the course of initiatory education; teachings serve the purpose of developing and preparing the neophyte (girl or boy) for societal adult role. This is more especially true for the girl whose curriculum specifically aims at perfecting her social role as woman and mother of the house, the mother of the society. All this reflects a pattern in human societies whereby education for children is based on their gender, and this pattern is channeled through three basic areas

that are the physical, the social and the cultural body.

## WOMEN AND THE DISCOURSE ON THE BODY

Once again, Merleau Ponty seems to summarize an idea of what the body gives to us, its seen and unseen functions. He writes:

*Usually man does not show his body, and, when he does, it is either nervously or with an intention to fascinate. He has the impression that the alien gaze which runs over his body is stealing it from him, or else, on the other hand, that the display of his body will deliver the other person up to him, defenseless, and that in this case the other will be reduced to servitude. Shame and immodesty, then, take their place in a dialectic of the self and the other which is that of master and slave: in so far as I have a body, I may be reduced to the status of an object beneath the gaze of another person, and no longer count as a person for him, or else I may become his master and, in my turn, look at him. But this mastery is self-defeating, since, precisely when my value is recognized through the other's desire, he is no longer the person by whom I wished to be recognized, but being fascinated, deprived of his freedom, and who therefore no longer counts in my eyes. Saying that I have a body is thus a way of saying that I can be seen as an object and that I try to be seen as a subject, that another can be my master or my slave, so that shame and shamelessness express the dialectic of the plurality of consciousness, and have a metaphysical significance (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:193)*

One's interest in this quotation is not the metaphysical meaning that derives from the study of the body, the plurality of consciousness mentioned by Ponty and precisely the contact and interaction among different bodies. Why does one show one's body? Definitely there is a purpose for it. The French phenomenologist is right when he says that one does not show one's body ordinarily. When one does, there is an intention for it. Based on this observation, we set to examine the different manifestations of the body and the messages it propagates in Africa. In this respect, one would like to examine the body in three parts namely, the physical, the social and the cultural. Ordinarily, one may be tempted to say what the difference is as the three parts are the different manifestations of the same and one body. The difference is that one is practical and the other two are abstract in nature. If one (the physical) is seen, the other two are determined by the appearance given out by the first. In other words, the social and the cultural are determined by the physical. The "seen" determines the "unseen". However, a critical assessment shows that the two abstract forms of the body in reality are seen, visible, manifest in the physical. The fact is that they engage in a

dialectic process through which, one determines what the other two will give to the external world. In practical terms, in traditional African societies, perception, beauty and sexuality bring to the fore the entire discourse on the physical, the social and cultural body. In traditional African societies, it is common knowledge that the image of the plump woman is the model of beauty. It implies as well a correlation between the female physique and procreation functions in traditional African consciousness. In fact, among the Yoruba of South Western Nigeria, it is often said: "Bi omo eni ba dara, ki a wii, ko ki i se pe kia fi se aya" meaning "if our daughter is beautiful we should acknowledge it because it is true". Also from D. O. Fagunwa, a foremost and respected Yoruba writer, come descriptions of beauty that usually incorporate a number of traditional Yoruba body image focuses. Fagunwa has his literary reputation from his images largely drawn from traditional Yoruba culture, religion, mores and personal observations. In his *Ireke Onibudo*, the object of adulation is the beautiful girl, Ifepade. In addition to bringing together many of the inscriptions linking body image and beauty in traditional Yoruba culture, the narration adequately incorporates the idea of proportion. Fagunwa describes Ifepade thus:

*Omobinrin na wa bi omo oba ni. Alari ni aso ti o ro, enikeni ko si lori. Tuntun gba ni. O we gele ti o ba alari na mu...Ara omo na papa ndan, o mo toni toni, oda bi ara omo ojo. Ko si eyo ifon tabi kuruna kan soso lara re beni kosi si oju apa egbo kan lara re... Ehin enu re si funfun bi ojo didi... (Fagunwa, 2005: 80).*

The translation reads: "The lady dressed like a princess. Her dress was the traditional *Alari*. It was a new one; she wore it with a matching headgear. Her skin was smooth and neat; she looked like a day baby. There were no rashes or scar on her body. Her teeth were white as snow". Down South Africa, in Uganda, the Hima tribe judges women beauty by their fatness (Oloruntoba-Oju, 2007). Notwithstanding, the slim beauty also has her place in traditional Nigerian African culture as represented here in traditional Yoruba language and culture (Oyewumi 1997). In the Yoruba vocabulary of body aesthetics, the term for the slim and pretty woman is *opelenge* meaning the slim and well-proportioned one. It is quite revealing that these images, descriptions and representations of the body are criteria of beauty and values. Consequently, these values are transmitted to young boys and girls in their learning process in order to equip them with the skills appropriate to their gender in preparation for family and societal roles. The entire process of education which underlines the choice of discourse is fundamentally about character ethics or virtue ethics. How then can the discourse on the body, sex and the consciousness of its relevance produce another discourse on female power? By implication, how do women discipline, control men and achieve their goals?

## THE MEETING OF THE BODIES AND THE NEW POWER PARADIGM

By the meeting of the bodies, we mean the challenges confronting two consciences when they meet. Our focus is the basic dichotomy between the subject and the object when the meeting takes place. In this respect, Hegel's master-slave dialectics is an eye opener to what a dialectical situation could be. Even though Hegel's focus was about self-consciousness, his aim was to demonstrate the struggle for recognition as the underlying factor of the relationship (Hegel, 1983). Far from being misogynists, we want to admit that in the course of the social relationship established between men and women, there is tacitly and implicitly the struggle for recognition mostly from women. Consequently, the goal of each conscience determines its approach to the relationship. Merleau-Ponty as earlier mentioned gives an insight to what strategies and methods are in this context. In part one of the *Phenomenology of Perception* we repeat what we quoted earlier: "Saying that I have a body is a way of saying that I can be seen as an object and that I try to be seen as a subject" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962:193). Correspondingly, our body interacts with other bodies and relates with the world in a dialectical process where actors engage themselves based on the goal they set for themselves and their skills of performance. Indeed, the history of philosophy teaches us that in Ancient Greece, women embarked in this dialectical process with the world in what was identified as gynaecocracy ("rule by women"), an attempt by women to really control and discipline their society in serious crisis. Aristophanes (1997, 1288) captured this in *The Assembly of women* of Aristophanes 392 BCE, a time of continuing trouble for a city state - Athens - that had suffered a crushing defeat from Sparta. In that play, a group of women with its leader, Praxagora decided that women must convince their men to give them control of the city-state of Athens, as they failed to improve the life of Athenians. Probably unsatisfied with men's response, women, in the guise of men, sneaked into the assembly and voted the measure, convincing some of the men to vote for it because it was the only thing they had not. From this perspective and the dialectical interplay that ensued, women in most African societies develop a unique and strategic discourse that uplifts them as they transform from the status of a weaker sex to that of controller and manager of the household in the first instance, and then the society at large. This phenomenon is known in many African societies where women though discreet, self-effacing play a vital role from the backstage in different social relationships. Chinweizu in *Anatomy of Female Power: A masculinist Dissection of Matriarchy* throws a challenge to Africans with an in-depth analysis of what he termed female power. He writes:

*Female power exists; it hangs over every man like a*

*ubiquitous shadow. Indeed, the life cycle of man, from cradle to grave, may be divided into three phases, each of which is defined by the form of female power which dominates him; mother power, bride power and wife power. (Chinweizu, 1990: 14).*

Chinweizu pushes further by underlining the five conditions (earlier called pillars) which enable women to get what they want from men. These conditions are: women control of the womb, women control of the kitchen, women control of the cradle, the psychological immaturity of man relative to woman and man's tendency to be deranged by his own sexual appetite. Chinweizu calls it "the excited penis". At this juncture, the author would like to disagree with Chinweizu. Even if the popular adage says that man comes of age at 60 while women come of age at 15, it is undeniable that the synergy experienced in different households is a representation of the dynamism displayed by both men and women. Furthermore, that men are psychological immature at a certain age is actually an oxymoron as man and immaturity are contradictory. A man by virtue of his physical appearance is a mature person. Even if some cases are an exception, it does not follow that all cases fall into the immaturity category. Invariably, from Chinweizu's analysis, of the five pillars or conditions, the womb appears to be the most important. The womb is exceptionally designed for reproduction. The fact that women have control over this pillar and also that men have an irrepressible craving to use it turned the womb into women's weapon of subtle manipulation of men. The womb becomes female power's ultimate base, notes Chinweizu. Nevertheless, the feminist picture of African societies depicted by Chinweizu does not exclude man's abilities to a certain power. In his work, Chinweizu (1990: 23) did a comparative analysis of male and female powers. He argues: whereas male power tends to be crude, confrontational and direct, female power tends to be subtle, manipulative and indirect. Given the above, the author concurs with Chinweizu to the attributes and characteristics of female power. These attributes are culturally inclined and in African traditional societies, they are taught through initiation rites. It is precisely through this channel that a discourse on power and its correlation to sex is developed. Mbiti observes that "one of the educational purposes of initiation rites is to introduce young people to matters of sex, marriage, procreation and family life" (Mbiti, 1990:135). From theory to practice, women, in order to achieve their objective, bring all their skills in manipulation notes Chinweizu (1990:66). In his work, the Nigerian cultural critic adds:

*In the art of managing men, rare is the male Caesar who can match the average girl of seventeen. Girls learn it by observation, or through conversation with their mothers or aunts, or during initiation rites in those societies which still practice them... To the management (control) of her husband, a wife brings the highest possible*

*professionalism (Chinweizu, 1990: 66 - 67).*

The emphasis here is the conversation criterion which explains the discursive angle to the phenomenon of power, sex and gender. In some quarters, it is even believed that behind every successful man is the manager who incidentally is the wife.

## CONCLUSION

In essence, Foucault's analysis of power relation re-echoed in African societies brings to the fore the extraordinary capacity and potentials of the discourse to shape life and organize the society through the knowledge and understanding of the self. Arguably, women understood their being and from the consciousness that derives from this understanding they are able to discipline, to control and instruct often from the back stage. For women, the body, the knowledge of the body and the discourse on it have become a weapon not of coercion or destruction, but that which is designed to maneuvering and transforming the environment, the social milieu into an *espace-mien*, a space in which the woman takes full ownership. It is in this respect that the life cycle of an African woman is theoretical and practical in its nature as every girl child in the process of growing up is first of all introduced in the mechanism of valorizing the self and by implication the body that becomes the engine of true self-realization. The whole machinery deployed in the process is to create awareness on the symbiosis between the body, the female body, the social milieu and the vital role women play in the society. The rallying factor is the body. As a matter of fact, the female body is carefully taken care of in order to perfect the desired goal of being the major player in the society. Hence, the second phase is practical. It is the time when a woman integrates the society through marriage and sets to herself some goals namely being a good wife, knowing and mastering her milieu. The correlation between the theoretical and the practical phases is achievable when the knowledge of the self and the environment blends with the practical. As a result, the hermeneutics of the body as studied in Foucault and the African societies shows the importance of the body in regulating, arranging, supervising and harmonizing the society.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

## REFERENCES

Arendt H (1958). *The Human Condition*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press. Available at:

- [http://sduk.us/afterwork/arendt\\_the\\_human\\_condition.pdf](http://sduk.us/afterwork/arendt_the_human_condition.pdf)
- Aristophanes (1997). *The Assembly of Women*. Translated with an intro. By Robert Mayhew. Prometheus Books. New York. Available at: <https://www.amazon.co.uk/Assembly-Women-Literary-Classics-Aristophanes/dp/1573921335>
- Chinweizu (1990). *Anatomy of Female Power: A Masculinist Dissection of Matriarchy*. Lagos Pero Press.
- Fagunwa DO (2005). *Ireke Onibudo*, Ibadan, Nelson Publishers Limited. Available at: <https://www.sunshinenigeria.com/ireke-onibudo-by-do-fagunwa-hardcover>
- Foucault M (1972). *The archaeology of knowledge and the discourse on language* (Trans: A. Sheridan). Pantheon, New York, 216.
- Foucault M (1980). *The history of sexuality. Volume one: An introduction*. Vintage Books, New York: Trans from The French by Robert Hurley.
- Foucault M (2012). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Vintage.
- Freud S (1963). *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, ed. Philip Rieff.
- Hegel GWF (1983). *La Phénoménologie de l'Esprit*. Paris Traduit par Jean Hyppolite, Aubier.
- Mbiti JS (1990). *African religious and philosophy*. Nairobi, Kenya: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd. Available at: [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=eTUpo9IH-fYC&oi=fnd&pg=PR10&dq=African+religious+and+philosophy.+&ots=Mgm\\_RrAnr2&sig=Ks8YKQ7tkS7bMa\\_AbVVycm3cnVA](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=eTUpo9IH-fYC&oi=fnd&pg=PR10&dq=African+religious+and+philosophy.+&ots=Mgm_RrAnr2&sig=Ks8YKQ7tkS7bMa_AbVVycm3cnVA)
- Merleau-Ponty M (1962). *Phenomenology of Perception*. Transl. Colin Smith. London. Routledge and Kegan Paul.
- Mills JS (1869). *Subjection of Women*. London, The Floating Press. Available at: [https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=ahfS8QWMh2EC&oi=fnd&pg=PR5&dq=Subjection+of+Women&ots=FPBEg9-JFi&sig=\\_tK9udv9fLEO0MSgQJvGG68l7s0](https://books.google.com/books?hl=en&lr=&id=ahfS8QWMh2EC&oi=fnd&pg=PR5&dq=Subjection+of+Women&ots=FPBEg9-JFi&sig=_tK9udv9fLEO0MSgQJvGG68l7s0)

- Oloruntoba-Oju T (2007). *Body images, beauty culture and language in the Nigeria, African context*. *Understanding Human Sexuality, 2007 Series*. Available at: <http://www.arsrc.org/downloads/uhsss/oloruntoba-oju.pdf>
- Oyewumi O (1997). *The invention of women: Making an African sense of western gender discourses*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Sarup M (1993). *An Introductory guide to Post-Structuralism and Postmodernism*. Athens 2nd Edition. The University of Georgia Press.
- Zahan D, Martin KE, Martin LM (1979). *The religion, spirituality, and thought of traditional Africa*.

### Web Documents

- Foucault M (1966). *Le corps utopique, conférence radiophonique du 21 décembre 1966, disponible en CD France-Culture, coll. « INA / Mémoire vive »* in *Les corps de Michel Foucault* by Mathieu Potte-Bonneville. Available at: <https://elegendre.wordpress.com/2016/12/07/michel-foucault-7121966/>