Feminism in the African Media: Possiblities for Diversification of Gender Representation

Introduction

Media content is not a mirror reflection of reality but a representation of reality that is, among other things, influenced by ideologies circulating in society. This is true of gender representation. Although most representations of gender in African media offer stereotypes of women, there is an increasing trend towards diversification to include non-stereotypical representation which requires critical analysis and offers possibilities for feminist politics and activism. This trend is evident in both the state-linked media and the new media that has emerged since media liberalization and democratization processes that started in the early 1990s. It is also present in women's media constructed for political and activist purposes. This article seeks to identify these representations and their distinguishing characteristics; their potential to influence changes in the ways

Lyn Ossome
University of the Witwatersrand
Johannesburg
South Africa

in which women are represented; and their ability to influence a feminist agenda for social change. The article will also focus on analyzing which media offers more of these new ways of representing and what the possibilities and limitations for mainstreaming are. Framing the media as a site of struggle that has potential to both marginalize and liberate, the article ultimately seeks to understand the ways in which a critical feminist engagement with gender representations in the media can contribute towards the latter potential, by broadening perspectives on questions of representation.

Feminism's 'Turn to Culture'

Stereotypical representations which predominate media in Africa are reflective of a trend within feminist media scholarship to lay emphasis on analysis of words and texts, rather than on *things,* what Barrett (1992) refers to as feminism's 'turn to culture'. In other words, feminist emphasis has shifted from social structures to discourses and symbols of marginality in texts, often with little attention to underlying material inequities (Steeves and Wasko 2002:17). Acknowledging the important contribution of feminist discourse analysis and cultural studies towards the study of representations, Steeves and Wasko (2002) nonetheless reject a narrow focus on discourse, without considering moral, political, and economic questions. Questions of concern less frequently relate to issues of social structure, includ-

ing capitalism and patriarchy, and more with issues of culture, sexuality, identity, and political agency. The focus of interest has moved towards processes of symbolization and representation, as well as of consumption and reception, in order to understand issues of subjectivity, psyche, and self (Barrett 1992:204-05).

Shifts within feminism itself have been blamed for this rapture and lack of interest in social structure, most especially the increasing yielding to a 'post-feminist' moment.[1] Angela McRobbie (2009) and Ros Gill (2003, 2007) both extensively criticize post-feminism from a perspective that recognizes an imperative to action bequeathed by second-wave feminism.[2] McRobbie (2009), for example, states that 'post-feminism' is a 'kind of anti-feminism, which is reliant, paradoxically, on an assumption that feminism has been taken into account' (p. 30) and through which 'feminist gains of the 1970s and 1980s are actively and relentlessly undermined' (p. 11). Gill (2003, 2007) criticizes more specifically how the hypersexualization of women's images in post-feminist advertisements and other media leave out those who are not young, thin, heterosexual, or otherwise conforming to beauty's many stereotypical manifestations, and thus ignores one of the primary thrusts of the second wave critique (Press 2011:108-9).

Hilary Radner's 'neo-feminism' is a similarly 'anti-feminist' category, which she uses to describe changes from the second-wave era to the present. She contrasts Helen Gurley Brown's (1962) admonition to feminists of an earlier era that they be frugal and financially independent, with latter day emphasis on consumption itself – often unbridled consumption – as women's means to individuation and the establishment of an identity. This current emphasis, she argues, suffers from the popular American media's lack of class consciousness, relentless optimism in the possibilities for all of us to consume endlessly, and view of consumption as therapeutic, pleasurable, and unproblematically open to all, leading to a 'culture of unabashed self-gratification in which fantasy prevails over notions of professionalism and work' (Radner 2010: 37).

Further, Jameson (1993:45-46) problematizes these individualizing notions of power, suggesting that cultural studies' rhetoric of power is, in fact, a repudiation of economic analysis, 'an anti-Marxist move, designed to replace analysis in terms of the mode of production'. The replacement of the mode of production by relations of power is accompanied by an inattention to class experience. In place of the old modernist conceptions of 'class', we now have new, post-modern conceptions of 'audiences', 'communities', and 'fans'.

These arguments that underline the postmodernist and post-feminist turn in cultural studies are summarized in Lisa McLaughlin's (2002) concern over what she sees as being the result of a shift in focus from 'structure' to 'discourse', which she contends conceptualizes power as highly dispersed rather than concentrated in identifiable places and groups. There is little sense of the specificity of power because it is treated as ambiguous, organized through discourse, and unrelated to prevailing material conditions or activities of agents and institutions (2002:37). Despite its rhetoric of power and resistance, cultural studies find it difficult to connect audience agency to individuals' subjective relationships to political participation and their roles in forming, reforming, and overturning practices and institutions (McLaughlin 2002:37). This article focuses on this later task of connecting agency to subjectivity, and discursively analyses the potential of feminism in African media to achieve this synergy.

Women's Media as a Site of Feminist Struggle

The media constitute social realities, meaning and power, and in many developing states, are sites of social and political struggle (Bosch 2011). Readings of media representations or the standpoint(s) from which media information is sold out or presented to audiences bears crucially upon its reception, interpretation and impact. Being constructs, media representations derive meaning through production. As Khun (1985:5) observes, meanings are produced through codes at work in representations, and while meanings might appear to be natural, obvious, immanent, they are in fact produced: they are constructed through identifiable processes of signification at work in all representations. Critiqued from a feminist standpoint, this conception should be taken as a politicized origin where many categories of difference interact and at times conflict, and therefore defy any logic that naturalizes or obviates reality. In other words, the materiality of images and information deriving from the media is a representation of powerful and dominant perceptions of race, gender, age, sexual orientation, ethnicity, class, disability and other biases, whose normative assumptions are not questioned, subverted or breached.

Moreover, meaning production takes place within social and historical contexts, and in a capitalist society, representations are no more exempt than any other products from considerations of the marketplace (Khun 1985:5). Media representations that fail to expose and interrogate urgent problems of injustice and inequality undermine the feminist desire to deepen understanding of the oppression of women and men entrenched in unjust social, political, cultural and economic structures, processes and institutions. This is a particularly pressing concern for feminists and gender activists in Africa, where women's immediate concern is with questions of landlessness and land dispossession, overconcentration in the unregulated, informal economic sector, poverty in relation to health, education and subsistence, and structural violence which has become part of the 'everyday' in the lives of many African women. Viewed from this perspective, it would appear then that the task of feminism in African media is to represent these realities in ways that neither fixates them as representations of the 'truth' nor renders invisible the historical contexts within which representations are produced.

Feminism is far from reconciled to this task. Many Third World feminists have argued against gender – or gender and class – as the primary social division(s) in feminist thought, agreeing with Foucault's view that there are no totalizing explanations, whether gender, class, race or nation. Rather, the nature of gender oppression shifts by historical and cultural context and cannot be generalized. However, while these feminists agree with postmodernists and poststructuralists on many points and disagree with traditional frameworks, their work retains a material political agenda (Steeves and Wasko 2002:25). This is partly due to the fact that nonmaterial conceptualizations of representation which shift focus to discourses, human agency and subjectivity, 'conceptualize power as highly dispersed rather than concentrated in identifiable places or groups' (Walby 1992:49). Such an approach is, however, problematic in African countries where democratization is

still very much grounded upon notions of state accountability and where the state is still considered to be the primary vehicle through which women seek recourse to wealth, resources and political legitimization. Representations that circumscribe dialogue between audiences and the political economy thus, in a sense, absolve the state and other structures of power from responsibility for the oppression of women.

On the other hand, Marxist and socialist forms of feminism, which share some fundamental concerns with political economy, have lost popularity for a number of reasons, including their neglect of the role of ideology in women's oppression, and also their failure to seriously consider social division aside from gender and class. In contrast, much current feminist scholarship emphasizes discourses of gender, with little or no attention to structures of inequality, which both shape and are shaped by discourses. The material nature of ideology thus remains inadequately addressed in feminist texts on representation, yet urgent global and continental problems of injustice and inequality necessitate both kinds of analyses (Steeves and Wasko 2002:26-28).

Rapprochement between the two tensions seems most desirable, yet as Steeves and Wasko (2002:28) contend, despite feminism and political economy having much to gain from each other conceptually and strategically, a merger between the two is difficult to theorize. Nonetheless, rather than seeking to resolve these complexities, possibilities do exist to analyze and work with[in] the tensions that stride discourse analysis and materialist analysis of gender representations in the media. There is, for instance, much critical thought that is going into the impact of new technology on women as participants, audiences, and agents in the ways in which stories are produced and how women are represented in them. One of the key questions confronting new media is that of labour: is a liberating discourse emerging from the ability of women to subversively insert alternative narratives of the female condition through new media technology, or is it a continuation of the appropriation of women's unremunerated labour? Are un-directed, unmediated spaces of performance and communication empowering women in allowing for autonomous representations, or do these spaces in reality minimize tangibility of the nature of women's oppression?

Liberating Potential of New Media in Africa

It has been argued by feminists such as Chandra Mohanty (1996) that history frames black women as singular monolithic subjects, wiping away the histories specific to them, and leaving black women with no alternative representations of themselves. This problem affects media production. The lack of alternative views stems from the fact that the producers of this media are so far removed from the reality of their readers – black women in Africa in this case – that they subscribe roles that are caricatures, benefiting the producer, not the consumer (Masina 2010:11).

Old problems regarding representation still exist, but the rapid proliferation of new media, including online social networking and mobile phones, raises new areas of exploration. The so-called information revolution has created opportunities for women's groups to use information and communications technologies (ICTs) to create new spaces to promote diverse voices and networking (Opoku-Mensah 2001). Scholars and activists have, however, pointed out that technology is not gender neutral. African women have often been disadvantaged by ICTs, as well as empowered by the promise of new prospects (Gadzekpo 2009). In rural areas, mobile phones offer opportunities for social networking, for market and trade, and for getting news; but in some contexts, mobile phones also result in gendered interactions and representations of identities (Bosch 2011:30).

As Gadzekpo (2009) argues, feminist media academics need to reopen the debates about women and technology and expand the dearth of scholarly material on African women and ICTs. In particular, she raises issues of low-cost text messaging and whether this is being used by poor women; issues related to African women's use of the internet and the roles played by women in the information economy; as well as the types of economic opportunities created for women through ICTs. Women in Africa have used ICTs to facilitate empowerment, particularly to reconceptualise private and public spaces and recognising the dialectic between gender and ICTs and ICT policy. Bosch (2011:30) makes the important argument that access to technology is linked to social and economic development and could be a key dimension of women's advancement in these areas.

Yet, this potential for technology to drive development, including the ability of African women to utilize existing ICTs in ways that favorably represent their lives, situations and interests, is contingent upon the ways in which 'economics and gender are sutured into our smallest day-to-day actions' (Riordan 2002:4). Scholarship that fails to elucidate the connections between the day-to-day lived experience of people and the structures of capitalism and patriarchy will continue to participate uncritically in their production.[3] Relating this to questions of representation, it is necessary therefore to understand how structural factors influence women's insertion and interaction within technological spaces.

Part of the task involved here is in recognizing the quality of feminist media representations as a way of resisting dominant gender representations. Strategically, it might be a useful initial practice to sift through and move away from the stereotypical boundaries of representation within which images of African women are often reproduced: (i) Non-stereotypical representations do not erase the subjects' sociopolitical contexts; (ii) Non-stereotypical representations present gender, race and class as real markers, not as superficial markers on characters, for example asking why it is that so many women want to alter their appearances; (iii) Non-stereotypical representations might embody spiritual enhancing rather than only visual images of women's lives; (iv) Non-stereotypical representations invalidate performed sexual identities such as the fetishization of female bodies and their commodification, a common thread in mainstream media; and (v) Non-stereotypical representations reject compulsory heterosexuality. Strategies ought to build on from these complex but identifiable discursive limits.

Strategies: How can African Media Become a Site of Feminist Exception?

Bell Hooks (1994) has written about the need for feminists to politically employ their cultural knowledge as a tool to subvert negative projections of women that are subject to public scrutiny, criminalizing the fact that those that have had (the privilege) to learn about other people's cultures have not been vocal enough to propagate representations that countered those dominant ones that prevailed in the mass media. Deliberately

casting a broader net and foregrounding the notion of subalternity, we should question then how we as feminists can 'unlearn our privileges as our loss' (Dhawan 2007) and re-present the stories of rural and indigenous women who have been cut off from the lines of mobility in ways that do not continue the fetishization of poverty (the basis of aid dependency and cyclical poverty in many developing countries). Rather, one of the tasks of African feminism should be to bring about an emergent discourse and material analysis that represents core survival strategies that rural poor women deploy in response to capitalist forces of which they bear little or no logic.

On this, Spivak (2002b) insists that the rural is the new front of globalization, for instance, through seed and fertilizer control, population control, and micro loans to women. Feminist analysis ought to be directed towards understanding the critical role played by new media technology in accessing, appropriating and exploiting labour in these subaltern spaces by global multinational corporations, while at the same time sustaining the invisibility of this women and their contribution to developed country capitalist economies. Ungendered representations of democracy and the 'game of numbers' has been deployed to this end, whereby figures denoting the widespread availability and use of mobile telephony and internet are uncritically accompanied by assertions 'development' which neglect the material realities of rural populations.

Spivak is consistent in dismantling such grand narratives of a world globalizing in unison, whereby she argues that imperialism establishes the universality of the mode of production narrative, so that to ignore the rural and indigenous subaltern today is, willy-nilly, to continue the imperialist project. The word 'transnational' now bears the weight of the untrammeled financialization of the globe, whereby capitalism is being re-territorialized as 'democracy'. Spivak explains contemporary international division of labour: with the so-called decolonization and growth of multinational capital, instead of transferring of raw material to the metropolis, maintaining international division of labour serves to keep the supply of inexpensive labour in the periphery. International subcontracting and minimal subsistence requirements for the worker ensures that labour is kept cheap in the

third world. Unorganized or permanently casual female labour is the mainstay of world trade, whereby the gendered subaltern in the global south form the base of contemporary globalization. Moreover, she argues, this structure of super-exploitation is compounded by patriarchal social relations (in Dhawan 2007).

A critical feminist intervention seeking to diversify gender representations in African media must take account of the questions Spivak and others raise. One way to narrow the privileged gap between producers of stories and the populations whose stories they narrate is by developing audiences through process. By involving people in production, it is possible for them to develop a sense of the way they see their own lives or histories in the stories that are told. By allowing temporal spaces to emerge through which audiences, by revisiting discussions and representations, can reflect on their own situations or contexts, alternative discourses of gender representation can emerge. Second-wave radical feminists engaged with this form of transformative text through the practice of consciousness raising, which sought to critically evaluate the relationships between feminist theory and practice, and to sustain dialogue between women positioned differently in relation to gender, race, age, and other categories of identity.

Media producers can also align with feminist aspirations of diversity by resisting representation of race, sex, class, etc., in ways that they are conventionally depicted in movies or television. Bell Hooks (1996:18) terms this resistance as 'reclaiming the space of artistic integrity'. She further argues that working against the requirements of Hollywood (or more relevantly for Africa, Nollywood) offers viewers the more diverse images of black female identities. Films can act as critical interventions, opening up cinematic spaces where women can disinvest from and disengage with old representations. Audiences too have to 'learn how to see race and sex while simultaneously looking beyond them'. In other words, we still live in a culture where black female bodies are stereotypically 'seen' in a sexual light so that it becomes difficult for audiences of any race to see images of black females standing for universal themes of identify formation, sexual agency, feminist resistance, unrequited longing, etc. (Hooks 1996:19).

Bell Hooks seems to suggest here a process of 'unlearning' the ways in which audiences view gender representations in the media. This is a complex process that should be accompanied by education and consciousness-raising targeting audiences. This strategy demands that audiences be made conscious of their own location or contexts in relation to the stories told about them and the information that they consume. In emphasizing audience individuality, this strategy can empower by formulating audiences as 'curators' in their own lives, narrating their own cultural histories and present locations, and allowing them to create links with and active connections to narratives told about them. More fundamentally, as Ooko-Ombaka (1985:174) suggests, an effective educational intervention must be relevant to the needs of rural communities. Relevance from a viewpoint of poverty quite clearly means that the substance of the education should be developmental, not in theory but in practical everyday terms of that community, in helping its members find a way out of their poverty.

Conclusion

Feminism in African media bears an educative role that imposes the necessity of engaging with discourse analysis as a means of understanding questions of representation, and with political economy as the only way to critique and make visible the systemic ways in which gender representations are captive of economic, political and cultural systems. Media representations of African women are far from being neutral reflections of society, but rather embody the aspirations of powerful, hegemonic forces within society. The media is a site of struggle that has potential to both marginalize and liberate, to both subvert dominant gender discourses and generate alternative representations of gender that narrow the gap between the imagined and the real. What this article shows is that it is possible to expand our understanding of gender representations, and at the same time hints at the difficulty with theorizing such transformation. More importantly though, it recognizes the complexity of framing such a shift in representation within only one theoretical framework, outlining the shortcomings of each on its own without other explanatory regimes.

There is merit in examining alternative and interdisciplinary spaces such as the arts,

within which this subversive shift is already taking place. Art has been able to pay tribute to women's oppression by transforming representations into symbols of black female struggle within discourses of racist supremacist capitalist patriarchy. The arts have succeeded in finding the language, tools and processes to enable a more critical re-entry into media, itself an art form, through feminist praxis.

I leave the readers with an example of art's intervention, a short video depicting South African feminist artist, Tracey Rose's take on feminism's role, in her critical performance done in conjunction with the exhibition titled 'Global Feminisms' (view video at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OX5iLPLWzPM). Her performance as a black woman and contextualized in the West, foregrounds many of African feminism's unresolved, intersecting questions of gender, sexuality, race and class privilege, and at the same time demonstrates the use of process in developing audiences, through a dialogue that draws in the audience by unsettling their positions with regards to the questions that she raises. Her unique style of performance, delivered in part by temporarily stepping outside of her own subjective position, and mediated by two 'anonymous' women in conversation, allows or rather compels the (unsettled) audience towards a critical avenue through which to engage with the issues she raises without succumbing to the power dynamics that often hinder self-reflexive consumption and introspection in mainstream media. This hindrance is a typical aspect of direct audience consumption of media programs that do not offer female audiences the possibility of 'talking back'. It may be worthy to think through the role of feminism in African media from this point of broadened perspectives, about collaboration in this case between feminism and (audio, visual or digital) art/feminist art and feminist media, and to draw on the theoretical traditions that each field has developed.

Drucilla Cornell (1995) reminds us that women are still struggling to create a space where our sexuality and our sexual voices can speak freely, where female sexual identity and performance can be represented in their diversity and difference. That space has to be imagined and created by both progressive, visionary men and women. Affirming our need to make this cultural journey, she writes:

There is space for the woman with glory in her heart as long as we insist that we are dwelling in it. We must write that dwelling into being as a place for us to 'be' differently, to be beyond accommodation.

Notes

1. Scholars variously refer to 'post-feminism' using alternative terms like "new femininities", "third-wave feminism", "embedded feminism" and "neo-feminism" (Press 2011:108).

2. See Christine Hughes (2010) for an overview of second wave feminism.

3. Ibid.

4. Scholars variously refer to 'post-feminism' using alternative terms like "new femininities", "third-wave feminism", "embedded feminism" and "neo-feminism" (Press 2011:108).

Bibliography

Bosch, T., 2011, 'African Feminist Media Studies', *Feminist Media Studies* 11:01, 27-33.

Cornell, D., 1995, *The Imaginary Domain: Abortion, Pornography and Sexual Harassment,* New York: Routledge.

Dhawan, N., 2007, *Can the Subaltern Speak German? And Other Risky Questions.* URL: http://translate.eipcp.net/strands/03/dhawan-strands01en#redir .

Gadzekpo, A., 2009, 'Missing Links: African Media Studies and Feminist Concerns', *Journal of African Media Studies* 1: 01, 69–80.

Hooks, B., 1994, *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations,* New York: Routledge.

Hooks, B., 1996, *Reel to Real:Rrace, Sex and Class at the Movies,* New York: Routledge.

Hughes, C., 2010, *Second Wave Feminism,* Available online, http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/staff/academicstaff/jonesc/jonesc_index/teaching/birth/second_wave_feminism.pdf> (accessed 12 September 2011).

Jameson, F., 1993, 'On "Cultural Studies"', *Social Text* (34): 17-52.

Khun, A.,1985, *The Power of the Image: Essays on Representation and Sexuality,* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Masina, N., 2010, *Black Like Me: Representations of Black Women in Advertisements Placed in Contemporary South African Magazines.* Unpublished MA thesis. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand.

Mohanty, C., 1996, 'Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses', In *Contemporary postcolonial theory: a reader,* ed. P. M. London: Edward Arnold.

Ooko-Ombaka, O., 1985, 'Education for Alternative Development: The Role of the Public Law Institute, Kenya', *Third World Legal Studies* Vol. 4, Article 11, Available at: http://scholar.valpo.edu/twls/vol4/iss1/11 (accessed 20 September 2011).

Opoku-Mensah, A., 2001, 'Marching On: African Feminist Media Studies',*Feminist Media Studies* 1: 01, 25–34.

Press, A., 2011, 'Feminism and Media in the Post-Feminist Era', *Feminist Media Studies* 11:01, 107-113

Radner, H., 2010, *Neo-Feminist Cinema: Girly Film, Chick Flicks, and Consumer Culture,* New York: Routledge.

Riordan, E., 2002, 'Intersections and New Directions: On Feminism and Political Economy', in E. Meehan and E. Riordan, eds., *Sex and Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 3-15.

Rose, T., 2007. *Global Feminism,* URL: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OX5iLPLWzPM (accessed 24 September 2011).

Spivak, G.C., 2002, 'A Conversation with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: Politics and the Imagination',(Interviewer by Jenny Sharpe), in *Signs* 28 (2), URL: http://www.journals.uchicago.edu/SIGNS/journal/issues/v28n2/280208/280208.web.pdf

Steeves, L.and Wasko, J., 2002, 'Feminist Theory and Political Economy: Toward a Friendly Alliance', in E. Meehan and E. Riordan, eds., *Sex and Money: Feminism and Political Economy in the Media,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 16-29.

Walby, S., 1992, 'Post-Post-Modernism? Theorizing Social Complexity', in M. Barrett and A. Phillips, eds., *Destabilizing Theory: Contemporary Feminist Debates,* Cambridge: Polity Press, pp. 31-52.