

https://dspace.org/

Representation of woman in fools

Makhema, Mamokuena

2006-11-13T13:20:26Z
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/1649

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The following review is meant to highlight the importance of looking at feminism from a different perspective from that initiated by first North American feminist theorists. The psychoanalytic theorists failed to look at important issues such as individuality, which raises concerns such as race, class, gender and more importantly the socio-economic and historical background of the subject. While it could be true that women in general have suffered oppression under patriarchal societies, the case is different with black women as Alile Sharon Larkin clarifies (1998:158), “As a black woman I experience all areas of oppression – economic, racial and sexual.” It is important to note that in the case of my research I am not only concentrating on black women but black South African women who have a different historical background from black women in other parts of the world.

2.1 Women in Culture

I found it necessary to utilise different interpretations and theories by different black women from both outside and within the African continent. This is because these theorists offer different perspectives based on their different backgrounds, each of which contributes to this study in an exceptional way. However, this does not mean that the basis of the research only lies on the writings of black women. **Laura Mulvey** also offers feminist readings in relation to film. In her essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” found in Visual and Other Pleasures (1989), Mulvey indicates that, “In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, a pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly.”

Mulvey (1989) further emphasises that “the actual image of woman as (passive) raw material for the (active) gaze of man takes the argument a step further into the content and structure of representation, adding a further layer of ideological significance demanded by the patriarchal order in its cinematic form – illusionistic narrative form.” In *Fools,* the character Nosipho, mumbles, “You men have no shame” after observing the easy manner in which Zamani (the rapist) is let off the hook by a group of elders that consists of men only. Does this imply that women are mere bodies without voices?

Post-modern feminist theorists present alternatives to the canonised and general theory of feminism writing by questioning standard notions of human identity based on categories of bodily integrity, race, ethnicity, class standpoint, or even gender.

Jacqueline Bobo, African American feminist theorist, conducted ethnographic research that resulted in her book Black Women as Cultural Readers (1995). Bobo offered black women an opportunity to read films that represent them. Bobo’s ethnographic research observes the reception of cultural products created by black women. Thus, she felt a strong need for black women to interpret these films and observe the ways in which black women produce meaning through cultural products such as film.

In Black Women Film & Video Artists (1998) Bobo writes, “Through meticulous history on Black women’s history, faithfully representing their lives, Black women’s films magnify female viewers’ perception of their material circumstances, motivating them toward activism, thereby strengthening their viability as a potent social force.” (1998:18) Through selected focus groups of black middle class women and through formal analyses of the texts, Bobo analyses black women’s responses to *Waiting to Exhale* (1995)*, The Color Purple* (1988) and *Daughters of the Dust* (1991)*.* These films are based on texts written by black women.

Using interviews, Bobo's initial aim was to examine the way in which a specific audience creates meaning from the mainstream text and uses the reconstructed meaning to empower themselves and their social group. In this case the specific audience is black women.

2.1.1 Black Women as Cultural Consumers and Cultural Producers

According to Jacqueline Bobo, when Terry Mc Millan's Waiting to Exhale (1994) became a best selling novel, critics dismissed it as a male bashing novel by a black woman writer. The same followed with Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1985) as critics continued to dismiss it on account of the negative depiction of black people, especially black men. Julie Dash's *Daughters of the Dust* was at first ignored by the critics, then disparaged with sarcastic assessments about the filmmaker's competence. This indicates how those with power in society, and mainstream critics continued to belittle black women and their works.

However, black women responded differently as they developed alternative and sympathetic responses to the texts and films. This is a major reason that provoked Bobo to conduct her research although one of the reasons for her choice of *Daughters of the Dust* as a case study was that it was written and directed by a black woman, Julie Dash.

Looking at Alice Walker's novel *The Color Purple*'s negative reception by the mainstream and black male critics, one is likely to wonder why black women were so excited by it. The widely held view that the film was a racist product directed by a racist director became complicated when black women offered increasingly tangible support to it. It underscored the importance of the historical moment for cultural analysis and for the understanding of specific audience.

The Color Purple, both novel and film had been cited as unconstructive by the mainstream media critics and by black men through ongoing protests. The subject matter here was that, a vocal minority expressed publicly their negative reaction to *The Color Purple.* As presented in the mainstream media, the predominant reading of *The Color Purple* was that it was one of those films that represent black people in a derogatory manner, especially black men. However, as Bobo reflected in her interviews with black women, the content of the works was not offensive to everyone in the audience and definitely not to black women.

Looking at this matter closely, Bobo concluded that there were privileged discourses that were allowed to determine the significance of the film because of its influence on power relations in conflict. The privileged discourses surrounding *The Color Purple* were those of the mainstream media and black men. Black women's feelings about the film had seldom been acknowledged.

Black women have always been a "silenced" component of history, and their vocal and visible support of the novel and film served notice of their place in black culture. Their reaction to this film and others already mentioned posed as an opposition to what had been presented to them before. In addition, they were in a way providing their own new theory different from ones that had been presented to them by psychoanalytic feminist film theorists. They were in a way adding to Black Feminist Scholarship.

2.1.2 Black Women Resisting Representations

Jacqueline Bobo, like bell hooks, points out that black women's representations in mainstream media have always been both distorted and limited and that black male directors have added to this construction. She gives an example of Spike Lee's film *She's Gotta Have It.* Bobo (1995:36) writes, "No recognition is given that black women are and have been powerful

agents conscious of their historical circumstances and are deliberately working towards bettering their lives."

Black women never really saw themselves on television or in films except for traditional representations that were stereotypical and which portrayed them as slaves, mammies or whores. Therefore, by supporting their representations by their fellow sisters, they are resisting former representations by the mainstream producers and later black men who never had intentions of portraying black women as equals. Bobo (1995:22) indicates, "Black women's challenge to cultural domination is part of an activist movement that works to improve the conditions of their lives."

Accordingly, black women's ability to read against the grain of the film and reconstruct more satisfactory meanings should not be undervalued. Bobo (1995:p90) follows this by saying, "When a particular audience forms an attachment to specific cultural products this is a correspondence that has been achieved, not a guaranteed outcome. The power of that correspondence should not be minimized, for it has potential to become a potent political and social force."

2.1.3 Black Women as a Social Force

Jacqueline Bobo suggests that at this juncture, the work of black feminist critics is to acknowledge these different voices, to explicate the responses, thus ensuring that they are also heard. By so doing, black feminist critics will be taking part in recognising their "voiceless" by subverting mainstream media responses. Therefore feminist critics can intervene strategically in the politics of interpretation.

Bobo believes that the role of the critic within the interpretative community is to give voice to those who are never considered in an analysis of cultural

works. Bobo further continues to point out that it is as a participant, not a detached observer, that the work of the critic becomes vitally important within the interpretive community. It is this idea that forced Bobo to go out there and listen to how black women interpret films that represent them.

Bobo embraces Stuart Hall's theory in which he states that the ideology that emanates from the reformation of ideologies in a discourse "transforms a people's consciousness and awareness of themselves and their historical situation" (Bobo, 1995:39). Although this ideology explodes culturally, "It does not constitute itself directly as a social or political force." Hall continues, "When it becomes connected to a social movement or a movement that is in the process of social formation, then it has the potential to be a social force. The potential becomes a reality when the group presents itself as 'collective subject within a unifying ideology.' Then the group becomes a unified social force." (Quoted in Bobo, 1995:39) This is what black women accomplished through the discussion of the work in Bobo's empirical research. Furthermore as Bobo suggests, black feminist critics should also come on board to participate as cultural scholars to further the movement towards social and political activism.

Stuart Hall has defined the principle of 'articulation', developed by Ernesto Laclau, to explain how individuals within a particular society at specific historical moments can wrest control away from the dominant forces in a culture and attain authority over their lives for themselves and for others within a social group, (Hall quoted in Bobo, 1995). To confirm this Bobo (1995:29) comments, "Were it not for black women's overwhelming endorsement of the film in the face of an outpouring of critical condemning there would not be an understanding that the power of mainstream media to influence audience reception is not as total as had been previously thought."

In contrast to the assessment of some critics, black women's statements about *Waiting to Exhale, The Color Purple* and *Daughters of the Dust* lend weight to their significance as intense cultural, social and historical events. Black women interviewed by Bobo see these films as important for black people and feel that the films' focus on black women is long overdue. Their comments go a long way towards rebutting criticisms of these works and helping to establish the works' importance within the historical and cultural movement. So, one can simply say that black women have demonstrated their bond of collective concerns through their tangible reception of these works.

Bobo concludes her work by suggesting that beyond the function of black women as interpretive community, there is a larger goal of establishing stronger bonds of commonality that can help form progressive and effective coalitions. She (Bobo, 1995:60) indicates that, "By considering the specific nature of black women's lives, through interviews such as those presented here, through oral histories, through examinations of cultural documents, the ways in which their experiences converge can be revealed."

According to Bobo this has the potential to create an environment that enables the transformation of many black women's consciousness and awareness of their historical situation to further the movement towards their unification as a social force.

bell hooks' Reel to Real (1996) clearly indicates that she is a woman who has come to film not just as a film critic but also as a cultural critic, fascinated by the issues film raises – the way cinema depicts race, gender, and class. With Reel to Real, bell hooks offers a reading of films in a new way by exploring culturally specific meanings.

2.1.4 How Film Teaches its Audience

bell hooks argues that imitating life is not what films do, for the reason that people go to the movies more importantly to learn, not only to be entertained. What is often learnt transforms lives in one way if not many. People leave theatres with different perspectives on life. bell hooks (1996:2) quotes Jeanette Winterson, “Strong texts work along the borders of our minds and alter what already exists. They could not do this if they merely reflected what already exists.” It may not be the intention of the filmmaker to teach audiences anything, but that does not mean that lessons are not learnt.

As a result of movies being pedagogical tools, bell hooks finds it interesting to interrogate specific films that were marketed and critically acclaimed as progressive texts of race, gender and class and to see if the messages embedded in these works really encourage and promote a counter hegemonic narrative which challenges the conventional structures that uphold and maintain white supremacist capitalist patriarchy.

bell hooks is particularly concerned with black liberation when the subject of race is raised. Specifically dealing with works by black filmmakers, she raises questions about what is required to imagine and create images of blackness that are liberal. The intention is to anticipate the impact of the growing presence of larger numbers of black filmmakers and assess cinematic representation of blackness. For hooks, it is an interrogation of these representations of blackness by black filmmakers which is central to her analysis.

2.1.5 Feminism and Black Women’s Representations

> Crossing borders within the academic world, moving in and out of Black studies, Women studies, traditional English

> departments, and Cultural Studies, I am continually distressed by the willingness of one group to repudiate domination in one form while supporting it in another – white men who take sexism seriously but are not concerned with ending racism or vice versa, black men who are concerned with ending racism but do not want to challenge sexism, white women who want to challenge sexism but cling to racism, black women who want to challenge racism and sexism but claim class hierarchy (hooks, 1994:6).

According to hooks, most texts always claim to be progressive yet they fall short of recognising the essence of these points. A text cannot be measured positive if it just deals with the issues of race but promotes oppression of the opposite sex.

bell hooks (1996:228) quotes Salim Muwakki, “Can a mature African-American community allow aesthetic judgments to rest on ideological or political criteria?” Though she agrees that aesthetic judgments should not rest solely on ideological or political criteria, hooks believes that this does not mean that such criteria can not be used more so because no aesthetic work is above politics or ideology. She continues to indicate that there are films that are advertised, marketed, and talked about in a manner that raised political and ideological questions about both the film and the public response to it.

bell hooks uses *She’s gotta have it* (Spike Lee, 1986) as a case study. As a feminist, she asks: “Was the film a woman’s story?” “Did the film depict a radically new image of black female sexuality?” “Can a man really tell a woman’s story?” bell hooks sees the representation of Nola Darling, the central character in *She’s gotta have it*, as unchallenging to notions of female sexual passivity. For hooks, Nola’s sexuality is not depicted in the film as an independent woman longing for sexual expression, satisfaction, and

fulfillment. Her assertive sexuality is portrayed though her body as reward or a gift she bestows on deserving males. Therefore hooks suggests that this woman is not liberated.

In addition, if this woman were sexually liberated, there would be no need for her to justify or defend herself against male accusations. The focus of the film is therefore diverted from Nola to her male partners. The narrators are male and the story is a male centred, male-biased tale. It is not progressive in as much as it does not break away from the traditional portrayal of female sexuality. hooks (1996:231) writes, “While Nola appears one-dimensional in perspective and focus, seemingly more concerned about her sexual relationships than about any other aspect of her life, the male characters are multidimensional.” They have personalities and she does not.

In *Fools* we see men getting together from time to time for drinks and discussing politics and matters that concern them such as “sugar babes”. However, we never see women discussing important concerns. The times we see them, women are miserable. For example, we see them cooking for a wedding and the main issue highlighted is an argument that transpires amongst themselves.

hooks suggests that Spike Lee is a veteran filmmaker and it would be expected of a liberated black man to create positive progressive images that liberate black viewers. However, he repeats what oppressors formerly depicted by offering audiences sexist representations. hooks argues that Nola is shallow and vacuous. When Jamie rapes her asking, “Whose pussy is this?” she gives in and disappoints women by not considering her body rights. She even names the rape a “near rape”. For a woman who is supposed to be sexually liberated, her response that her pussy belongs to Jamie raises doubts about black women’s ability to control their own bodies. At this

juncture, hooks (1996:234) concludes that, "we have witnessed a woman being disempowered and not a woman coming to power."

2.1.6 Resisting Representations

bell hooks emphasizes the necessity for compelling representations of black women, films that represent black womanhood in ways that can be enjoyed and respected. hooks indicates that instead, there are "mock feminism" representations. She uses *Waiting to exhale* (Forest Whitaker, 1995) as a case study to explore this concept of mock feminism. Looking at Busi for example in *Fools,* she is supposedly verbally liberated. As she shouts at the elders who leave her house and attacks Zamani in her house, she unleashes her anger at Nosipho. What becomes clear is that she is just loud and lacks the intelligence to solve problems in a constructive way.

Waiting to exhale claims blackness and black authencity according to hooks, the reason being that a black woman has written the book on which the film was based. McMillan assisted with the screenplay and a black man, Forrest Whitaker, directed the film. Terry McMillan fails to portray positive progressive images and does not break from white supremacist representations of black women. The disappointment could have been brought about by the fact that according to hooks, "McMillan told the world in *Movieland* magazine those experienced black women directors in Hollywood just were not capable of doing the job. She made the same critique of the black woman writer who was initially hired to write the screenplay," (1996:53). Yet, the film is about black women and is offered as a feminist narrative.

Waiting to Exhale features four professional heterosexual black women who want to get a man and keep him. Instead of providing images of professional black women concerned with the issues of racial uplift and gender equality in the work place, racist stereotypes feature 'happy darkies' singing, dancing,

fucking and drowning their sorrows in alcohol. We see four incredibly glamorous women obsessed with getting a man with status, material success and petty competition with other women, especially white women.

It is surprising that McMillan depicts black women in the novel as progressive and deal with politics around race and gender yet what is seen on the screen is different. bell hooks asks, “Did she forget that she had written a far more emotionally complex and progressive vision of black female-male relationships in her novel?” (1996:56).

We see only white women having dedicated relationships with black men in the film. hooks emphasizes this by writing, “What we saw on the screen was not black women talking about love or the meaning of partnership and marriage in their lives,” (1996:54). The message sent could be that black men are really undesirable mates for black women as none of the black men involved with a black woman in the film are compassionate about their women.

2.1.7 The Oppositional Gaze

bell hooks watches films with black women and reads their responses to the films. Her motivation is to offer a response to the images of black women, her assertion being that there is power in looking. She writes, “A distinction must be made between the power as viewer to interpret a film in ways that make it palatable for the everyday world they live in and the particular persuasive strategies films deploy to impress a particular vision on our psyches” (hooks, 1996:3).

The subject of black women as spectators takes us back to the notions of race, gender and class only this time bell hooks furthers it to nationality, diasporic representations and black identity. Of particular interest to me is the

question of representations of black women by filmmakers especially by black filmmakers as in my case study of *Fools.*

When black people first had the opportunity to look at film and television, media maintained white supremacy therefore there were no exciting images of black women. On rare occasions where representations of black women were present in film, they were compelling for white audiences as they were slave figures. According to bell hooks, the way black women were portrayed in these films forced black female spectators to negate their representations and reject those images. Only negative images of black women were visually constructed.

However, through studying interpretations of black women spectators, bell hooks discovered that the very images that she and her age group rejected, women of the previous generation could identify with. Hence it is important when conducting interviews that different age groups and different classes be considered for screenings and discussions as I have done in my study. This is because different generations and economic backgrounds offer alternative readings.

Furthermore, the response of the feminist film theorists remains unsatisfactory. They fail to acknowledge black female spectatorship. In Reel to Real (1996), bell hooks writes, “Their psychoanalytic framework privileges sexual differences but actively suppresses recognition of race and racialised sexual difference.” This could have been brought about by the fact that feminism started with white women. These women failed to acknowledge individuality that is brought about by issues such as race, socio-economic and historical background of the subject. According to bell hooks, many feminist film critics continue to structure their discourse as though it speaks about “women” when it actually speaks about white women.

bell hooks writes, “interrogating black looks is mainly concerned with issues of race and racism, the way racial domination of black by whites over-determined representation. They were rarely concerned with gender,” (hooks, 1996:200). She continues to point out that major early black male independent filmmakers represented black women in their films as objects of a male gaze. For example, looking at the reception of *She’s gotta have it*, the situation is depicted in such a way that the audience knows more about how men see Nola than about how she sees herself. bell hooks points out that as they are watching the rape scene, when Nola gives in, “Sexist male viewers vilified cheered, expressing their satisfaction that the uppity black woman had been put in her place, that male domination and patriarchal order had been restored,” (1996:233). Therefore, situations are forced to be seen the way men see them and women are portrayed the way men want to see them in order to maintain patriarchal social control, male power over women.

As a result of all the above, identifying with neither the phallocentric gaze nor the construction of white womanhood as black, critical black female spectators had to construct a theory of looking relations where cinematic visual delight is the pleasure of interrogation. Examples can be drawn from a black woman filmmaker Julie Dash who has been influenced into making film by being a critical spectator. bell hooks herself became a film critic as a result of being a spectator who reads against the grain.

One can therefore argue that critical black female spectatorship emerges as a site of resistance only when individual black women actively resist the imposition of dominant ways of knowing and looking. Black women therefore provide alternative texts that are not solely reactions but according to bell hooks, looking and looking back, black women involve themselves in a process whereby they see their history as counter memory, using it as a way to know the present and invent the future.

Ifi Amadiume's (1987) study aims to achieve a contextualised and fuller picture that would reveal gender, class and race conflicts over power sharing. She is interested in issues concerning African women, culture, power and democracy. Amadiume was triggered into her study as a result of her disagreement with the kind of ethnography used in the universities in the West. Her argument arose as a result of recognizing that data collected by those she refers to as "old masters of Anthropology during the colonial period", was interpreted and applied according to their point of view to justify conquest and the subjection of indigenous people and their cultures to the foreign rule. She further noticed that material produced was inevitably racist.

In her book Male Daughters Female Husbands (1987) she highlights the influence of two shortcomings of social anthropology – the racist division of the world and the indifference to those being studied – in the attitude and politics of western feminists to the Third World women. She continues to argue, "Given the racist element of the Western women's movement, it is perhaps not surprising that none of their studies have dealt with issues of racism," (Amadiume, 1987:4).

When female academics and western feminists began to attack social anthropology in the 1960s and 1970s, issues they took on were androcentricism and sexism. The methods they adopted indicated to black women that white feminists were not less racist than the patriarchs of social anthropology, an attitude that white feminists themselves were condemning with a male bias. Amadiume writes, "They fantasized a measure of superiority over African and other Third World women. Black women's critiques could therefore be restricted to the male bias of social anthropology and not challenge white women," (1987:3).

One could say that Ifi Amadiume is offering an alternative theory of feminism from that proposed by Western feminist theorists. She again differs from the

Western approach by not generalising and uses African societies as her case study. Furthermore, she indicates the importance of not overlooking the fact that cultures and practices differ accordingly and concentrates on the Nnobi group with whom she feels more comfortable as she was born and raised in that culture. Her second study of the Nnobi resulted in Daughters of the Goddess Daughters of Imperialism (1992) a book about gender, class and race relations under the present state system in African countries and the contemporary nature of power between different classes of women nationally and globally.

2.1.8 Matriarchal Power in African Societies

Amadiume writes, “At no period in the history of the patriarchal cultures of Europe has motherhood been accorded the same status and reference as it has had in African cultures. This in my opinion epitomizes the arrogance and insensitivity of ‘abstract anthropology’, an attitude which unfortunately also permeates the work of most western feminist theoreticians,” (1992:3).

Ifi Amadiume argues that there is much power in the hands of African women that Western feminists refuse to recognize. Using the Igbo societies, specifically the Nnobi group, as her case study, Amadiume indicates that titles were given to women and not only to men as one would think. Daughters as well as wives married into these societies are offered certain titles that gave them power. She quotes Diop who argues that ancient Africa was matriarchal. “We consequently find that maternity is viewed as sacred in the traditions of all African societies. And in all of them, the earth’s fertility is traditionally linked to women’s maternal powers,” (Amadiume, 1987:191).

However, Amadiume indicates that all Igbo daughters of patrilineage are accorded the superior status in relation to their wives. For example, the wives of the patrilineage address all Igbo daughters as ‘husbands’. Therefore, this

poses a question of class and gender division among women (Amadiume, 1987:180). The conceptualisation of daughters as male in ritual matters and politically in relation to wives did not imply that daughters should be seen as ‘manlike’; nor were ‘female husbands’ expected to dress or behave like men.

The fact that biological sex did not always correspond to ideological gender meant that women could play roles usually monopolized by men, or be classified as ‘males’ in terms of power and authority over others. Furthermore, the presence of an all-embracing goddess focused religion favoured the acceptance of women in statuses and roles of authority and power. To elaborate on this, Amadiume quotes Okonjo stating that the Queen’s Council was strongly represented in the king’s court, so that no trade legislation or transactions were made without their knowledge and consent (Amadiume, 1987:181). In addition, the queen also appears to have been independent of the king as she was not ritually subservient to him.

However, Western culture and Christian religion brought by colonialism carried rigid gender ideologies which aided and supported the exclusion of women from the power hierarchy, whether in government or the church in the modern society. This rigid system meant that roles are strictly masculinised or feminised, breaking gender rules. Annie Lebeuf argues, “If women in traditional African political systems lack authority today, it is a result of policies initiated from the western prejudices which relegates women to the sphere of domestic tasks and private life, and men alone are considered equal to the task of shouldering the burden of public affairs.” (Quoted in Amadiume 1987:186-187)

2.1.9 African Feminism versus Western Feminism

Amadiume raises the aspect of socio economic impacts which affect women according to the Diaspora in relation to feminism. She uses Nigeria as her

case study to indicate how socio-economic issues can impact on people. In the chapter ‘Class and Gender in Child Abuse’ Amadiume writes, “Child abuse in Nigeria has its own complexity and reflects new structures of patriarchal and class privilege, thus pointing to an economic factor: victims tend to come from poor families.” (2000: 122)

This chapter looks at child abuse in Nigeria: child labour, trade in children, child marriage, teenage pregnancy, abortion and abandoned babies. According to Amadiume, data presented shows that all the above problems have a socio-economic explanation and very much relate to class inequality between women.

This is because parents are forced into marrying off their children or giving them away to start working at an earlier age as a result of poverty. Usually those who marry young girls are better off and can afford to feed and take care of the girl’s family. Likewise teenage pregnancy is brought about by poverty as it results from girls who are desperate to get jobs or get money from older men. After indulging in unprotected sex for money they often find themselves with unwanted pregnancies and resort to abortions or abandoning their babies.

Looking at Nigeria, it is a clear example of how women’s needs differ. According to Amadiume, women were concerned about the following, “Health issues, disability, land rights, poverty, work, environmental racism, oil pollution and environmental refugees” (2000:12). One should also take note of the factor of religion that also affects women’s needs as the Muslim women. For example, the concern with issues of the age for girls to be married does not necessarily affect Christian women.

Although these issues may be vital to Nigerian women, they seem to be insignificant to the western women. Amadiume against the slogan WOMEN

RIGHTS ARE HUMAN RIGHTS writes, “Well, bourgeois women’s rights are not human rights – they are rights of class privilege at the expense of human rights,” (2000:12). The needs of grassroots women are usually contextualised, less abstract and quite practical.

2.1.10 Daughters of the Goddess and Daughters of Imperialism

Ifi Amadiume talks in terms of Daughters of the Goddess and Daughters of Imperialism. According to her definition, Daughters of the Goddess are those that fought the nationalist struggle for independence while Daughters of Imperialism inherited the post independence successor state and are partners in corruption. One of many aspects that bring the difference between the two is the issue of generations.

Amadiume argues that in pre-colonial society, sex and gender did not necessarily coincide. In this book, she examines the structures that enabled women to achieve power. She indicates that roles were neither rigidly masculanised nor feminised. This calls for an inspection of other African societies. The Lovedu found in the north-eastern Transvaal in South Africa have a history of supreme female rule (Amadiume, 1987:187). Just like the Nnobi and many other African societies, sisters have a higher status than the wives; the queen reigns at the capital and is the head of the judicial system; either men or women act as district heads. The queen has super natural powers: she makes the rain. She is given ‘wives’ and may not officially marry a man but may have children.

Economic changes in colonial times undermined women’s status and reduced their political power and as Amadiume maintains, patriarchal tendencies introduced by colonialism persist today to the disadvantage of women. For example, in examining contemporary women’s associations, Amadiume says she noticed that politically oriented women’s organisations systematically

attracted economically successful women and restricted membership of younger women still dependent on husbands and constrained by domestic responsibilities. These organisations are therefore dominated by post-menopausal widows and divorced women, and it is these women that are invited to fill in political offices, nominated as possible candidates by political parties, or given honorary titles by towns and governments (Amadiume, 1987:186).

However, as already mentioned, previously daughters could have higher status than wives. Nnobi daughters, who had no economic base, had a higher status than wives, whose labour was central to the economy as a whole. The power and authority of daughters were the result of a cultural construct, not of economic achievement or of any rights to extra-domestic distribution (Amadiume, 1987:190).

In conclusion, Ifi Amadiume stands out as an African feminist who highlights that women's experiences differ and that this shapes their understanding of texts. She indicates that facts such as class, gender and race are important considerations when dealing with issues that enhance the betterment of women in the world generally. However the issue of economy seems to be more important when looking at the historical background of African societies brought about by their previous political status, for example, South Africa. The agenda of class in contemporary Africa seems to be based on the issue of differing economic status of women.

Experiences of feminism will differ according to the experiences of women, which can also be determined by geographic and historical locations. Black women in Africa possibly will have different perspectives from black women in other parts of the world. In this respect, theories of feminine experiences differ significantly as do discourses of feminism.

In relation to my research, Bobo and hooks serve as the basis for black women as cultural readers. Though they are far from South African cultural interpreters, I look at what they have done in America for African American writing to form my own basis of what to do for black women in South Africa in offering them space as interpreters of their own culture by using a film that claims to represent them. Amadiume is used as someone who understands both the historical and political background of black women in Africa. Contrasting Bobo and hooks, Amadiume looks further into aspects they overlook as a result of their African American location.

Jacqueline Bobo and bell hooks are concerned with cultural contexts, both using films to exemplify and explore black women's experiences in America. They are both black feminists who offer alternative feminism from psychoanalytic approaches explored by film theorists. Bobo and hooks while concerned with issues of class are not focused on the class relations in an African context but rather privilege class questions in an African American context. They do look into historical and political influences but not in a colonial or postcolonial context, as is the case with Amadiume. Their historical location is that of slavery and the civil rights movements of African American experience. Amadiume clearly outlines the historical background of black women in Africa and the political history of colonialism and neo colonialism of today.

Bobo expresses that because black women had always been a "silenced" component of black history, their vocal and visible support of films that are products of black women writers indicated that they have place in black culture and they are ready to demand relevant presentations. Their reaction to these films posed as an opposition to what had been presented to them before. In addition, they were in a way providing their own interpretations different from ones that had been presented to them by psychoanalytic

feminist film theorists. They were in a way adding to black feminist scholarship.

However, hooks talks of mock feminism. Using *Waiting to exhale* as an example, she points out that some films claim black authenticity but when one looks into their making closely, these films uphold patriarchy and racism that result in distorted representations of black women. Although Bobo is adamant that the overwhelming reception of these films by black women indicates that something must be right, hooks clearly points out that imitating life is not what films do as people go to the movies to learn. Essentially hooks calls for progressive representations.

Jacqueline Bobo like bell hooks strongly points out that, black women's representations in mainstream media have always been both distorted and limited and that black male directors have added to this construction. Bobo exemplifies her position with Spike Lee's film *She's Gotta Have It.* She writes, "No recognition is given that black women are and have been powerful agents conscious of their historical circumstances and deliberately working towards bettering their lives," (1995:36).

In films, black women have always been and are still featured as subversive beings. Jacqueline Bobo's Black Women As Cultural Readers (1995) illuminates how black women's history of resistance to social domination forms the essence of their resistance to cultural domination. Black women have always been continually involved in patterns of resistance and this is illustrated by their resistance to oppression by their white masters at their working places, even fighting for better wages throughout the years.

Like Bobo and hooks, Amadiume blames the legacy of patriarchy and colonial oppression on the white man. Amadiume strongly points out that before

colonial rule and Christianity; women were regarded highly in African societies.

The issue of class is central to Amadiume's analysis as well as to Bobo and hooks. Amadiume indicates that prior to colonial rule, economic status was not a decisive factor for one to hold a certain political position but of birth, but now it is a matter of class and capital that leads to positions being monopolised by older women who are either widowed or divorced with fewer commitments to household obligations.

To conclude, though there is still difference of opinion to a certain extent between Bobo and hooks, they both look at matters differently from Amadiume. Amadiume is more concerned with the relation of race to colonial power and feminism. Colonialism has initiated class differences between women through white patriarchal practices. Though Amadiume is educated and might be said to belong to a middle class grouping, she is willing to look at what brought about class disparity and how those who claim to be fighting for the rights of women continue to worsen the matter by condoning and practicing class inequality between themselves and women in Africa. She is concerned about the economic status that is a cause of serious dependence of women on men as providers and questions how women may overcome such inconveniences to improve lives of black women in Africa.

It is important to indicate that what has been discussed in this chapter is fundamental to the analysis of the film *Fools* which serves as the case study. In order to explore the existence of these concepts the research will adopt a qualitative study to offer black women in South Africa a space to interpret representations of black women in a South African film. It is also essential to find out whether women in different parts of the world read cultures in a similar way or if their backgrounds bring difference in the way they read.