BOOK REVIEW

Wanjiku Mukabi-Kabira, Masheti Masinjila and Wanjiku Mbugua (eds.)

Delusions: Essays on Social Construction of Gender
Nairobi, Femnet, 1994, 1 + 67 pp

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Introduction

Gender relations constitute the social, political and economic interaction of both men and women. As a result, gender contract is interpreted as an unwritten and invisible social contract defining the actions of men and women in the belief that this is what society expects of them. Viewed within this framework, gender research is about relationships between men and women. But in single studies the focus can be on only women or men, given that their situation is analyzed within a structural gender relationship. Where does the book under review fit within this framework?

Thrust of Text

The text's focus is on the relationship between men and women, but with a bias for women. Indeed, this is understandable, considering that the social construction of gender preponderantly invisibilizes and marginalizes women in the general social contract. This explains why in the historiography of gender relations worldwide, the emphasis is on women, making the subject of gender synonymous with women's studies. Consequently, women researchers tend to monopolize the production of knowledge on gender. In some instances, they jealously guard their small ‘academic empires’ acquired in the field. However, in this regard, the African Women’s development and Communication (Femnet) Organization transcends this parochialism by incorporating male researchers in its projects. Delusions: Essays on Social Construction of Gender is one such endeavour. It consists of seven chapters, all of them discussing the social construction of gender.

Chapter one theorizes patriarchy, asserting that it is society’s organization of its affairs to cater for and sustain male supremacy over females. Masheti Masinjila, for instance, explains how the patriarchal tradition of African societies ensures perpetuation of male-centred institutions even when society changes from the indigenous forms of organization to contemporary forms. He cites the language used in different African societies as a way by which patriarchy perpetuates itself. Moreover, institutions such as marriage, rites of passage, the warrior culture and religion reproduce the patriarchal ideology. Women are portrayed as playing the second fiddle to men. He summarizes how patriarchy sustains itself saying that:

The most powerful argument that patriarchy justifies itself ideologically with, is the belief that change of the current organization of society will be disruptive in a damaging and irreparable way (p. 13).

In chapter two, Wangoi Njau is concerned with the process of socialization of individuals. According to her, society is constituted of individuals within social units such as family, clans, communities and nations. Based on the social units with their structure and value systems forming the general patterns of social organizations and relationships, society also has various social expectations. These are norms, rules, regulations and principles that determine human conduct and ethical foundations crucial for its maintenance and survival. The gender contract is thus based on
Chapter three discusses gender and politics, explaining the participation of women, the political process in the ancient world and pre-colonial Africa. Okumba Miruka decries women’s representation in decision-making process of governments saying they are less than 10 per cent. He avers: “...women candidates who go to the hustling of prioritizing women concerns or proclaiming feminist beliefs, are likely to frighten the electorate” (p. 22). But, this should not discourage women from clamouring for greater representation in the decision-making organs to empower themselves. Whereas Okumba Miruka makes these allegations, he does not give adequate examples to bolster his argument.

In chapter four, Mukabi-Kabira discusses gender and social mythology. She asserts that social mythology is powerful in shaping social relations. However, social mythology appeals to opinion rather than facts. It is created in such a way as to appeal to emotions. For instance, it makes “women feel guilty if they are not at home, if they are not with children, if they are not good at cooking or organizing their homes etc.” (p. 28). This is a result of the colonial structure which required women to be home-makers and men breadwinners.

Chapter five explains the place of gender and symbolism in Maragoli circumcision ceremony and its impact on cultural construction. Thus, Henry Indangasi examines the Maragoli circumcision ritual and how it perpetuates patriarchy, making females to feel inferior in society. This is because the circumcision ritual reaffirms “traditional values, customs and prejudices.” These values are associated with machismo and have helped to define gender relations.

In chapter six, Benjamin Odhonji examines Luo poetry and oral narrative and how it socializes individuals in the Luo community. According to him, the socialization process in all aspects of the Luo seems to marginalize women. But what is the place of the concepts, “house” and “home” in the Luo social contract? Indeed, the concepts, “house” and “home” have defined gender relations in the Luo community. Conventionally, it is asserted that they tend to empower women economically. Through the house, for instance, a woman’s property is defined - she determines what belongs to her. The final chapter by Kariuki Gakuo, which is titled, “Moaning the Death of tradition,” explains the extent to which music is used in the social construction of gender. The author draws examples from the songs of Joseph Kamaru, a local Kenyan musician, to demonstrate women’s subordination. For example, when the musician refers to a woman as a drawer of water, he equates her with a labourer. Thus, the girl child is socialized into the world of labouring and is regarded as an economic investment.

Conclusion

The book’s strength is in its ability to identify the root cause of gender imbalance in African societies. But, whereas, it has a number of short-comings including, typographical errors and minor spelling mistakes it provides good reading for those who want to understand the social construction of gender in Kenya. While moaning the sorry state of affairs of women however, the authors do not suggest solutions to the predicament. This makes the book to appear like a lamentation.

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