

## **Africana Notions of Gender, Rape and Objectification**

By

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### **Abstract**

This article derives its conceptual impetus from Lindsay Kelland's incisive discussion of rape in an article entitled: "Conceptually situating the harm of rape: An analysis of objectification published" in the *South African Journal of Philosophy*. In this article, Kelland advances the contention that "what takes place in an encounter of sexual objectification can be thought of as establishing an implicit threat which permeates the lived experience of being a woman under patriarchy because of the prevalence, meaning and place of sexual objectification in hegemonic patriarchal ideology." Having thoroughly scrutinized this article, I strongly identify with Kelland on the harm associated with the objectification of the female body by the male other and I argue that even the idea of Africana womanism, which represents the interest of African women in Africa and in diasporic spaces, will have to do a lot more to challenge this position as it tends to mask the real challenges African women face in their everyday association with patriarchy.

### **Introduction**

In this article, I discuss the harm of rape and the problem of objectification from two diametrically opposed perspectives, namely the feminist perspective represented by Kelland and the Africana Womanist perspective represented by Clenora Hudson-Weems and others. I charge that while Kelland's incisive discussion of the harm of rape makes it clear that patriarchy has led to violations of women's sexual rights, the Africana womanist perspective has tended to mask the same through its deliberate failure to identify gender binaries in Africana culture.

I now go straight into a summary of Kelland's submissions on rape and sexual objectification, which are packaged in five sub-headings, namely: the human condition and situation, women under patriarchy, sexual objectification, alienation and dissociation. In this article, I admit that

Kelland has done a wonderful job in demonstrating how the notion of rape has become gendered in contemporary society. It is also against this background that I attempt to investigate this notion from an Africana womanist vantage point.

While from a feminist perspective, it is easier to understand where Kelland is coming from, given that feminism and patriarchy are opposite poles, from an Africana womanist perspective – a perspective that does not quite clearly blame patriarchy for treating women as objects – it is somewhat difficult. Having thoroughly read and understood the submissions of both feminism as represented by Kelland and Africana womanism as represented by Hudson-Weems, I make the claim that issues of rape and sexuality can only be fully understood when defined from a universal or cross-cultural perspective. This is notwithstanding the fact that the factors leading to rape may well be cultural and circumstantial. Below I give an outline of Kelland's submissions on rape and sexual objectification in order to buttress the foregoing.

### **Kelland's submissions**

Kelland believes that an analysis of the human condition and situation is necessary to understand the particular situation of women under patriarchy. She believes, too, that an understanding of the human condition and situation helps to explain the notions of objectification, alienation and dissociation which, according to her, are clear cut indicators of women's oppression under patriarchy. Coming to the notion of the human condition and situation, Kelland believes that the human body is always lived within a social and historical setting. In short, it is situated; that is to say, the body is always engaged in interaction with ideologies and other social practices (Moi, 2000: 59).

Kelland maintains that, since the very meaning of the word situation, in this context, is the structural relationship between our projects and the world, to say that the body is both *a situation* and is always *in a situation* is to allow for the fact that the meaning of the body is intertwined with our projects (Kelland, 2011: 170). As Kelland (2011: 171) insists:

The human condition itself, as defined by Jean-Paul Sartre, is played out at the level of the human body; the ambiguous relationship between transcendence and immanence that constitutes the lived experience of the human condition and situation is revealed in our very nature as bodily beings both in its own right and in its relationship to the world...The importance of the body to the human condition and situation is intricately wrapped up with the importance of our relations with others or with our being-for-others.

Although I challenge Kelland to say a bit more about how this relationship is brought to bear given that this claim has more appeal to women in non-Africana contexts than those in Africana contexts, this should not be taken to mean that there are serious flaws on the part of Kelland's submissions, especially the part that points to rape and objectification as gendered constructs that are more revealing in patriarchal societies than in other societies.

I maintain that Kelland is right in arguing that 'the social realm, which makes up part of the world with which our bodies are engaged, is itself made up of other individuals and the ideologies, beliefs and values held by these individuals' (2011: 171). Thus, it is these ideologies, beliefs and values that define cultures and which cultures determine how both women and men should be regarded in the different cultures in which they submerge their individuality. Thus, the problems of rape and objectification can only be understood from this perspective.

Kelland (2011: 171) also makes the important point that the specific contradiction of women's situation is caused by the conflict between their status as free and autonomous human beings and

the fact that they are socialized in a world where men *consistently cast them as other*, as objects to their subjects. Moi affirms this point thus:

Women's transcendence is objectified by transcendence and the effect is to produce women as subjects painfully torn between freedom and alienation, transcendence and immanence, subject being and object being. This fundamental contradiction is specific to women under patriarchy (Moi, 1994: 155).

For Kelland, the split between transcendence and immanence which is already doubly experienced by women under patriarchy is further complicated by the role that women's bodies play in their oppression under patriarchy (2011: 172). In her discussion on patriarchy, Kelland appeals to the theory of biological determinism which holds that there exists what can be called a 'feminine essence' that pervades the entire existence of a woman and which springs solely from her biology – most typically in these accounts, from the ovum (2011: 172).

According to this theory:

The alleged fact that the ovum is passive in the moment of conception translates into the fact that passivity is a fundamental feature of femininity and ...an essential feature of every woman's nature. The corollary of this idea is that the sperm is allegedly active at that moment of conception and so, along the same lines as before, activity is fundamental to the 'masculine essence' and an essential feature of every man's nature (2011: 172).

Kelland wisely concedes that while biological determinism may not be widely advocated today, the associations endorsed by such an account are still widely upheld and still seem to ground, and are considered to justify, gendered social roles and activities (2011: 173). Please take note that Kelland does not herself directly blame biological determinism for the oppression of women under patriarchy, far from it. Her position is that biology could still be a factor when it comes to the oppression of women in patriarchal contexts.

With regard to sexual objectification, Simone De Beauvoir and Catherine Mackinnon (cited in Kelland, 2011: 173), argue that women not only live as other and object but as *sexualized* other and *sexualized* object. For Kelland, one is taken to objectify another if one treats the other as a means and not as an end-in-themselves. Kelland appeals to Martha Nussbaum's seven notions of objectification in a bid to strengthen her case. These are:

1. *Instrumentality*: This is whereby the objectifier treats the object as a tool for his or her purposes.
2. *Denial of autonomy*: Here, the objectifier is treating the object as lacking in autonomy and self-determination.
3. *Inertness*: With regard to inertness, the objectifier is treating the object as lacking in agency and perhaps also in activity.
4. *Fungibility*: With fungibility, the objectifier is treating the object as interchangeable (a) with other objects of the same type and/or (b) with objects of other types
5. *Violability*: This notion of objectification is whereby the objectifier treats the object as lacking in boundary integrity, as something that it is permissible to break up, smash, break into.
6. *Ownership*: With regard to ownership, the objectifier is treating the object as something that is owned by another, can be bought or sold.

7. *Denial of subjectivity*: Here, the objectifier is treating the object as something whose feelings and experiences need not be taken into account (Nussbaum, 1998: 218-219).

Nussbaum thinks that when treating a human being as an object, the most problematic or morally exigent of the seven features is *instrumentality* since when an objectifier treats a human being as a tool for his or her purposes, treating the human being in the other ways seems to follow (Nussbaum, 1998: 218-219). Kelland rightly builds on Nussbaum's theory to argue that women under patriarchy are sometimes treated like tools which men can use to achieve their purposes. Kelland argues that to be sexually objectified, that is, to be treated as nothing other than a generic, sexual object whose experiences and feelings need not be taken into account, threatens further degradation, such as rape, where the victim is treated as instrumental, fungible and sometimes owned and experiences her autonomy and boundary integrity as violated (Kelland, 2011:177).

On the issue of alienation and dissociation, Kelland draws on the work of Sartre, who argues that alienation is to be 'objectively' something which you have not chosen to be (Kelland, 2011:179). Thus, a woman under patriarchal conditions finds herself positioned and defined as other and object in contrast to the absolute, male subject (Kelland, 2011:179). This meaning, which is attached to her from outside, is one which she has not chosen, but is rather one that she finds herself given due to her biology and situation (Kelland, 2011:179).

Kelland also relies on the work of Sandra Bartky (1990), who argues that alienation occurs when the sexual objectifier separates a sexual part or function from the whole of the objectified person and takes that part or function to represent the whole of the objectified person (Kelland,

2011:179). For Kelland, this leads to estrangement, which should be seen as an instance of psychological oppression that results in alienation (Kelland, 2011: 179). Dissociation, for Kelland, is the phenomenon of detaching oneself, as subjectivity, from one's body during unavoidable trauma. It is a coping mechanism which is employed by a rape victim by separating her real self from her 'bodily' self, and in so doing she distances herself from rape (Kelland, 2011: 181).

Kelland notes that, if we accept that alienation is the result of the internalization of the objectifying male gaze as a result of the hegemonic rule of patriarchal ideology, then we have one possible way to explain the prevalence of dissociation in the narratives of female-rape survivors; through internalizing the gaze of the objectifying other, women come to see their bodies as object-like and inert and so distance themselves – as subjects – from their bodies (Kelland, 2011: 181). This is as far as Kelland can go in her defense of the feminine discourse on rape and objectification. While her argument is quite convincing, certain parts of it need to be scrutinized.

At face value, it would appear as if Kelland's argument is not directed to any particular audience, but when one thoroughly reads her article, one can see that she is appealing to feminism, which automatically suggests that she is addressing a female audience, but what one cannot take away from this solid argument is that there is a problem and the problem is that of patriarchy's violations of the sexual rights of womenfolk through rape and sexual objectification. Thus, in her explanation of the human condition and situation, Kelland strategically puts a lot of emphasis on

the importance of the human body when it comes to rape and objectification. I say ‘strategically’ because, to me, the female body is, in all cultures of this world, the site of all gender struggles.

But it is also fair to argue that while Kelland has focused – in general terms – on how patriarchy has objectified the female other, there are other perspectives that debunk such an approach to life, which Kelland deliberately chooses to ignore, and Africana Womanism is one such perspective. Drawing on the work of Hudson-Weems (1993, 2004), the conceptualizer of Africana Womanism, I explore the various ways in which Kelland’s submissions do not resonate well with the lived experiences of women in other cultures, at least according to the defenders of Africana womanism.

### **Africana Womanism’s submissions**

According to Hudson-Weems (1993: 22), *Africana womanism* is “an ideology created and designed for all women of African descent. It is an ideology grounded in African culture and therefore, it focuses on the unique experiences, struggles, needs and desires of Africana women.”

Hudson-Weems asserts that while many academics uncritically adopt feminism, most Africana women in general do not identify themselves as feminists (Hudson-Weems, 1993: 15). Hudson-Weems argues that for those Africana women who do adopt some form of feminism, they do so because of feminism’s theoretical and methodological legitimacy in the academy and their desire to be a legitimate part of the academic community (1993: 16). Suffice to say that, outside the academy, Hudson-Weems probably fell short of saying that most of those Africana women who have adopted some form of feminism remain as Africana women in thought and in action. But this is the argument I wish to pursue in this article at least for now.



How does Africana womanism deal with issues of rape and sexual objectification? To my knowledge, Africana womanist literature on rape and sexual objectification is hard to come by. In fact, I have not been able to come across relevant literature on the subject of rape and objectification prior to writing this article. So, my submissions here will be based on the philosophical method of inference. I will try to play the devil's advocate. Thus, in their reaction to Kelland's submissions, defenders of Africana womanism would probably argue that patriarchy has not completely oppressed women's performance space to the extent of rendering them as objects and hapless victims.

Defenders of Africana womanism would also probably argue that it is the same patriarchal order that has allowed women to be subjects rather than being objects. Thus, they would argue that patriarchy has not always been exclusive. They would point to certain cultural practices in Africana societies to show that women have not necessarily been treated as objects to be toyed with. They would say, for instance, that among the Shona people of Zimbabwe, the statement *Musha mukadzi* (the woman is the cornerstone of the home) is a clear endorsement of the reverence that is accorded to women in Africana societies.

The Igbo people of Nigeria say *naeaka* (mother is supreme). What this probably means in the minds of most Africana womanists is that the Africana woman is not necessarily treated as an object but as a subject with full rights and responsibilities that are defined within the context of Africana womanism. Contrary to Kelland's submissions, defenders of Africana womanism would probably argue that a woman does not occupy the periphery of society, where she is acted upon rather than acting. Even if one was to revisit Nussbaum's first criterion of objectification,

namely, *instrumentality*, whereby the objectifier treats the object as a tool for his or her purposes, defenders of Africana womanism would still object to this claim, citing among other things the absence of gender binaries in Africana cultures, which, to them, gives women the dual role of being both mother and father depending on circumstances.

Defenders of Africana womanism would also postulate that the possibility of regarding Africana women as *inert* is next to none. They would argue that there is nowhere Africana women can be said to be lacking in agency and activity given that at the centre of all family activities is the Africana woman. Defenders of Africana womanism would probably not endorse the position that Africana women are *fungible*, whereby they are seen as changeable or dispensable, given their central role in the socialization of children, stabilization of adult personalities and the caring of both children and adults.

Another Shona statement which is probably reflective of the profound reverence extended to women by defenders of Africana womanism is: *Ukarova mai unotanda botso* (If you assault your mother, society will curse you) and all misfortunes will befall you until you compensate for the misdeed. What this means therefore is that the human condition and situation in sub-Saharan Africa is best explained by looking at the importance of spirituality in explaining human behaviour. This point also shows that Africana men do not consider Africana women to be *violable* as shown by the profound reverence they extend to them.

For Africana womanists, it is a far-fetched idea to suggest that Africana women can be commodified or *owned* by another since from a spiritual point of view, Africana women occupy a very important place. This point also takes into consideration the issue of feelings. Because of

the spiritual nature of Africana women, their feelings can be taken into the grave and the results can be disastrous for those who will have suppressed such feelings while the women were still on earth. I have no doubt that Africana womanists would probably argue that Nussbaum's seven notions of objectification, which Kelland enlists in her bid to put across her argument, cannot apply to the condition and situation of Africana women.

Another point to note is that it will not be plausible to suggest that the specific contradiction of women's situation is caused by the conflict between their status as free and autonomous human beings and the fact that they are socialized in a world where men consistently cast them as other, as objects to their subjects. The words *free* and *autonomous* imply that women are subjects and not objects. For only subjects can be free and autonomous. We are, however, aware that, conceptually, it is possible for a person to remain a subject even after being raped but the point we are making is that, semantically, rape takes away a person's freedom and autonomy, at least during the time of rape, in which case the victim is reduced to an object.

Explaining the subjects of freedom and autonomy further, Thomas Szasz (1988: 18) traces the history of the concepts of *freedom* and *autonomy* back to the period of the enlightenment and the nineteenth century. He begins by noting that in the enlightenment period, a concept of *freedom* originated that had an individual and positive structure: freedom then was the possibility for the individual to attain his own goals, thus the purpose of *freedom* for Szasz was to become an individuated person, an autonomous, authentic, self-responsible man (1988:18). This was "freedom *to*." In the nineteenth century the concept of freedom was clarified by "political revolutionists" such as Marx and Lincoln, who argued that freedom was collectivist and had a

negative structure, formulated as freedom *from* something, such as: freedom from oppression, freedom from slavery, or freedom from abuse (1988: 18).

In short, this freedom was the freedom of a group to have the same privileges as all other groups. Szasz thus identified “freedom *from*” with collective freedom (1988: 18). The individual had “freedom *to*” while the group had “freedom *from*” (1988:18). Although Szasz considers both forms of freedom to be desirable and necessary, collective freedom is to him meaningful only as a condition for individual freedom (1988: 18). He opposes the view that individualism and autonomy are but excuses taking advantage of the weak (1988: 18). Autonomy, for Szasz, is a positive concept meant to develop oneself – to increase one’s knowledge, improve one’s skills and achieve responsibility for one’s conduct (1988: 22).

An Africana womanist argument could be put thus: in addition to their status as co-partners and male compatible, women are free and autonomous because they are not consistently cast as other by their male counterparts. Africana Womanism is a family centred rather than a female centred theory, which focuses on gender from an Africana centred point of view. Africana Womanism emphasizes unity rather than separation. In that sense, women cannot be seen as the *sexualized* other or *sexualized* objects but as subjects who are constantly working with their male counterparts to achieve collective goals.

Probably from an Africana womanist vantage point, the idea of *freedom from* sits well with the idea that it is the responsibility of both men and women to *free* their society from oppression and other such vices. If this point is anything to go by, then men cannot cast their women

counterparts as *other* as they are in the same struggle to end racial oppression and class antagonism.

### **A critique of Africana womanism's submissions and the way forward**

To begin with, while some Africana women have accepted the label *feminist*, more and more Africana women today in the academy and in the community are re-assessing the historical realities and the agenda for the modern feminist movement (1993:16). These women are concluding that feminism does not accurately reflect their reality and struggle (1993:16). Please note that although many women who subscribe to Africana womanism are likely to be persuaded to dismiss Kelland's conceptualization of rape and objectification on the basis that it is premised on the idea of feminism, the reality remains that rape and objectification are universal or cross cultural problems.

The other challenge that comes with the package of Africana womanism is that it does not explicitly say anything about rape and the problem of objectification in Africana societies. Only Chapter VI of Hudson-Weems' book, *Africana Womanist Literary Theory* (2004: 79-97) comes closer to addressing these issues. The chapter is entitled "Africana Male-Female Relationships and Sexism in the Community." In explaining this Africana male-female relationship, Hudson-Weems seems to be dividing Africana womanism into two categories, namely that it addresses the concerns of Africana women in continental Africa and Africana women in diasporic spaces.

What I seem to discern from this chapter is that these two categories of Africana women somehow have different ontological, epistemological and axiological experiences, with the former still embroiled in a struggle for gender liberation and the latter struggling against racism

and classism. What unites them, though, is that they share a culture that is rooted in silence. By this I mean that, although African women in continental Africa are still struggling against gender inequality as perpetuated by patriarchy and although rape and objectification define their daily struggle, their culture socializes them into accepting gender inequality as something that is normal and unchallengeable and so they do not want to talk about it in public.

The corollary of this is that to both the former category of African womanism and the latter category, notions of rape and objectification are masked by culture as well as racism and classism respectively. If this argument is anything to go by, then Kelland's analysis of rape and objectification as universal and/or cross-cultural concepts is spot on. Chris LaMonica (2014) puts it succinctly when he argues, thus:

While universal understandings of many concepts may pose many challenges and while the notion of 'objectification' which Kelland investigates might well be cultural; there can be no misunderstanding as to what rape is. In fact, the general global trend is toward the objectification of women and that rape is...a particularly poignant example of that. If murder is mankind's most selfish act; then rape cannot be too far behind and if there is no universal understanding of what rape entails, it is something well worth striving towards.

Another point to note is that African womanism, through its deliberate failure to recognize and problematize gender binaries in African societies, has masked the challenges that African women have faced, which are more or less the same challenges highlighted by Kelland's feminist analysis of rape and sexual objectification. Some of these challenges include, but are not limited to, domesticity. For instance, the statement '*musha mukadzi*' (a woman is the cornerstone of the home) that was cited earlier may not necessarily mean that African women have more authority at home than their husbands.

It could mean that since they (Africana women) spend the greater part of the day at home, they know how to organize homes better than their husbands, who are always out fending for the family. This is different from women in the West who have, to some extent, liberated themselves from this yoke of domesticity. Besides, girls in most Africana cultures have been socialized in such a way that they do not consider themselves to be equal to boys. They are constantly told that in the future boys will be fathers and they will be mothers and society will expect the later to submit to the former. The argument is that since boys will become fathers tomorrow and girls will become mothers, it follows that boys have more power and authority than girls. Socialization thus prepares girls to accept that scenario in the future. It is against this background that Africana girls and women become victims of rape and objectification, compared to women in the West whose socialization takes a different form. It is on the basis of such premises that Kelland's analysis of rape and objectification can be applied as a template to all patriarchal societies, including Africana societies. This is notwithstanding the points raised against this analysis by defenders of Africana womanism.

## **Conclusion**

In this article I discussed the problems of rape and objectification from two different perspectives, namely the feminist perspective idealized by Kelland and the Africana womanist perspective represented by Hudson-Weems and others. While I admitted that Kelland's submissions had their own challenges, given that, at face value, she was not addressing any particular context, I submit that she has a solid argument in which she defends the claim that women under patriarchy are sexually objectified by their male counterparts and that rape is one of the tools used to sexually objectify them. In order to strengthen her case, Kelland went on to

enlist some of Nussbaum's seven notions of objectification, namely *instrumentality*, *denial of autonomy*, *inertness*, *fungibility*, *violability*, *ownership* and *denial of subjectivity* and these notions were fully explained in the text.

However, using the method of inference, I noted that defenders of Africana womanism were not in agreement with each of these seven notions of objectification in terms of how these could be applied in Africana contexts. Their central argument was that Africana women were revered in their societies and that rape and objectification were not important issues on the Africana agenda. While, to some extent, they succeed in what they probably consider as taming feminism, they fail to convince me that Kelland's argument is heavily flawed. My position is that in both Africana and non-Africana contexts, rape and objectification are women's everyday struggles although they are being masked by culture, race and class and that Kelland's analysis on these issues is spot on.

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