

# **Whose Body Whose Language? A Feminist Critique of the Construction of Discourses on a Woman's Body in African Religious Spaces and its Effect on Well-being**

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## **Abstract**

The autonomy of a woman's body and the space it occupies in many religious spaces appears to be embedded in a contested terrain. An African woman's body is located in a space that seems to be safely controlled in order to save it from its supposed vulnerability. Such interventions have been championed by many factors such as colonialism, patriarchy, and religio-cultural ideologies derived from different religious traditions such as African Traditional Religions and Christianity. Within these interventions the female body seems to be silent, spoken for, acted upon, amidst situations that locate it in subordinated hierarchies of society. These hierarchies appear to be carefully secured by the patriarchal rhetoric that cuts across the secular and religio-cultural traditions. This paper is a critique of how religions such as Christianity and African Religions construct women's bodies which in turn affects their wellbeing in society. The paper uses discourse analysis to argue that although women's bodies have power to control and challenge systems both in societal and spiritual realm as is argued by scholars these bodies are still perceived as subordinate to patriarchal control. Hence, the paper concludes, with a need for urgency in analyzing the way in which women's bodies are located in religious spaces and its effect to women's identity and wellbeing.

**Keywords:** Woman, Bodies, Religious spaces, subordination, Christianity, African Traditional Religions Sexuality, Feminism.

## **Introduction**

One of the key elements that motivated the contemporary wave of Western feminism was to address the issue of female subordination. This meant challenging male dominance so as to recognize women's rights and autonomy over their bodies<sup>1</sup>. Previously, theories of knowledge with regard to women's bodies and their potential in society were mostly championed from a male epistemological standpoint. This dominantly male championed knowledge cut across the secular and religio-cultural traditions. For example, from the western secular world philosophers such as Plato, and Aristotle, whose thinking and teachings are influential even in today's contemporary society, attest in some of their classical works to the inferiority of a female body in comparison to a male body. (Buchan 1999). Comparatively, the male body was thought to be depository of the superior soul and well equipped for heavy tasks such as fighting, state protection and leadership, and for generating souls of perfect humans, whereas, the female body was considered the host of an inferior soul (Buchan 1999:46). Such a soul necessarily residing in a female body was considered a product of the imperfect seed, which is weak, slow in resisting stress, and in need of protection from the 'super' male body (Allen 2002). These secular teachings from the Greek philosophy found their way into Christian traditions through the church fathers such as Augustine and Thomas Aquinas (Thetcher 2011). On the other hand, religio-cultural traditions in many African societies too have their own perceptions on female bodies. Hence religions such as Christianity and African Traditional Religions have to a certain extent created a considerable force to influence how the female body is talked about in the contemporary society. Most of the discussions on women's bodies are closely linked with issues of sexuality. From the western perspective issues of sexuality emerged within women circles as a consequence of women's endeavor to take charge of their bodies. Some of the radical feminists argued that 'sexuality in a male-dominated society inevitably involves danger for women' (Caplan 1987:9). African scholars such as Matroy (2005), Oyewumi (2005) and Tamale (2011) view sexuality as a complex and often silenced phenomenon that can be exploited by the patriarchal systems present within African societies. We have therefore argued in this paper that the subordination of an African female body does not seem to arise from a vacuum.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on the subject matter see the work of Annie Clifford in her works on the history of feminism.

Instead it is embedded in certain cultural, religious, and colonial imperialistic theories of knowledge which are 'coated' and 'flavored' by intentions to promote health, liberation, religious morals, and sexual excitement for the African woman. The paper locates its argument in the context of religio-cultural socialization of the female body and its effect to women's wellbeing, while deriving examples from specific geographical contexts within the continent. We believe that such an approach helps to guard against the generalization of women's narratives which tend to undermine the value of context in academic research.

### **Discussing Theory and Method**

The paper employs a feminist approach to discussing discourses on sexuality and women's bodies using Lisa Isherwood's conceptual framework on sex and body politics. Through a textual analysis as its method of analysis, the paper critically examines discourses that influence the way in which women's bodies have been perceived and the space that women by virtue of their bodies have occupied in African religious spaces. It also attempts to analyze discourses of power and control that have been exposed in these religious spaces when constructing epistemologies that define female bodies. The discourses on human bodies suggest that there is a contestation in defining the spaces these bodies occupy in society. Lisa Isherwood observes that any attempt to venture into the phenomenon immediately reveals a 'highly constructed reality reflecting the power structures of the society' (2000:20). The author further states, unlike the male bodies, female bodies are usually treated as the 'other' members second in hierarchy after male bodies. This can be observed in patriarchal societies where religion and society join as liberating parties yet end up forming a super power force that attempt to hierarchically rank female and male bodies (Isherwood 2000:21).

Some of the dominant male led epistemologies pre and post-Christianity have attempted to argue against women bodies. These levels of knowledge have conceived and through ages sustained claims that female bodies are not always necessary unless only as material support for male souls' survival (Thetcher 2011:8-10). From such assumptions Isherwood (2000) demonstrates that the demonization of women bodies has for ages been experienced especially where women were reduced to reproduction of wealth and human labour. Isherwood's claim is relevant in helping to understand the

space occupied by women in the colonial and postcolonial capitalist societies in Africa. This is because in many African societies, at the interplay of religion, colonialism and patriarchy women became dwellers of private life as mothers while men retained active public life as leaders in religious and civil spaces (Falola & Nana 2012:73; Tamale 2014:159). Literature has also revealed that as women bodies were retained from public to private affairs they gradually became spoken for and acted upon by the active male patriarchy. Revisiting the implication of the Christian model as pointed out by Isherwood as well as paying attention to how colonialism and patriarchy ordered women bodies is key in the current society as we attempt to deconstruct various epistemologies that subordinate women. Such engagement, cannot in a context where health and wellbeing has been highly associated with women's bodies. For instance in their ethnographical research on women agency amid the prevalence of HIV in South Africa scholars such as Morrel *et al.* (2012) discovered that gender inequalities perpetuated by the societies' view of male and female bodies pose a great threat to women's agency to evade HIV. The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians with scholars such as Phiri and Nadar (2003), Hinga *et al.* (2008), Dube and Kanyoro (2004) and Haddad (2011) and many others, together with male gender activist scholars such as Ezra Chitando (2009) have extended the debate further and indicated that discourses on sexuality and HIV and AIDS pandemic reflect a female body that is talked of, acted on and perceived as the key player in the spread of the pandemic.

## **Governmentality Theory**

The theory that this paper proposes is Foucault's theory of governmentality. Nyanzi (2011:482) proposes that the theory of governmentality is an 'analytical tool [t]hat facilitates the analysis of the locus and the dynamics of power in sexual relationships and sexual cultures'. It examines how the conceived norms and practices within a society are deemed 'normal' and acceptable in controlling peoples' behaviour. A critical analysis of how language is constructed around women bodies suggests an imbued power of control that has effect on how individuals perceive women bodies in the outside world.

Religio-cultural practices in many African societies promote governmentality of female bodies not only through the power of the 'said

word', but the language of silence and symbols. This is despite the fact that women's bodies are perceived to have certain spiritual powers that can be used to control the community. Through the promotion of silence certain members of society are initiated to communicate their bodies' affairs through symbols. This kind of communication can either be positive or negative. Although the notion of silence is contested within cultural contexts we argue that it has also opened avenues in which women bodies have been acted upon by society. Among the Baganda of Uganda, like many other African contexts when the girl child is of age, she goes through initiation rites that involve sex education. In most cultures the girls are kept away from the public arena. In this time the construction and expression of female sexuality depends on the acceptable form of body operation. During such sessions girls' bodies are under strict observance and instruction by the paternal Aunt who can be said to represent the patriarchal authority.

A religio-cultural perspective shows that that during these rituals, it is the body that has to conform with the dictates of culture and society, thus we see a scenario where a woman's body is regulated by cultural power systems. This is in line with Isherwood's (2000:21) theory of body construction, where she attests, the female body is not exempted from being possessed and acted upon by different forces. Therefore, Synnott (1993:1) affirms that, 'the body is not a 'given' but a social category with different meanings imposed and developed by every age... as such it is therefore sponge-like in its ability to absorb meanings'. If bodies absorb meaning by being acted upon, what meaning does a stretched labia minora, none stretched, and a 'cut' and 'uncut' clitoris infer? How about a body that is displayed for media purpose? A body used to assess health statistics? Who then determines the meaning of the body the beholder or by the society? Cultural analyses point out the fact that female bodies are often acted upon in silence and secrecy. Therefore, constructions of power in this case are displayed through prescribed cultural domains.

## **Language as Tool to Govern the Dichotomies between Male and Female Bodies**

Language is one of the most powerful tools for communication in defining women's bodies. As an instrument of governing bodies, language seems to locate female and male bodies differently and perhaps influence which bodies

are best suit to lead others. In this analysis a close attention is given on the sexual language which appears to be one of the most controversial means in which bodies are governed. The power imbalances in relations expressed in sexual communications has to a great extent contributed to sexual and gender based violence coupled with concepts of powerful and dangerous masculinities that see themselves as being superior over the femininities. Although in many African traditional societies, sexual language is communicated metaphorically<sup>2</sup> (Muyinda *et al.*, 2001:354) the metaphors used seem to portray the underlying power relations within sexuality. . Metaphors among the Baganda are called:

... *okwambaza ebigambo*’ (dressing words) ... [t]hey are an acceptable medium of accessing the secret world of un-verbalised sexuality, shifting it from the ‘private’ to the ‘public’ realm. ...As cultivating is the primary economic activity of the Baganda, many of the sexual metaphors and symbols... are couched around this theme Hence a man who is impotent is described as ‘no longer able to cultivate his farm’ (*takyalima nnimiro*); one who is lousy in bed is a ‘bad farmer’ (*ennima embi*); one who gets premature ejaculations is referred to as ‘unable to complete his *lubimbi* (piece of arable land apportioned for the day)’; to ‘eat one’s dinner’ (*okulya eky’ekiro*) or ‘digging one’s *lubimbi*’ both refer to having sex; ‘food must be eaten with *ebirungo* (spices)’ means to introduce variety in sexual activity. A woman is referred to as *asiriza entamu* (burns the pot) if she is not adequately lubricated. The sexual symbol of mortar and pestle is universal: thus *omusekuzo* (pestle) is an erect phallus and *okumusekula* (pounding) refers to its motion in sexual intercourse (Tamale 2006:92).

A critical analysis of the sexual metaphorical language of the Baganda seem to indicate that while a man is compared to a farmer (who carries the identity of a human being) the woman is associated with land and seen as a garden (carrying the identity of an object). This could be assumed that one body is active while the other is passive. Further analysis can also suggest that

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<sup>2</sup> To speak metaphorically is to communicate using words, sentences or phrases to describe ‘an object or action to which it is not literally applicable’ <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/metaphor/>>.  
(Accessed on 20 September 2014.)

the sexuality of a man is expressed in terms of power while that of a woman is viewed as dormant and receptive.

Another important indicator of how metaphors tend to imply inequalities in sexualities is how the male and female sexual objects are defined. The sexual organ of the man (penis) is presented with a powerful image of the 'pestle' which hits the 'mortar, an axe that cuts the wood, a spear or a hoe that cultivates the land,' i.e., the receptive image of the female sexual organ the vagina. Hence, according to Chirwa (1997:7):

In Malawian culture, a man courting a woman for marriage affirms his commitment to her by giving her or her parents or guardians a material gift called *chikole*, from the word *kukola* meaning 'to get hold' or 'capture' or 'take control'. The *chikole* gift thus symbolises the man's access and claim to the woman's sexual territory, and the exclusion of other men from her.

Although, Chirwa (1997:8) has argued that the *chikole* does not necessarily connote a man's control of his wife's sexuality, but is a symbol of affection, love and willingness to enter into a life-long relationship, nevertheless its root *kokola*, could be interpreted to show the imbalances between a woman and a man's sexualities. The language drawn from the meaning of *kokola* thus locates a man and a woman at far distance from each other. Similar to Isherwood's description of a man's sexuality that 'screws' the woman, and the Baganda's male sexuality that 'cultivates' a woman, the Malawian male sexuality 'captures' the woman, thereby portraying how powerful male sexuality is understood and expressed (Isherwood 2000:28; Tamale 2006:92; Chirwa 1997:7). It can therefore be argued that these expressions attempt to portray a reality of how power is distributed in the discussions of sexuality which later reviews how the female body is perceived by society.

### **Discourses on Women's Subordination in Religious Spaces**

For the indigenous people of southern Africa, the introduction of Christianity meant that they had to deal with the dualistic nature of faith adherence in their conceptualizing of the female body. This had a considerable impact on the way

Africans perceived their humanness within religious spaces. Having embraced Christianity, African Christians were compelled to view themselves as people of two separate entities-body and soul of which the soul (as it was taught in many Christian theologies of the time) was superior to the body. The Christian teachings viewed the body as that which needed thorough ongoing purification to reduce its potential of corrupting the soul. The whole notion seems to have been a battle of sexuality and the soul a condition that put women bodies on the spot light, whose sexuality was already under control by the western and African patriarchal societies<sup>3</sup>. Rakoczy states that feminist theologians reject the dualistic model because it assumes that the male is the better, stronger and more gifted one between the male and female and that women need men in order to be complete. The model also locates women in a biological context as though women are only created for procreation (Rakoczy 2005:49).

Further, a woman's body and her sexuality has not always occupied an appraised space in the history of religions such as Christianity as indicated earlier. For example, informed by mostly Platonic and Aristotelian philosophies, greatly acknowledged church fathers such as St Augustine, and Thomas Aquinas both had reservations on women bodies. As an influential exemplar of Christian conversion and monasticism St Augustine seemingly believed that for men to attain holiness they had to retain a certain distance from women. In chapter VI of his rule St Augustine warns monastic men of the danger of looking at women bodies: *'...you must not fix your gaze upon any woman. seeing women when you go out is not forbidden, but it is sinful to desire them or to wish them to desire you, for it is not by touch or passionate feeling alone but by one's gaze also that lustful desires mutually arise'* (Augustine, IV, 4 as cited in Karen & Hermes 2009:196). It appears therefore that women bodies were not only capable of corrupting the 'holy' men's souls but also destabilizing monarchical lifestyles of men. The rule seems to further portray that women had no decision or control that informed their behaviors but could be dictated upon by the desires of men. Similarly, appeased by Aristotelian philosophy which insisted on women's inferiority as products of defective male seeds<sup>4</sup> (Allen Prudence 2002:141). It is from such discourses

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<sup>3</sup> Cf. Caplan P. The Cultural Construction of Sexuality (1987: 9); Tamale Exploring the contours of African Sexualities (2014:160).

<sup>4</sup> Aristotle believed that women were only created due to the lesser hotness of the sperm and this was a defect. While the female bodies provided the material

and perceptions about a woman's body that some of the religious derive their teachings which deny women the right to emancipate their bodies from religious teachings that are life denying and fail to promote the wellbeing of women. Therefore, a need for feminist epistemology that will challenge such a status quo.

## **Feminism, Religion and Women's Bodies**

From a feminist perspective, the call towards the liberation of African women from religious discourses that promote patriarchy is one of the major issues that has attracted the attention of African women feminist theologians. African feminism is contextually understood. It seeks to respond to a diversity of African women experiences as influenced by a number of forces such as religion, colonialism and traditional cultural norms Kanyoro (2002).

In their edited volume Phiri and Nadar (2006) argue that one of the areas that some African women feminists and theologians have greatly contributed has been to redefine a woman's place in religious circles a space which has been for centuries predominantly male-controlled. It has also been rightly noted by many African feminist theologians that religion has been used as a tool to suppress women's voices, bodies and experiences, and in some way, as a systematized mechanism of surveillance over women's theological reflections on their being.

Although Oduyoye is equally keen at appreciate the contribution of religion and its relevance in the African context, she raises concerns on religious orchestrated silences when it comes to issues that directly undermine women's liberation:

My criticism of African churches is made to challenge them to work towards redeeming Christianity from its image as a force that coerces women into accepting roles that hamper the free and full expression of their true humanity .... the church seems to align itself with forces that question the true humanity of 'the other' and, at times, seems actually

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support during reproduction it was the male's sperm that provided life. Women's bodies were thus only necessary for a nourishing environment (cf. Thatcher 2011:8).

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to find ways of justifying the oppression or marginalization of ‘the other’ (Oduyoye 2005:480).

For some time now, African women feminists and theologians have called for the liberation of women’s bodies from all forms of oppression by challenging society to accord women the freedom to assume equality due to them as humans (not just complementarity).. Traditional body theologies that tend to categorize men and women as unequal partners in both strength and exercise of responsibilities have continuously found beacon in the contemporary African church. As rightly raised by Rosemary Radford Ruether (1993) body politics are constant determinants for women positions and hierarchy in religious spaces. A good example can be drawn from the Catholic church where the ordination of women is vehemently challenged by referring to the apostolic tradition that never saw the ordination of women; to the supposition that Jesus chose only men for apostleship<sup>5</sup> and John Paul II’s most recent statement that ‘while men and women are equal in worth and dignity, their physical and anatomical differences are evidence that God intends different roles and purposes for them’ (Manson 2014). An emphasis that would lead one to conclude that such exclusion is justifiably focused towards the woman’s body and not her being as a human being. Thus the idea that women in most cases are judged by the church on grounds of *who* they are and not *what* they. In this this way the body becomes the place of contestation.

The discourses on body-based argument that seem to take for granted women’s liberation theologies in many Christian denominations have been as a consequence of failure to positively address issues related to body theology. One of the reasons for this failure could be argued from an existentialist point of view that society can hardly respond positively to issues relating to women’s bodies historical social and religious constructions of women’s bodies. Further the sustained limitation to respond to women’s experiences can also be seen as agenda of alienating women from the center to the peripheral. A recent study by Falola and Akua, 2012 affirms Ruether’s (1993) point of view that while the center of leadership and ministry is visibly under male control, women are left with less options than to occupy the peripheral. But the seemingly successive push of women to the peripherals of religious spaces can, in some sense, be a subsequent effect of the ‘WHO’ and ‘WHAT’ hermeneutical

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<sup>5</sup> Cf. John Paul II ‘Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*’ 1994.

interrogation of a woman through her body. The two W's when used through a patriarchal interpretative lens often locate a woman as a co-helper, complementary, productive and reproductive 'asset' of the male. The two W's further present a woman's body one that should acted on, silenced and talked for by society. Accordingly, Falola and Akua argue that 'based on its interpretation of the Bible on the Who a woman is and What her capabilities entail the Church has positioned women in a childlike state and effectively rendering them as needing care; attention; and most importantly, directions in order to function properly in society and live a righteous life' (2012:73).

It would be however inappropriate to fail to recognize some traditions that have made effort to deconstruct and reconstruct the position of women in their religious spaces. While this development is noteworthy, the platonic sexism that denounces the woman's body seems to still exist in most of the religious circles. In the context of HIV and AIDS, marriage and Gender based violence, African women theologians have often critiqued the Christian church not for being ignorant of the gospel of equality and humanness but for failing to put into practice that which is believed, read, and taught (Phiri 2007: 20).

It would also be misleading if it is generalized that African religions treated women and men equally. At least not as far as their bodies were concerned. At the same time, it would also be misleading to see African Traditional religions and Christianity as monolith in their perception of women's bodies this is because bodies that defined masculinities and femininities always dictated which place one occupied.

## **Conceptualisation of Female Bodies as Health Threats**

The paper has debated discourses on body theology and its effect on women's wellbeing drawing much of its ideas from an African perception of women's bodies. In relation to African sexuality Amadiume (2007:26) argues that most of the studies done on African sexualities have created more fear for the African woman than pride and joy for her sexuality. She observes that the woman's body has been reduced to a figure for scrambling between different forces for purposes of advising, controlling, health assessment, entertainment (own words) or offering direction. The theory of governmentality equally clarifies this phenomenon by asserting that in any human society, at the helm of power and control individuals learn 'to act on others ... (and this through

these relations,) it bends, it destroys, it breaks, it forces, or it closes all possibilities' (Foucault *et al.* 2003:137). To this end, women usually identify themselves with little self-esteem inferiority and subordination.

In the Christian tradition, one of the powerful means used in exerting control of women bodies in religious spaces was through demonising African traditional practices that sought to promote and revere the woman's body. As maintained by Tamale (2014), Messianic religions failed to appreciate the woman's body as did the African traditional religions. As Christian missionaries sought to instil the sacredness of worship spaces the gaze was much directed towards the women bodies' disposition. Traditional dances and dressing as appreciated by African cultures seemingly portrayed a sense of 'immorality' before the 'holy men of God.' For many of the early Christian missionaries in Africa as Tamale (2014:153) would argue 'the female body was viewed as the seat of sin, moral corruption and a source of distraction from Godly thoughts'.

Similar sentiments are held by scholars such as Phiri (2007). In her analysis Phiri observes how certain aspects of the Chewa initiation ritual (*chinamwali*) ended up being demonised and banned. Among the key elements that the Christian missionaries deemed inappropriate and sinful were, 'cultural taboos associated with [menstruation] blood and sex' (2007:62). Christian missionaries argued that such practices were not only contrary to Christian teaching, but were also enslaving to women and girls. Religion as such was seen and presented as a liberating mechanism for the enslaved body of a Chewa woman. Borrowing Hertog's (2010:121) words we argue that 'religion can influence people's opinions, attitudes and behaviour'. About issues such as health and wellbeing. In dictating how the women bodies are viewed, theological assumptions such as these carry overwhelming influence considering the fact that they are pronounced from religious seats of authority overseen by the patriarchal structures. In the era of HIV and AIDS the female body continue to be viewed as a threat to the male body in as far as infection is concerned. This kind of threat reflect a battle of the genders, (i.e., the male power which is seen as superior and the female power which is considered as inferior to the male) (Tamale 2014:152). When negative attributions are associated with an African woman's body there seem to develop tendencies of psychological inferiority that tend to gradually limit one's abilities to challenge tendencies of subordination a situation that increases one's vulnerability.

From African Traditional Religion point of view, women occupied

significant spaces as diviners, healers, prophetesses that performed leadership role as priestesses (Falola & Akua 2012:70). We therefore argue that in an effort to find redemptive ways of addressing the women's body in the context of health and wellbeing African traditional religions can offer a reliable critique to reviewing how women's bodies can be perceived in such a context. Other than being perceived as weak, African Tradition often view women's bodies as spiritually powerful. This however does not mean that African Traditional Religion is devoid of women subordination in relation to the physical bodies. Although women performed roles of diviners, priestesses and others, their bodies could in many ways at times be perceive as obstacles for community purification. For example, woman's menstruation period is continuously associated with impurity and possibility to defiling the sacred shrines. This type of blood is believed to 'render impotent or reduce the efficacy of any herbal medicine or talisman' (Oduyoye & Kanyoro 1992:20), hence affecting the health of any male who comes in intimacy contact with a women observing menstruation. It is such kinds of assumptions that have also contributed to the way in which women's bodies are perceived as health hazards in most societies

This paper has theoretically analysed the construction of women's bodies in Religious spaces. The main focus of the paper as discussed earlier was to show how religious constructions of women's bodies affect the way in which society view women as health threats and how such constructions has led to how women view themselves in relation to realizing their wellbeing. The location, perception, the gaze or spiritualizing of women's bodies in religious spaces needs to be critiqued if women's emancipation is to be attained. Without this engagement, we argue that women's bodies will continue to be subordinated and this will perpetuate negative perception of women's identity in society. Further this kind of approach to women's bodies will continue to undermine women' agency in responding to contemporary challenges such as HIV and reproductive health.

## **Conclusion**

We conclude this paper with an argument that knowledge with regard to how women should express their bodies and sexuality has served more instances of subordination than equipping women with autonomy to direct their health and wellbeing. This is despite much effort by women to liberate themselves from

such human perceptions. The conception of this knowledge has been greatly informed by a number of forces such as colonialism, Christianisation, African tradition Religions, and other forms of epistemologies informed by patriarchal tendencies. At the centre of these constructions is a discovered framework of hierarchy in which even in issues relating to wellbeing bodies are ranked first and second class positions. This does not exempt religious spaces despite the 'preached gospel of equality.' As the paper demonstrates patriarchy continue to provide structures of control over women's bodies through arms of culture, health and religion. This makes women's subordination inevitable. However, identifying traces of subordination remains critical since these forms of knowledge are presented with codified sentiments of health intentions, sexual excitement, cultural identities and 'life-saving' intentions that women ought to enjoy. However, in as much as certain forms of epistemologies attempt to forward good intentions for the female body, the failure to engage women experiences and actively provoke their voices, creates states, pauses a great challenge to the current call for women emancipation that leads to women's realisation of their identity.

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