# A Critique of the Notion of Patriarchy in Feminism Using Metz's Relational Ethics.

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## Abstract

Within the intellectual ambience of feminism is the notion that the human world is patriarchal. Hence, feminism is a movement aimed at dethroning patriarchy, which seems to favour men over women. This entails that for feminists, the world is lopsided. Therefore, there is a need to reorder the system for women to be fully integrated into society and share equal privileges and rights as men. We disagree that this feminist patriarchal view of the world is correct. Thus, in this paper, we argue that Metz's conception of harmony can assist us in understanding that the argument by the feminists that there is a conflict between genders is not real but imagined. Metz's relational ethics, which is built on the sub-Saharan African notion of 'relationship', asserts that humans [irrespective of their gender] can affirm their identity and live in solidarity if and only if they operate with the principle of communion. This ethical theory upsets the feminist's thought that the world is patriarchal. Instead, it shows that identity distinction between the male and female genders leads to solidarity in human society.

**Keywords: Feminism, Gender Roles, Harmonious Relations, Patriarchy**

## Introduction

Feminist theory has for a long time presented gender relations as in conflict. As a conflict theory, feminism assumes that a society consists of opposed fractions [sexes] whose relations are based on the domination of men over women. The theory believes that the root cause of women's oppression is a patriarchal understanding of gender relations. Thus, the major aim of feminism is to eliminate male privilege and sex distinctions such that genital distinction between human beings should not matter culturally and politically. Also, feminists champion the need for society to recognise the social role that women play in reproduction, and this should be accommodated in the workplace. They sometimes push further the argument to suggest the need for compensation for this socially essential service. At its height, feminism argues for the reordering of society along a matriarchal basis by opposing patriarchal oppression. With this understanding, we then present what we believe should be the proper understanding of gender relations in African societies, drawing from Thaddeus Metz's understanding of conceptions of harmonious relations in African societies.

Contrary to the understanding of gender as in conflict, we invoke Metz's argument of harmonious relations in African ethics to address the notion of patriarchy in feminism. Metz's ethics is known as African relational ethics [Metz 2012; 2013; 2014; 2017a; 2017b; 2018; Metz and Gaie 2010; Metz and Miller 2016, etc]. This ethics is built on and prizes the sub-Saharan African notion of relationship as an ethical ideal. It holds that humans must be relational to be ethical or moral. It advocates harmonious coexistence and communitarian relations within human society. In such a society, it becomes difficult to segregate and oppress anyone since all commune harmoniously.

Following the above argument, we contend that gender relations should be understood as males and females communing with each other or participating in harmonious relations as exhibited in African virtues. As we advance our argument, we will discuss diverse feminist thinking demonstrating how they portray patriarchy, hence befitting the description of feminism as a conflict theory.

## 1. The Question of Patriarchy in Feminism

Feminism as a discourse is not monolithic; it has many variations and movements since its inception. Thus, it becomes clear that there are ideological differences between the various feminist groups. However, they unite when it comes to their views against hierarchical relationships between men and women, which they believe is not a biological destiny. For purposes of this paper, we are more concerned with radical feminism, which argues that patriarchy is a foundational system of male dominance embedded in social and sexual relations. Radical feminists believe that patriarchy is responsible for women's oppression. The word patriarchy derives from the Greek words —*pater* [father] and *arche* [rule] [William 1994:209], and literally means the rule of the father in a male-dominated family. Thus, originally patriarchy is understood to mean a father who rules over a family [Peirik 2018:8]. However, with the coming of feminism, the definition of patriarchy became broader. Ray defines patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices, in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women [2011:1]. In Daly's words, patriarchy is:

> *1: society manufactured and controlled by males: FATHERLAND; society in which every legitimated institution is entirely in the hands of males and a few selected henchwomen; society characterized by oppression, repression, depression, narcissism, cruelty, racism, classism, ageism, [speciesism,] objectification, sadomasochism, necrophilia; joyless society, ruled by Godfather, Son, and Company; society fixated on proliferation, propagation, procreation, and bent on the destruction of all Life 2: the prevailing religion of the entire planet, whose essential message is necrophilia [2006:53].*

Bhasin notes that patriarchy is now used to refer to "male domination, to the power relationships by which men dominate women and to characterise a system whereby women are kept subordinate in several ways" [2006:3]. This domination of women by men is understood to take place in both private and public spheres. The private sphere is the family and the public sphere is society. As Laurien puts it:

> *Patriarchy is a social system controlled by men and as an inheritance which is passed on from father to son. Family members are dependent on, and submissive to, the male head of the household. In its broader sense, patriarchy is a system in which men dominate, oppress and exploit women and which extends beyond the household to society in general [2004:1]'*

Thus, for most feminists, the term patriarchy designates the power relationship between men and women. Understood this way, patriarchy is viewed not just as a term but a concept that helps understand women's realities. Wamue-Ngare and Njoroge [2011:14] further explain that patriarchal culture is institutionalised through a rigorous socialisation process in which every community member is aware of what duties, responsibilities and roles are expected from them, which is perceived as the correct order crucial for family and communal harmony. Through institutions such as the academy, the church, and the family, it justifies and reinforces women's subordination to men. For feminists, patriarchal relations are not inevitable but are constructed relations that can be changed. They believe that patriarchal ideology exaggerates biological differences between men and women, making certain that men always have the dominant, or masculine roles

and women always have the subordinate or feminine ones [Sultana 2010: 3]. In support of this view, Walby [1990:20] sees patriarchy as a system of social structures and practices in which men dominate, oppress, and exploit women. This understanding of the concept helps feminists explain the notion of biological determinism – the view that men and women are naturally different because of their biology or anatomy and, therefore, assigned different roles. Thus, feminists believe that patriarchy is artificial and that historical processes are responsible for its creation.

Furthermore, Engels [1940] gives an important explanation of the origins of patriarchy. For him, the world-historical defeat of the female, which involves the development of private property, gave birth to women's subordination. He believes that both the division of classes and the subordination of women developed historically. With the advent of private property, men wanted to retain power and property to pass it on to their children [Engels 1940]. Hence, to establish the father's right, women had to be domesticated and confined and their sexuality regulated and controlled. With the emergence of private property, women's housework sank into insignificance compared to men's productive labour. "The world historical defeat of the female sex with the establishment of capitalism based on private property ownership by men did away with inheritance of property and social position through female line" [Bhasin 1993:24-25]. The bourgeois families who owned private property emerged as patriarchal families where women were subjugated [Suranjita 2008:7]. Such patriarchal families became oppressive as men ensured that their property was passed on only to their sons. Therefore, bourgeois families and private property as a by-product of capitalism subordinated and oppressed women. Marxist feminists and socialist feminists believe that it is not women's biology alone but private property and monogamous marriage, economic and political dominance by men, and their control over female sexuality which led to patriarchy [Suranjita 2008:8].

Contrary to Engels' views, radical feminists such as Brownmiller [1976] and Firestone [1974] believe that patriarchy precedes private property. They challenge the notion of femininity and masculinity as mutually exclusive and biologically determined categories. The ideology of motherhood subjugates women and perpetuates patriarchy, which forces women to be mothers and determines the conditions of their motherhood [Suranjita 2008:12]. However, Walby [1990:4] notes that there are differences between radical feminists over the basis of male supremacy. Still, often this is considered to involve the appropriation of women's sexuality and bodies, while in some accounts male violence is seen as the root cause. Sexual practice is seen to be socially constructed around male notions of desire, not women's.

Further, sexuality is seen as a significant site of male domination over women, through which men impose their notion of femininity on women [1990:4]. For radical feminists then, heterosexuality is socially institutionalised in contemporary society and organises many aspects of gender relations. They uphold the view that the original and basic contradiction is between sexes and not between economic classes.

Generally, the feminists' view of the oppression of women seems to come from patriarchy [in private spheres] and extends to capitalism [in the public spheres]. Hence, this outline of the feminists' views on women's oppression brings about the sexes in conflict. To this effect, socialist feminists call for a transformation of society to eliminate the categories of race, class, gender and sexuality. In contrast, radical feminists call for a complete revolution of society to alter the patriarchal system. We, however, argue against the feminists' patriarchal view of the world as a correct depiction of gender relations in African societies. We believe that Metz's relational ethics can assist us in demonstrating that the conflict between genders explicated by feminists was an imagined one.

## 2. Metz's Relational Ethics

Thaddeus Metz articulates an African theory of morality known as relational ethics. This ethics is African because it is African culture-inspired. The sub-Saharan notion of relationship inspires it. He notes that this idea of relationship is also found in non-African cultures but is a dominant idea across sub-Saharan Africa. This idea of relationship is apparent in two famous African aphorisms. These include: 'A person is a person throu-

gh other persons' and 'I am because we are' [Mbiti 1990: 106; Mandela 2013: 22; Metz and Gaie 2010: 274; Metz 2017b: 444; 2018: 38]. The point is that a person must be in a relationship with other persons and live in the 'we consciousness' to be a person. In this context, the person must be humane and develop and exhibit humanness [Metz and Gaie 2010: 275; 2017b: 444]. Metz posits that the South African concept of *Ubuntu* encapsulates this human excellence in indigenous Africa as seen in the sub-Saharan idea of relationship [Metz 2010; 2017a; 2017b; 2018; Gwara & Mutelo 2025; Igbalumun & Mutelo 2025].

Furthermore, this idea of relationship promotes "living communally with others" [Metz and Miller 2016: 4]. In this communal living, humans see the other as an integral part of the self. Hence, no one sees the other as an outsider. On the contrary, all are part of the whole – the community.

Before Metz, some African scholars have discussed this idea of relationality in their writings. These include Segun Gbadegesin [1991], Gessler Nkondo [2007], and Dismas Masolo [2010]. For Gbadegesin, "Every member is expected to consider him/herself an integral part of the whole and to play an appropriate role towards achieving the good of all" [1991: 65]. Nkondo notes that for *Ubuntu* advocates and philosophers, the principle that informs and shapes their life is "commitment to the good of the community in which their identities were formed, and a need to experience their lives as bound up in that of their community" [2007: 91]. According to Dismas Masolo, what defines their being is the communitarian values of "living a life of mutual concern for the welfare of others, such as in a cooperative creation and distribution of wealth … Feeling integrated with as well as willing to integrate others into a web of relations free of friction and conflict" [2010: 240]. From these thoughts, Metz systematically argues that sub-Saharan African ethics [morality] is essentially relational because it has to do with relationships.

For Metz, a relationship is ideal in most African societies south of the Sahara. So, relationality defines the lifeworld of Africans within this region. This idea of relationality is found in and reflects concepts such as communion, life [vitality], and the common good. These concepts are fundamental and foundational to Metz's ethical theory. They are the concepts Metz employs to articulate the principles that undergird his ethics. These are the principles of communion, vitality, and the common good.

Principle of Communion: The principle of communion is concerned with harmony in society. It asserts that harmony must be the ideal of the rightness of an action. According to Metz, "actions are right insofar as they promote [or prize] communion or harmony" [2017a: 67]. The converse of this is morally wrong or immoral. Communion or harmony is what makes an action moral. Thus, we see why Desmond Tutu contends that "social harmony is for us the *summum bonum* – the greatest good. Anything that subverts or undermines this sought-after good is to be avoided like the plague" [1999: 35]. According to this principle, discord and disharmony must be avoided because they are evil and antithetical to social well-being.

Principle of Vitality: This principle of vitality emphasises the sanctity of life. Morality is defined by the fact that an action enhances life. Hence, Metz states: "actions are right insofar as they promote vitality" [2017a: 67]. Vitality has to do with life. If community or harmony is feasible, then life ought to be promoted in such a society. Life is the highest value that must be placed or prized above everything else. Several African scholars have explained this principle in different but related manners. These include Kasenene, Pantaleon Iroegbu, etc. In Kasenene's words, "any action which increases life or vital force is right, and whatever decreases it is wrong" [1994: 140]. For Iroegbu, "all people and activities that diminish life are in all cultures considered evil, while those that promote it are regarded as good" [2005: 447]. This principle states that life is supreme and definitive of the morality of an action.

Principle of Common Good: If there is communion and life, it is necessary to promote the common good in society – that is, the life and well-being of all. This idea of common good is the focus of this principle. Although this principle is well articulated by Metz, one can see similar thought in Kwame Gyekye's words, which read: "actions that promote human welfare or interest are good, while those that detract from human welfare are bad" [2010: 109]. Collective human welfare is what is emphasised here. Individual interest is subsumed under this collective welfare. This collective welfare is what Metz refers to as the common good. Hence, Metz states this principle thus: "actions are right insofar as they promote the common good without

treating people's dignity disrespectfully in the process" [2017a: 68].

These three principles point to the fact that relationship is pivotal to morality. There is morality where there is harmonious coexistence, promotion of common or collective human life, and well-being. However, Metz favours the principle of communion/harmony above the principles of vitality and common good. Metz substantiates his preference for the principle of communion/harmony because it grounds the idea of human dignity and rights as exemplified in freedom of movement, political participation, informed consent, and justice, amongst others, as flowing from the capacity to communally relate [Metz 2012]. Also, the principle of communion/harmony more forcefully promotes the idea of harmonious coexistence than the principles of vitality and common good. Therefore, if an action leads to a harmonious relationship, then it is moral. In such a society, people live peacefully with others. If this is the case, then there is identity and solidarity within such a society. The point is that African relational ethics is at the root of and promotes social identity and solidarity [Metz and Gaie 2010: 276; Metz 2013: 81; 88; 2017b: 445; 2018: 40]. These are the two ethical ideals [identity and solidarity] inherent in a communal/harmonious relationship [Metz 2012: 1; 2013: 81; 2017b: 446; 2018: 40].

Metz argues that individuals within a harmonious community possess identity. He sees identity as what humans realise when they belong to a community or group. An individual shares the community's collective identity and realises their individuality [personal identity] within this community. Writing on collective identity, Metz quips that it is "a matter of considering oneself as part of the group, experiencing life as bound with others, being close and feeling integrated" [2014: 149]. The individual is assimilated into the group, and the group's identity becomes his/her identity. Hence, to belong is to have an identity – a collective identity. Here, the individual is seen as a 'we' – the community or group they belong to. What this entails is that it is within the community or group that the individual achieves personal identity. In this context, the individual in the group realises their individuality/particularity that makes them stand out in the group. They might not realise this identity if they stand outside the community. Thus, on the one hand, Metz's African relational ethics affirms identity.

On the other hand, Metz's African relational ethics enhances and promotes solidarity. In a harmonious community, there is also solidarity. Solidarity is concerned with care for others. According to Metz,

> *[t]o exhibit solidarity with one another is for people to care about each other's quality of life, in two senses. First, it means that they engage in natural aid, acting in ways that are expected to benefit each other [ideally, especially over time]. Second, caring is a matter of people's attitudes, such as emotions and motives being positively oriented towards others, say, by sympathising with them and helping them for their sake. For people to fail to exhibit solidarity could be for them to be indifferent to each other's flourishing or to exhibit ill will in the form of hostility and cruelty [2012: 26].*

Metz holds that identity and solidarity are Siamese twins. One does not exist without the other. These two concepts lead to and are manifestations of a harmonious community. According to Metz,

> *[o]ne could identify with others, but not exhibit solidarity with them – probably workers in relation to management in a capitalist firm. One could also exhibit solidarity with others, but not identify with them, e.g. by making anonymous donations to a charity. My proposal, following the limitations of several African thinkers, is that a promising conception of community includes both kinds of relationship [2012: 26].*

African relational ethics advocates a relationship of inseparable identity [identity with each other and taking one's distinctness from the group] and solidarity [caring, cooperating, and complementing one another]. Thaddeus Metz and Sarah Miller explain this communal dimension to African relational ethics from two fronts:

> *On the one hand, there is a relationship of sharing a way of life, considering oneself a part of the whole, experiencing life as bound up with others, and feeling integrated. On the other hand, there is reference to a relationship of caring for one another's quality of life that is, achieving the good of all, being committed to the good of others, and being concerned for others' welfare [2016: 5].*

Hence, African relational ethics is an ethics of 'friendship' and 'love' rooted in the relationship that leads to communal living. Metz and Miller referred to this relationship as "friendly – relationship" or "familial relationship" [Metz and Gaie 2010: 276; Metz 2012: 394; 2017: 445; Metz and Miller 2016: 5]. In this moral theory, there is sharing of life and care for each other such that everyone's dignity is promoted.

The bottom line of Metz's African relational ethics is that individuals need to cherish the relationship and maintain a harmonious communion with one another in the community in which they exist. If this is the case, then this relational ethics is communitarian and egalitarian. Therefore, it is an ethical system that enhances communal coexistence, equality, equity, and justice. On this premise, Metz's African relational ethics can function as an option for articulating a feminist theory that is not lopsided but addresses the challenge of patriarchy.

## 3. The Implication of Metz's Relational Ethics for the Notion of Patriarchy in Feminism

Gender classification has always been there in human societies since time immemorial. However, our contestation is with the feminists' understanding and characterisation of the notion of patriarchy. As indicated earlier, understood from its etymological definition, patriarchy means rule by the father. However, it is the feminists who later defined it in different ways to suit their purposes and pit males and females against each other. To demonstrate that the feminist understanding of patriarchy is faulty, we invoke Metz's thought of human relations in African societies. This is encapsulated in Metz's African relational ethics, emphasising the harmonious communal coexistence of humans. Thus, gender relations ought to be understood as harmonious communion of sexes as opposed to the feminists' understanding of genders in conflict.

As discussed by feminists, the notion of patriarchy negates Metz's relational ethics and its underlying principle of communion [Metz 2017a]. This is because patriarchy elevates males above females and gives the males privileges that the females are denied. An argument like this demonstrates that females cannot contribute effectively towards society such that their complementary roles are not recognised. Here, their solidarity relationship is relegated to the background while that of the male is given prominence. In this case, the female identity is not fully realised because they are only meant to be seen and not to be heard or given recognition like their male counterparts. Thus, the male identity and contribution are overemphasised to the detriment of the female identity and contribution. Although males and females coexist in human society, they are not given the same social recognition and roles.

Given the above scenario, males and their social roles are placed above females and their social roles. This is because the relationship between males and females is lopsided, as males are above females in all respects. The fact is that the principle of communion [Metz 2017a] is not applied accordingly in such a society. Hence, the goal of harmonious communal coexistence is defeated with the practice of patriarchy. However, Metz's relational ethics and its underlying principle of communion help us reconceptualise patriarchy such that males and females not only coexist but also realise their identities and contribute in solidarity to the common good.

In societies, certain things are expected from males and females. These, however, need not be understood as implying oppression or the domination of women by men as witnessed in feminism. Speaking of the Yoruba people, Oyewumi claims that body type was not the basis of social hierarchy, and neither was biology the foundation of social ranking [1997: xii]. For Metz, a general understanding of gender relations is imbued in the African understanding of harmonious relations. It is based on the view that males and females complement each other. In such societies, individuals are grouped based on their societal roles, and these have nothing to do with one's biological makeup. Such societies are not characterised by oppression, repression, cruelty, or a joyless society that is bent on the destruction of life, as is the case with feminists' patriarchal societies [Daly, 2006:53].

Metz's principle of communion gives the impression that males and females have to coexist and live in harmony. This is because harmony is a fundamental moral value that humans need to pursue given that both the

male and female genders can communally relate [Metz 2012]. If both males and females communally relate such that there is harmony in the community, then they are termed good. In such a society, there is mutual respect among the male and female genders. This harmonious relationship naturally leads to the practice of the principle of vitality. With the principle of vitality, males and females see their respective life as supreme. Thus, both males and females seek to protect life regardless of the possessors. This has a direct link to the principle of the common good.

Through Metz's principle of the common good, it is difficult to envision the conflict between males and females in African societies. What is of paramount importance is that this principle emphasises actions that promote society's welfare and the common good. By common good, we understand Metz to mean the welfare of each individual belonging to the group regardless of sex. Hence, cruelty, oppression, and repression disrespect people's dignity, and the principle of the common good does not approve of this. Furthermore, Metz's relational ethics better describes the relationship between the sexes in most societies. The idea is not to fight for equality between men and women; instead, these two sexes maintain harmonious relations based on complementarity. In line with this, Olajubu [2004: 44] notes that the Yoruba hold that the question to ask about the state of the sexes is not which sex is dominant but, rather, over which areas each sex enjoys prominence. Further, the prominence that one sex enjoys in a particular human activity does not make the people in that sexual category independent of others.

From Metz's characterisation of human relations, men and women are understood as socialising with each other and the environment. Thus, the individual thrives on entering into concrete relations with others. That is why existence is thought with and through material otherness rather than against or beyond it. In support of Metz, Eze, a Nigerian anthropologist, argues that the defining characteristic of personhood is to be in a dialogical relationship with others within a community [Eze 2009:387]. Thus, for Metz, the human person is a communal being whose existence embodies interaction with other subjects. This gives rise to the notion of African communalism.

In African communalism, the human is understood as socially dependent and continuously participates in mutual relations with others. Therefore, women are not complete without their male counterparts, and neither are men complete without their female counterparts. Their existence is determined through a continuous, interdependent, harmonious engagement with each other. The subject is therefore never complete or final. It is determined through ongoing mutual engagement with others. In other words, a closer examination of human relations in Metz's ethics is incompatible with the gender binaries of feminism that elevate one gender above the other. In Metz's relational ethics, patriarchy ought to be understood from a radically different perspective from that subscribed to by feminists. It has to do with males leading without oppressing females. This is because the gender binaries entail both male and female genders communing together. Thus, the male and female genders realise their identity in this gender relationship.

Metz speaks of identity [Metz 2013; 2017a; 2018]. Linking his ideas to the notion of patriarchy, we argue that men or women consider themselves as part of the human group sharing in the fate of others, being close, belonging, and participating. In such societies, it is difficult, if not impossible, to find traits of the feminists' patriarchy, such as oppression and cruelty. For it is of utmost importance for one to belong to the group; they should be able to uphold and prize the good of others and be sensitive to others' interests. Since oppression is understood to mean exercising authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, and unjust manner, this does not resonate well with relational ethics that emphasises friendliness, sensitivity to the interests of others, and love. However, it leads to solidarity between men and women. Hence, the manifestation of values such as caring, compassion, friendliness, generosity amid humility and peaceful coexistence [Metz 2017a].

The question that comes to mind is whether Metz's relational ethics leads to the view that patriarchy is absent in human society? No! This relational ethics entails that there could be patriarchy in the sense of males leading in love and allowing women complete privileges and rights like their male counterparts. This idea of patriarchy is not oppressive. Neither does it subjugate the female gender. Instead, it gives females a place among males in society. Thus, males and females are relational beings who realise their identities in this relationship and exhibit solidarity.

## Conclusion

So far, we argued that the notion of patriarchy exists but not in its feminists' oppressive sense. We have pursued this thesis using Metz's relational ethics, which holds that humans harmoniously coexist. They realise their identity and live in solidarity for the common good and enhance human life. In this scenario, gender oppression is a mirage, but gender complementarity is feasible. It becomes imperative for humans, irrespective of their gender, to imbibe and exhibit the principle of communion enshrined in Metz's relational ethics. This is because relational ethics and its undergirding principle of communion inculcate the spirit of togetherness and abhor divisiveness that the feminists see in patriarchy. Thus, with this ethics and its principle of communion, males and females realise their identity and exhibit solidarity, which drives every thriving society.

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