

## HER-STORICITY AND EPISTEMIC JUSTICE

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Evaristus Matthias EYO

School of Business Leadership, University of South Africa

The Conversational School of Philosophy

Calabar, Nigeria

Email: [evaristuseyo96@gmail.com](mailto:evaristuseyo96@gmail.com)

ORCID No: 0000-0002-0838-3291

### Abstract

In this paper, I explore Mesembe Edet's idea of her-storicity, which entails the recognition of women's perspectives, experiences, and histories that have often been marginalized and excluded in epistemic space, to demonstrate how it could address the problem of epistemic injustice against women. The problem of epistemic marginalization and exclusion of women's perspectives in African philosophy often leaves women in a disadvantaged position to interpret and derive meaning from their lived experiences. While various scholars have explored solutions from diverse angles, the historiographical perspective remains underexplored in tackling this issue. Thus, building on Edet's thesis of her-storicity, I contend that her-storicity, if properly realized, can address the problem of epistemic marginalization of women because it is erected on the foundation of inclusivity and complementarity. While critics may raise concerns about her-storicity compromising rigor through subjective bias, I demonstrate that its capacity to embrace various epistemic viewpoints enhances its credibility as an alternative solution to issues of epistemic justice.

**Keywords:** Her-storicity, Epistemic injustice, Epistemic justice, Complementarity.

## Introduction

The problem of epistemic injustice<sup>1</sup> has been addressed by different scholars over time (FRICKER 2007; CHIMAKONAM 2017). While some scholars advocate for cultivating the virtue of epistemic justice (FRICKER 2007; 2017), others propose epistemic inclusion<sup>2</sup>, the deconstruction of the epistemic space (CHIMAKONAM 2017), and a re-examination of the background logic of knowledge production that perpetuates epistemic injustice (CHIMAKONAM 2022). However, one aspect that has not received enough attention is the historical perspective on the issue of epistemic injustice against vulnerable groups, such as women. It was against this backdrop that Edet (2018) developed his theory of her-storicity, showing the historical significance of women to world and intellectual history, as a way of addressing the problem of epistemic injustice against women. By considering historical perspectives, Edet's theory challenges prevailing narratives that marginalize the voices of women and individuals of African descent, providing recognition and value to their experiences. This approach highlights the importance of diverse perspectives in knowledge production and emphasizes the need to re-evaluate existing epistemological frameworks from a gendered and African perspective.

In his influential work, "Women in the His-story of Philosophy and the Imperative for a 'Her-storical' Perspective in the Contemporary African Philosophy," Edet (2018) argues that the exclusion of women's contributions to history has had profound implications for how knowledge is constructed and disseminated. By accommodating women's experiences and perspectives, Edet's theory of her-storicity aims to deconstruct the hegemonic narratives that have traditionally excluded women from the history of knowledge production. And by carefully analyzing both written and oral histories, Edet demonstrates how women's voices have been marginalized and silenced, leading to a distorted and incomplete

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<sup>1</sup> The idea of epistemic injustice here entails the denial of an epistemic agent the epistemic right to produce, regulate and disseminate knowledge as well as lack of recognition in epistemic space (see MASAHA 2017; EYO and OBIOHA 2022)

<sup>2</sup> Epistemic inclusion here refers to the recognition of all epistemic agents, and the conferment of equal epistemic rights on all epistemic agents irrespective of their race, gender, or geographical location.

understanding of the past. Furthermore, he argues that by overlooking women's experiences, traditional historiography has perpetuated systems of oppression and inequality that still affect women's lives today.

This paper is structured into two main sections. The first section discusses how epistemic injustice affects women in African philosophy, highlighting how patriarchal power structures influence African thought and perpetuate epistemic inequality. The second section will explore how Edet's theory of her-storicity can address the problem of epistemic injustice against vulnerable groups, such as women, by accommodating diverse perspectives and contributing to an inclusive, balanced, and decolonized epistemology. I will demonstrate that accommodating perspectives beyond traditional masculinity, including those of women and other marginalized groups, is crucial for fostering an inclusive, balanced, and decolonized epistemology that addresses epistemic injustices.

### **Exploring the Concept of Epistemic Injustice Against Women in African Philosophy and Its Impacts**

Epistemic injustice refers to the unfair discrimination and denial of credibility in knowledge spaces based on factors like gender, race, ethnicity, and social identifiers, resulting in unequal treatment and opportunities in knowledge creation. It involves unfair discrimination against individuals based on factors like location, gender, background, ethnicity, race, sexuality, and accent, labeling some as incapable of knowledge generation. (ABUDU and IMAFIDON 2020; DÜBGEN 2020; BYSKOV 2021). Jane McConkey (2004) credits Miranda Fricker with introducing the concept of epistemic injustice, which centres on assigning credibility to individuals making knowledge claims. It is a condition of unequal social formation within an epistemic space<sup>3</sup>, where epistemic rights are granted to some people while others are denied such rights. McConkey elaborates on credibility, explaining it as how believable a person is thought to be. Communities confer credibility on individuals, giving them the power to determine believability. This

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<sup>3</sup> Epistemic space here entails a conceptual sites or environment in which knowledge is produced, evaluated, distributed, and regulated.

authority can lead to the denial of credibility to certain groups. In this context, credibility is established by African males who generalize their epistemic perspectives, imposing their ideals as the standard for knowledge production, while the female perspective is often undervalued.

Instances of epistemic injustice against women vary from issues of credibility deficit to the manipulation of identity power, intending to shape distinct identities for both genders. This unequal comparison assigns rationality and intellectual superiority to men while stereotyping women as emotional and less capable in the realm of knowledge. For example, the erroneous conception that men are rational while women are emotional (ARISTOTLE 1984; LLOYD 1984) captures the situation. This argument is flawed because there is no definitive empirical evidence showing that emotions are exclusive to women or that rationality is solely a male trait. I maintain that all humans are subjects of both emotions and reasoning. Therefore, to assert that one gender is solely emotional or rational is not only inaccurate but also perpetuates harmful stereotypes. Considering the masculine perspective as credible knowledge in African epistemology restricts diverse viewpoints, perpetuating a narrow narrative that may not truly represent human experiences. This is what Chimamanda Adichie (2009) refers to as the danger of a single story, where one perspective is elevated above all others, leading to a narrow and limited understanding of the world. Recognizing the complexity of human experiences, which encompasses emotions and rationality, enables a more comprehensive and accurate portrayal of diverse viewpoints. These presumptions must be contested, and it must be understood that credibility should not be determined by gender but rather by the quality and validity of the propositions or variables being presented.

Marinda Fricker's book, *Epistemic Injustice: Power and the Ethics of Knowing*, explores the concept of epistemic injustice, a form of distributive unfairness that affects access to epistemic goods like education. She defines epistemic injustice as injustice against people in their "capacity as knowers" (FRICKER 2007, 1). Fricker argues that mainstream epistemology has neglected marginalized voices, perpetuating unequal power dynamics. She further distinguishes between testimonial and hermeneutical injustice,

highlighting the importance of integrating epistemology, ethics, and politics to create a more equitable society. According to her, “testimonial injustice occurs when prejudice causes a hearer to give a deflated level of credibility to a speaker’s word; hermeneutical injustice occurs at a prior stage when a gap in collective interpretive resources puts someone at an unfair disadvantage when it comes to making sense of their social experiences” (FRICKER 2007, 1). By promoting inclusive testimonial practices and expanding collective interpretive resources, we can address these injustices and create a more equitable society.

Women encounter intellectual and cultural obstacles in predominantly male-dominated epistemic spaces, where they are frequently perceived as intellectually weak. They struggle to express their experiences and perspectives, and often they are regarded as lesser beings. These epistemic injustices can sideline women from global epistemic spaces where regulation governs knowledge creation, limiting their potential and influence. In the context of African epistemology, African women experience epistemic injustice in African epistemology due to being placed on the epistemic margin, denied access to knowledge spaces, and facing prejudices that devalue their credibility. The two-valued logic system, as pointed out by Oyèrónké Oyěwùmí (1997), Jonathan Chimakonam (2022), Evaristus Eyo and Precious Obioha (2022), establishes and perpetuates this epistemic injustice. This exclusion not only impedes the contributions of African women to knowledge production but also sustains a cycle of marginalization and inequality in African epistemology. It therefore becomes pertinent to dismantle these barriers and create more inclusive knowledge spaces that value the perspectives and expertise of African women by questioning the two-valued logic of coloniality and its bivalence principle that sustains epistemic injustice. The two-valued logic of coloniality, inspired by Aristotelian bivalence (i.e., every proposition is either true or false, with no third or middle option), forms a fundamental mechanism through which colonial hegemonic epistemology enforces and sustains epistemic injustice. This binary logic operates not just as a logical structure but as a metaphysical imposition that upholds epistemic hierarchies, delegitimizes alternative knowledges, and marginalizes subaltern epistemic

perspectives. For example, among the Yorùbá, the use of *Ifá divination* and herbal knowledge (involving a complex empirical and spiritual system) was not only marginalized but systematically criminalized under colonial law. Here, Oyěwùmí argues that:

The colonialists' binary logic reduced African systems to mere opposites of European modernity. Yoruba medicine, embedded in cosmological understanding, was not assessed on its own terms but was rendered invalid simply because it was not biomedical". (OYĚWÙMÍ 1997, 135)

The preceding shows that for those who operate two-valued logic: either medicine adheres to the Enlightenment-based scientific method (and is true), or it does not (and is false). There was no conceptual space for the possibility that Yoruba healing knowledge could be valid within its own ontological and epistemic framework.

Also, Odera Oruka's (1991) work, *Sage Philosophy*, showcases a gender imbalance where only one out of the twelve sages interviewed is female, highlighting the underrepresentation and/or exclusion of women in philosophical discourses (or as possible knowledge bearers) and the need for gender equity in knowledge production (see also MOSIMA 2016). Thus, for Sanya Osha (2008), the African epistemic space is determined by a phallocentric regime<sup>4</sup>, and there is a need to question that regime. In questioning this phallocentric regime, I argue that there is a need for an epistemic balance in which the contributions of women to the development of human civilization in Africa and the African knowledge economy can be recognized. The idea of 'epistemic balance' recognizes the expansion of Africa's intellectual arenas by implementing inclusive strategies in epistemology to share power and include individuals of all genders. It advocates for the allocation of equal epistemic rights to all epistemic agents, irrespective of sex, race, or geographical location.

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<sup>4</sup> This refers to a system of thought, reasoning, or representation that privileges one perspective over others, especially the symbolic authority of the phallus, not just as a biological organ, but as a cultural signifier of power, rationality, and normativity (see Oyěwùmí, 1997).

Building on the work of Chimakonam and Louise du Toit (2018), I argue that gender dynamics impact epistemic injustice in African societies by drawing attention to the connection between women's cultural oppression and philosophical practice on the continent. Traditional gender roles in African societies play a significant role in shaping epistemic injustice. Jose Medina (2013) argues that the cultural oppression of women in African philosophy poses intellectual risks as it correlates with their marginalization in society. Traditional gender roles in Africa limit women's access to education and intellectual growth, perpetuating marginalization, though some scholars (AMADIUME 1987; OYĚWUMÍ 1997; ARNFRED 2004) have argued that gender roles were alien to African tradition until colonialism. That is, while some gender distinctions existed in African societies, they did not always imply subordination or inferiority (AMADIUME 1987; OYĚWUMÍ 1997). It was colonial rule, through law, Christianity, bureaucracy, and education, that entrenched the European gender binary and made women's subservience seem natural or traditional.

Integrating women's perspectives and voices in framing philosophical questions in Africa is essential for addressing epistemic injustices (MEDINA 2013). In addition to fostering a more comprehensive understanding of knowledge production, this inclusive approach acknowledges the varied experiences and viewpoints of African women. African philosophy can promote inclusivity, representation, and effectiveness in addressing epistemic inequalities by accommodating women's perspectives, examining gender intersections, and fostering a more diverse and fair philosophical dialogue. Ultimately, promoting a diverse and inclusive philosophical discourse in Africa requires inclusive knowledge production methods that recognize marginalized perspectives.

Now, epistemic injustice has significant impacts on women. For example, if their epistemic perspective is continuously marginalized, it will have effects on their epistemic worth, thereby further denigrating their humanity. This is because denying someone's epistemic credibility indirectly questions their humanity, as the dominant view of what it means to be human is often tied to consciousness and rationality. For instance, in a patriarchal society

where women's perspectives are often dismissed or belittled, their contributions to philosophical discussions may be devalued, leading to a lack of representation in academic and professional settings. This can perpetuate systemic inequalities and hinder the advancement of gender equality in philosophical discourse. One specific example of this can be seen in the field of philosophy, where female philosophers are often overlooked or not taken seriously, leading to a lack of diverse perspectives and ultimately hindering the progress of the discipline. Female philosophers are glaringly underrepresented in philosophy programs, according to numerous empirical research studies.

According to VIDA's *Women in Literary Arts 2011* study<sup>5</sup>, despite significant contemporary female authorship, less than 5% of readings in more than 60 university curricula assessed in the US and the UK were by women – “Students are consistently exposed to philosophy as a field dominated by white male figures, reinforcing the perception of philosophical authority as inherently male” (HASSOUN 2012, 221). Also, this marginalization can contribute to a vicious cycle where women are discouraged from pursuing philosophy as a career, further perpetuating the lack of representation in the field. Jennifer Lackey also argues that one of the most significant philosophers of the 20th century, G.E.M. (Elizabeth) Anscombe, is sometimes overlooked in favour of her male peers, even though she played a crucial part in contemporary action theory and ethics. According to her, “Anscombe's *Intention* (1957) is foundational to modern philosophy of action, yet it was long neglected in academic curricula where male-authored texts were privileged” (LACKEY 2016, 92). Thus, this lack of representation not only impacts the diversity of thought within the field of philosophy but also limits the opportunities for women to make meaningful contributions and advancements.

Epistemic injustice hinders women's self-development and societal relevance due to identity power, which views them as irrational and incapable of taking responsibility. Gender is often a

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<sup>5</sup> This report was the first to draw widespread public attention to the gender gap in prominent literary works.

common area for identity power exercise, resulting in women being excluded from epistemic spaces. They are denied appropriate recognition and accommodation to partake in epistemic inquiry; thus, as Iris Young (1990) noted, this can restrict an agent's (women's) ability to develop key capacities.

Indeed, Heidi Grasswick (2004) emphasizes the importance of understanding individuals as "individuals in communities" and their social contexts. Grasswick's argument emphasizes the interconnectedness of individual identity and community dynamics, emphasizing the need for collective efforts to combat epistemic injustices. Recognizing the interconnectedness between individual agency and social structures is crucial for understanding and promoting resistance to epistemic injustice. Women's credibility is essential for epistemic balance and justice, as they possess unique thinking faculties.

To break this cycle and promote gender equality in philosophical discourse, it is crucial to address the problem of epistemic exclusion in epistemic spaces and challenge any biases or prejudices that may exist. By creating a more inclusive and supportive environment for female philosophers, African philosophy can benefit from a wider range of perspectives and ideas, leading to a more vibrant and progressive field overall. This is the central idea of her-storicity, as I will discuss in the following section.

### **Her-storicity: A Call for Epistemic Justice**

Edet (2018) introduced the concept of her-storicity to address the historical exclusion of women's perspectives in African traditional historiography, emphasizing the need for a more inclusive approach to storytelling. It is a term coined to highlight the need for a more inclusive and balanced approach to storytelling that acknowledges and values the role of women in shaping history and knowledge production. With this concept, Edet (2018) promotes acknowledging women's contributions in historical narratives through the idea of 'Afro-herstoricism' in African philosophy. He argues that the absence of strong women's and feminist voices in the discipline of African philosophy is an epistemic question that needs to be addressed to avoid committing historical injustices against women. Edet (2018) emphasizes the importance of including women in

historical texts to ensure a gender-inclusive perspective in the history of African philosophy. In his view, her-storicity will address the problem of epistemic injustice against women. By epistemic justice, I mean the accommodation of all epistemic perspectives, ensuring that all individuals have equal rights to contribute to knowledge production without facing discrimination based on gender or other factors. The idea of epistemic justice entails the recognition of all epistemic perspectives as authentic modes of knowledge production, and the allocation of equal epistemic rights to all epistemic agents irrespective of gender, location, or race.

Her-storicity, as a concept, seeks to rectify her-storical neglect and undervaluation of women's voices in standard histories, particularly in the field of philosophy, when it comes to knowledge production, distribution, and regulation. By advocating for the recognition of women's creative works, intellectual contributions, struggles, and participation in human affairs, her-storicity aims to enrich philosophical discourse and promote a more authentic and holistic understanding of reality. Furthermore, I contend that her-storicity is not merely about reversing the gender bias in historical narratives but about establishing a new epistemological foundation that respects and integrates both male and female perspectives. It calls for a re-evaluation of existing approaches to historiography, research methodologies, and knowledge production to address the marginalization of women's experiences and ideas without perpetuating gender inequalities.

Relating this to the problem of epistemic injustice, for instance, her-storicity affirms the importance of diverse voices in shaping knowledge systems by acknowledging and valuing women's intellectual and creative contributions. This recognition helps counteract historical erasures and marginalization of women's perspectives, ensuring that their insights are not only acknowledged but also integrated into the broader intellectual discourse. I know critics may argue that this perspective would lead to the trivialization of epistemic questions, shifting from 'what' and 'how' questions of epistemology to 'who' questions. However, I counter this argument by contending that the idea of inclusivity does not trivialize the core of epistemology but seeks to strengthen it by advocating for the allocation of equal epistemic rights to all epistemic agents,

irrespective of their race, gender, and location. If this is realized, then the 'who' question would be eliminated.

Also, her-storicità seeks to correct gender biases and gaps in traditional African historiography and knowledge production by integrating women's stories and experiences into historical accounts. Historically, traditional African historiography and epistemology favoured male perspectives, and most often, neglected or marginalized women's contributions and experiences. This gender bias has resulted in a skewed and incomplete understanding of history, especially that of knowledge production in Africa, where women's voices and agency are underrepresented or erased. It is on this note that her-storicità confronts gender inequalities by integrating women's perspectives into historical narratives, disrupting male-centric viewpoints, and fostering a more inclusive and diverse representation of the past to enhance our understanding of human experiences.

In the area of epistemic power or epistemic high grounds, her-storicità challenges traditional historiography by advocating for a fairer distribution of power, such as by highlighting overlooked women's contributions and promoting gender inclusivity in historical narratives. Epistemic power here, according to Kristie Dotson (2018, 12), is "the differing ranges of privilege and underprivilege based on one's standing in terms of knowledge possession, attribution, and production". It is closely tied to one's epistemic status. Epistemic status refers to the assessment of one's epistemic position, indicating the ability to claim knowledge about a proposition (DOTSON 2018). It entails the ability to be acknowledged as someone who has the right to know and speak authoritatively on a subject, not just being knowledgeable. Even though a person may be knowledgeable, their epistemic standing is low if their opinions are routinely disregarded, questioned, or discounted. Epistemic status consists of credibility, that is, whether or not people believe what you say; Epistemic authority, if you are regarded as having the right to define, examine, or theorize; Social Recognition, whether you are acknowledged as having the right to speak and be heard in epistemic spaces by peers, institutions, or the general public; and Access to Epistemic Resource, that is, whether or

not the agent has the means to produce and share knowledge, such as education, language, tools, or forums?

This status can be positive or negative, reflecting the strength or weakness of one's epistemic position. When an individual possesses positive epistemic status, it means that their beliefs or claims are viewed favourably in terms of knowledge attribution. This positive status grants them the power to assert authority in discussions and debates. This authority is rooted in a perceived stronger connection to privileged values, such as truth or evidence. Essentially, having positive epistemic status allows individuals to occupy what Dotson describes as an "epistemological high ground" (DOTSON 2018, 4). Occupying this high ground enables individuals to defend their claims with confidence and effectively challenge opposing beliefs. It signifies a position of influence and authority within epistemological discussions, where one's positive epistemic status lends credibility to their arguments and positions. In African philosophy, women have historically been in a disadvantaged position in terms of epistemic power or authority, due to factors that have marginalized their experiences and perspectives. This has led to a lack of recognition and validation of their epistemic perspective(s), which hinders their ability to assert themselves in epistemological discourse. Thus, it suffices to argue that her-storicity seeks to rectify historical injustices and biases by recognizing women's experiences in historical accounts. This transformative framework provides a more accurate, balanced, and comprehensive understanding of the past.

The concept of her-storicity can also influence research methodology. Here, I argue that her-storicity could necessitate the development of new research methodologies and approaches that actively seek to include and amplify women's voices and experiences, such as participatory research methods and intersectional analyses. Traditional research methods have often overlooked or marginalized women's perspectives, leading to a limited and biased understanding of history and knowledge. African history and oral traditions frequently focused on male chiefs or elders, ignoring or presenting women's stories through patriarchal prisms. The written documents used in conventional historiography, for instance, were frequently created by male elites. Women's

experiences were often lost or distorted because they were infrequent writers or subjects of writing, particularly in formal fields. By adopting inclusive and gender-sensitive research practices, her-storicità ensures that knowledge production processes reflect diverse realities and perspectives more. This inclusivity yields a more robust and nuanced body of knowledge that encompasses the full range of human experiences and insights. By accommodating women's perspectives in research methodologies, her-storicità not only corrects historical imbalances but also enriches the research process with a more comprehensive and inclusive approach.

Traditional knowledge systems have long been constructed through androcentric lenses, reproducing patriarchal hierarchies that obscure or erase the epistemic contributions of women and other marginalized groups. This epistemological narrowing not only distorts our understanding of reality but also actively constrains the scope of intellectual inquiry. The concept of her-storicità emerges not merely as a corrective gesture but as a radical reconfiguration of what counts as knowledge, who is authorized to produce it, and how it is legitimized. Rather than simply adding voices to an existing canon, her-storicità disrupts the foundational assumptions of traditional epistemologies. It insists on epistemic multiplicity, challenging the hegemony of singular, linear narratives and foregrounding the co-existence of diverse, situated knowledges. In doing so, it does more than expand our intellectual horizons it redefines them. Her-storicità is thus not only an inclusionary afterthought; it is also a methodological imperative that reorients knowledge production toward plurality, relationality, and justice.

By foregrounding lived experience, affective insight, and embodied ways of knowing, her-storicità opens up new analytic and interpretive pathways that more accurately reflect the polyphonic texture of human existence. This epistemic intervention not only fills historical gaps but contests the very structures that made those gaps possible. In this sense, her-storicità is a generative rupture—one that demands we rethink not just what we know, but how we come to know at all. It is worth noting that the idea of alternative epistemologies aligns with the ongoing decolonial call for the exploration of alternative sites of knowledge production, especially

in Africa (TAIWO 1993; CHIMAKONAM 2022; HUNGWE, 2022). This shift towards embracing alternative epistemologies reflects a growing recognition of the limitations of male-centric knowledge systems in understanding diverse worldviews and experiences. By advocating for the recognition of women's perspectives and modes of knowing in African philosophical discourse, her-storicità challenges dominant narratives and power structures that have long marginalized feminine epistemic perspectives. Fundamentally, the pursuit of alternative epistemologies offers opportunities for authentic self-representation and promotes intellectual diversity in African intellectual discourse.

Focusing on deliberate gender equity and inclusivity, critical her-storicità facilitates a wide range of social developments by questioning current power relations, establishing respect for all ideas, and striving for fairness and justice in all aspects. By arguing for the empowerment and recognition of women in knowledge creation, her-storicità will shape a world that is destined to be more equitable and democratic, especially in knowledge production and distribution through regulations. This reshaping is not limited to educational institutions; it will inevitably spread throughout the public sphere when knowledge produced by half of the population is acknowledged and upheld. Critical her-storicità will advance epistemic democracy and a just epistemic space, where all epistemic agents are given equal epistemic rights and recognition, while challenging the power dynamics that have relegated other epistemic perspectives to the margins.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has examined her-storicità as articulated by Edet, foregrounding its critical intervention in academic discourse and epistemological frameworks, particularly within African contexts. Her-storicità offers more than a call for gender inclusion; it seeks to reconstruct the epistemic space by incorporating women's narratives, silenced histories, and embodied experiences into the fabric of knowledge production. The paper demonstrates how epistemic injustice is perpetuated through androcentric paradigms by examining specific instances of exclusion and marginalization in the processes of knowledge production, regulation, and transmission.

Within African epistemology, her-storicità challenges hegemonic models of thought that have historically devalued or silenced women's intellectual contributions, offering instead an epistemic reorientation that validates the plurality of epistemic perspectives and lived realities. This reconceptualization not only subverts dominant historical and literary narratives but also advocates for an inclusive epistemic architecture, where epistemic rights are shared and allocated to all epistemic agents without any form of discrimination. Thus, embracing her-storicità entails a critical disruption of entrenched power structures and affirms the transformative role of gender-inclusive perspectives in both literature and knowledge systems. The paper concludes that her-storicità is indispensable to rebalancing the epistemic field and recognizing the full spectrum of intellectual labour within African and global contexts.

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