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Abstract

Having one's first novel published is not as glamorous an affair as the media makes readers believe. The would-be author would start by convincing himself, that 'this is it, this is what I want to do, I must write, I must tell a story or do nothing else. It is novel writing for me, no matter how long it takes, no matter whether I'm published or not. Write I must, and a novel it must be'.

That First Novel

Having one's first novel published is not as glamorous an affair as the media makes readers believe. The would-be author would start by convincing himself, that 'this is it, this is what I want to do, I must write, I must tell a story or do nothing else. It is novel writing for me, no matter how long it takes, no matter whether I'm published or not. Write I must, and a novel it must be'.

Then follows that secret joyous state of the actual writing. Some lucky would-be male authors are, at this early stage, surrounded by good friends and doting members of their families who actually believe in them, believe in what they are doing, hopeful that one of them will be a real author one day. Many are regarded as authors simply because they are writing a book. The clap-clap of the typewriter is greeted with reverential awe as believers greet in hushed silence the gradual approach of their priest. This treatment has its compensations: one is hailed as an author by a doting mother, a would-be girl friend or wife. Women would-be authors are not so lucky. They are regarded as either eccentrics, extreme feminists or lesbians or both. The world, especially the African world, still regards the premise of serious writing as a masculine preserve. We all know this and accept this cultural lag, for unfortunately it is very true.

The only bad effect on a still unpublished author treated this way is that of facing the crash when it comes. This comes when he suddenly realizes that writing takes longer than he had previously calculated, or when he faces a plot that becomes, suddenly, impossible to handle, or worse still, when those admiring relatives and friends become stingy with their homage. They now want to see his book in print, his yacht on the Riviera, and his book become an overnight best seller currently being filmed in Hollywood. Now, alas, the would-be author finds himself alone and has to be really determined to be able to continue from here. Some hopeful authors perish at this stage and are never heard of again. They have had their glory, their praises, short-lived though they were. Invited

to parties by hopeful hostesses, the would-be author is politely asked, 'What happened to that lovely book we were all going to buy and read?' Then he stammers an explanation, unusually long, telling why the book has failed to materialize.

There is the other would-be author who has only himself to blame, only himself to disappoint, and only himself to attack when the crash comes. Many people still maintain that the sharing of personal pains makes them lighter. There are instances when this is true, but when it comes to the field of any artistic creation, I doubt it very much. Maybe the old masters knew the answer. How many times does one read of great painters never unveiling their work until they had satisfied themselves that every bit of their imagination had been captured on the canvas before them. These were lucky artists and secure creators. I should by now have learnt my lesson after Miss Humble and the experience I had with the burning of the work that would have been my first book, *The Bride Price*, but I never did. I am not that secure. But as I said earlier, I think I now survive as a writer, because I learned and practised the art of laughing at myself first.

As a result of all this conditioning, I now belong to the group of writers who, though they have convinced themselves that they are going to be a writer, never have much courage in telling others about it. And the few who know are encouraged, wickedly maybe, to make light of it, by the would-be authors themselves.

In my own case, this attitude kept everybody happy for a very long time. Having tucked my kids into bed, I banged away at an old God-forsaken typewriter which I picked up for only five pounds from the market where I then lived in North London. I still keep the old thing, but it has long given up the ghost, after the onslaught it had when I was typing and retyping my second book, *Second Class Citizen*.

The third stage of the would-be author's life is the most cruel and disheartening and the end of the road for many. This is the endless trips to the publishers, the unceasing flow of letters to newspapers and magazine editors. Take my own case, for example, as I happened to be one of the unluckiest would-be authors that have ever lived. I spent almost every week of 1968, 1969, 1970, trying to persuade publishers just to read my work. I didn't care whether I was paid for their publication or not, my only wish was that someone would share my dreams; that someone would tell me where it was that I was going wrong. I soon got used to the sound of returned manuscripts on the lino-covered floor of my council flat. The plop sounds of the fat returned envelopes dug immediate pits in my

stomach. It took years for those pits to be filled, but during those long lonely weeks of over ten years ago, the feeling was too horrible to describe. It was more of a mental thing. The physical reaction was not so bad. My stomach would start rumbling and then graduate into strong protestation, just as if one had eaten some poisoned stuff or drunk polluted water. I used to cure myself of this by simply leaving the returned manuscript there, completely ignoring it. I didn't need to read the accompanying letter, because by now I knew almost by heart how the nicely worded photocopied note read. They used to say that they thanked me very much for letting them read my lovely manuscript which they enjoyed enormously, but that they couldn't publish it at the moment. Then I used to ask myself, 'But when can they publish?' After a while, I accepted this as part of my life — this constant rejection. I even went to work at the Christmas post sorting office during my college holidays — at this time I was reading for an honours degree in Sociology. The money I got from those endless nights I used partly for my children's Christmas presents, the rest simply to buy typing paper and postage stamps. It was a good thing I kept all this to myself. But if anybody had asked me then, 'But look woman, what are you doing, sending all that typed stuff to publishers who never read it?' I would have told that person that I knew people who for ten to fifteen years gambled on the football pools, hoping that one day they would win the jackpot. The possibility of getting my work published was just as remote.

Then what made me keep on? Maybe I was young and stupid, or maybe there is something in what those who believe in horoscopes say — that people like me, born under Cancer, are crabby and tenacious. Or maybe it was just being twenty-two, stubborn in my own quiet determined way, still very hopeful, and still thinking that nothing was impossible. Or perhaps it was simply a combination of all these things. Anyway I slogged on nonetheless.

Soon I suddenly realized that I was coming to the end of my degree course. Soon there would no longer be the Inner London Educational grant to feed my large family and myself, soon I would have to go out again and face the world to earn a living for myself and my family — my former husband had recommended adoption for our five children, and since I wouldn't agree to this, he washed his hands of us. I saw him only a few times in over ten years, so whining to him for help would only result in his repeating his famous sentence, 'I told you I would not be saddled with five kids'. It is a pity that he is one of those who believe that babies would always remain babies. Still I have to thank him. For many years

later, a Professor friend I met in Chicago said to me, 'I bet if your ol' man didn't give you a kick in the ass, you probably would not have written'. I still think she was right. Because maybe after my degree I would have simply settled back in my secure civil service job and dreamt of becoming a writer one day. Day dreaming is not new to me. I enjoy it, even as an adult. When things become intolerable, I retreat into myself, and can spend months just looking into vacancy and dreaming away. My life would have been like that if I had had a happy marriage. That is why I can now forgive everybody. That is why I am not bitter any more. The realization of all this came much later. When I was nearing the end of my Sociology course in London, I was bitter, I was violent in my words, because I could see no hope for myself and for the children I loved and was determined to give a good start in life, because they were mine.

My failure to get my writing appreciated hit me frontally at this time. I would get an Honours degree in Sociology, then what? Go back to the British Museum and start working again among the Mummies? Not on your life. I was not going to do that. Go back to Nigeria? The war in Biafra was then on, and anybody remotely connected with the Ibos was not then sought for in Nigeria. The only brother I have told me in a letter that being born in Lagos, coupled with the fact that we all speak Yoruba like natives, almost made him forget that we were Western Ibos. But Nigeria reminded him of the fact. Indirectly he made me aware of being an Ibo, a fact which I too was then stupidly playing down and hoping that being a Nigerian was enough for me. Well, thank God, all that is now becoming a thing of the past. Politicians can be trusted to bring up the tribal issue, but we all hope that soon people will have become so educated and touch their hearts each time the Nigerian National Anthem is sung. I am not blaming anybody for this, because Nationalism as it is known in the Western world is a novel thing for us. But we are catching up, and fast.

Anyway, as I was saying, this only brother I have had not written to me for over a year, and I had given him up for dead. I did not then know that he was living somewhere in the bush. My in-laws and ordinary relatives? They had probably crossed me off as a bad debt, for doesn't everybody love a winner? Who in his right senses wants to put up with a relative who has five screaming babies and doesn't know what she wants to do? So all that was left for me was me, my children, and the English editors and publishers.

I changed my style of writing. My language became pragmatic, almost insulting. I became bitter, I started to write about my everyday life,

pouring my aggro out on paper. I didn't care for form. I didn't have to think about the words. They just came, my daily life on paper. I started first of all in a diary, then I realized that those large page diaries were too small to contain my bitterness and my hurt. I poured it all into exercise books, and in the evenings, after doing my revisions, I started typing them. Social realities I called them.

As I said earlier, I never learn from my mistakes. One evening one of the few friends I had at the time came. And instead of my trying to think of some witty conversation to amuse him, I almost drove him crazy by reading my 'observations' or 'Social realities' to him. I didn't know that he was listening, but I had come to the stage where I didn't care. I knew that after that day I would not see him again anyway, so what did I have to lose. He listened patiently as he sipped his tea. Then he said, 'There is a crazy Englishman who has taken over a paper called the *New Statesman*; why not send him your observations. I am sure he will read them.' He left shortly after this, not bothering to tell me whether my work was good or not.

But I did not despair; what had I to lose anyway? I know he made the suggestion by way of ridicule. Yet I was prepared to put this to the test. I typed out the first three 'observations', sending one every Tuesday when I went to the Post Office to collect the children's Family Allowance. I could not afford the postage otherwise, and felt guilty in a way. Because in England, the Family Allowance, now called Child Benefit, just a few pounds, is specially intended for the use of the children. But my argument was, well, if I ever become a writer, they would gain more. So I felt justified in spending those three penny pieces in posting my observations instead of using them to buy the kids a pound or so of potatoes. The first week nothing happened, not even a rejection slip was sent. That was very odd. Because each manuscript usually came back the following Friday. Undaunted, I sent another one; nothing. Still I sent the third one, and it was then that I think the poor man or whoever was receiving them sent me a note saying that he was amused and interested in my 'Observations of the London Poor'.

I screamed with joy until I almost lost my voice. I was going to be a success at long last! I showed the letter to all my friends at the college and tried to tell the children what was happening. They were too young to understand, but they were happy with me. Well, they couldn't help it, they had no choice, because I was all smiles and singing away at my work. Success, success at last.

Then I waited, first week passed, nothing, second week, nothing. By

the sixth week, I could hardly face my friends who only weeks before had started calling me a writer. They told me that the man who signed the letter was a big man, a former British MP, and an intelligent man in the former Labour government ... they told me all sorts of things about him. I guess that was why I was nice enough to wait six weeks before taking the bull by the horns.

The children were particularly trying that morning. After packing them off to their day nurseries, I came back to the flat. The day was damp, and not all that warm. I tried to heat the place up with my old paraffin heater, only to realize that I had run out of kerosene. But the heater let out a choking smell that paraffin heaters are well known for. To let out this impure air, I had to open the windows, and that brought in more cold air, and drops of rain. I was given an old flat, that befitted my poor position. One gust of the wet air stirred the native African woman in me. 'Who the hell is this man that has kept me waiting all these weeks after sending such an encouraging note?' If I had had a telephone, I probably would have telephoned him. But since I had none, and since I couldn't go to the college that day because I knew the lecturer was going to start asking me how far I had gone with my book, I decided to find the office of the magazine myself. Even though people had told me that he was a big man and all that, I was full of anger. And luck was with me. It was on one of those rare occasions when the coast was clear and the stage was set for me. The only person who stopped or tried to stop me was a tea lady or an elderly woman who looked like one. I passed her and followed the direction she gave me to the office of the editor. It was when I was half way down the narrow chokey corridor that she asked me if I had an appointment. It was too late, I was determined to go in, and in I went. The man was not at all pleased to see me, but weeks later his assistant, a very nice lady, came to my flat and we went through my 'observations of London' which by now have acquired another working title of *Life in the Ditch*.

Life in the Ditch is a documentary novel of the daily happenings of my life when I was living in this place officially known as Montague Tibbles in the Prince of Wales Road in London. Many people in Africa have since asked me why such a place I described happened to be in a street belonging to the handsome Prince of Wales? Well, I still do not know the answer, but by the time I moved in there, that particular block of flats was locally known as 'The Pussy Cat Mansions', a place which, by accident or design, looked as if it was set apart for problem families. If one had no problems, the Pussy Cat Mansions would provide problems

for one in plenty. Funnily enough I made friends there. I met social workers like Carol, met desperate women like Whoppey and her mother, and many others who are still my friends. The uniqueness of this place was stranger than fiction, and that was why *Life in the Ditch* was serialized. A few weeks after the lady editor visited me, it started appearing in the magazine.

I was almost like one of those early English poets, I don't remember who, who said that he woke up one morning and suddenly found himself famous. Agents wrote to me, cub journalists wanted interviews, and there followed a series of talks over the radio at Bush House, and at the height of it all I was asked by a Publishing House, 'Barrie and Jenkins', to compile my 'Life in the Ditch' into a book! I thought the excitement of it all would kill me. Well, it didn't. There were months of going through this and that, for I never realized until then how long it takes to produce a book.

After the serialization of *Life in the Ditch* in the *New Statesman*, the council gave me an ultra-modern flat in Regents Park. And all the tenants at Pussy Cat Mansions were rehoused. To think that these very tenants had been agitating for better conditions for over ten years! Maybe there is some truth in what they say, that the pen is mightier than the sword. And that the pen should come from a young African woman, for whom English is not her first, or second, but fourth language, was something. Pride came into it, and all my fellow ditch dwellers got flats of their choice. It was a pity to learn that years later many of them went back to live there. They were so used to the friendliness that poverty brings that they could not cope with other places. But by then the Pussy Cat Mansions had been renovated and given a posher name. They now have a proper heating system! Just think of that.

I remember very well the day *In the Ditch* was ready. The publisher telephoned me. (By now I had a telephone.) Not only was the book ready, but another Woman's Magazine called *Nova* was going to serialize it again. I had just put on a kettle for tea when the phone rang. I forgot about the kettle and was brought back to reality by the smoke that was coming from the kitchen. I did not mind about this. I wanted to see my first book and could not wait for the post. I took a bus and went to the publishers myself and was presented with six sparkling copies of *In the Ditch*.

I had come a long way, and only people who had set their hearts on achieving something and eventually getting it would realize how one feels at a time like this. I have always compared the feelings I have for my

books on their first appearances to the ones I had after going through labour pains and then being left for a few minutes with my brand new baby. I don't know whether other mothers do this, I always make a little speech to my new child, then strip it completely naked to make sure it is perfect, I just do not trust those smiling nurses, they could be hiding something from me. And when I'm perfectly sure that all is well, then I thank the Lord, and smell my child. I don't know whether people notice this, but a new child has that special natural smell which is unique and which always reminds me of the smell our farmers in Ibuza usually bring with them from the farm. It is like that of forest fire, mingled with rain and human sweat. I love it, and still cannot put up with over-washed people. A new child smells like that before it is washed. And somehow, in my imagination, my new books smell like that. That is why I know that the most workable birth control I shall ever have is writing. As long as I keep writing, I will not produce any unwanted babies. And it is working. All this sounds outlandish, but how much of ourselves do we really know?

In any case, *In the Ditch* brought me a modest fame, and it soon went into paperback. I had praise at first, then all of a sudden the cynics started to make remarks like, 'If you say you are that educated, how come you find yourself "In the ditch"?' — and even some of my fellow students started to be funny at my expense and kept asking me, 'Why don't you publish in Nigeria?' Some were even saying that I got my own way because I was young and a woman. Oh, I could go on and on. But one of the most painful, albeit now humorous remarks came from the top people I knew at the time. I came across this recommendation of myself by chance. It read something like this, 'Buchi is a young and intelligent African woman, but still has to learn a great deal about self control'.

Well, that did it! I broke off with those first publishers and had nothing to do with them, but still kept my agents Curtis Brown. But you see, maybe there is something in what that Big Man said. I still have to learn about self control. Because even now when I am happy, I am really happy, and God help anyone around me who is feeling moody, and when I don't get things going my way, I don't like to describe myself. Luckily I am trying very hard to control the latter feeling.

Many journalists have asked me if it would have been different if I had been in Nigeria. I do not know the answer to this one either. All I know is that Nigeria kept copies of *The Bride Price*, some parts of *In the Ditch*, and *The Dilemma* for over six years. I used to send some of my early works to them. But in Nigeria they say you have to know people. In England you do not have to know people, but for a woman, and a black

one at that, your work has to be a step ahead of those of the others for it to see the light of day.

Heinemann and O.U.P. are now publishing my works for Nigeria, as I am getting ready to go back to my country and write from there. Well, eighteen years is a long time to stay in another man's country, a country which to me will always be my second home. And maybe there is something in what the Nigerian Manager of Heinemann said to me when he was considering my work for Nigeria, 'I think it's a good thing you are recognized in England and America. Most African writers always find this part of their career more difficult.'

To prove to those who doubted the authenticity of *In the Ditch*, and to cure myself of so many things, I sat down to write my second book, *Second Class Citizen*. I was then on my way to becoming an established writer, but it was far from easy. Nonetheless I believe in the power of the will, and with the help of that Man upstairs of course, one can always achieve one's goal if one is determined enough.