1994

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Writing as Power in the Narratives of African Women

Abstract
'I could speak until tomorrow.' (Utterance by a woman performer, used by Karin Barber as the title of her book on Oriki) 'You know women's conversation never ends.' (From Idu by Flora Nwapa.)
JANE BRYCE

Writing as Power in the Narratives of African Women

'I could speak until tomorrow.'
(Utterance by a woman performer, used by Karin Barber as the title of her book on Oriki.)

'You know women's conversation never ends.'
(From Idu by Flora Nwapa.)

There we dreamt about
the tall, black and handsome
like Heathcliff. Was he
African to us? Did he look
like the men we knew?
like our fathers and brothers?

Or we thrilled to blonde
blue-eyed dreams, identified
with white winner-masters,
who strode through Edgar Wallace,
Rider Haggard, and Joseph Conrad.

There would be no more polygamy
in our world, no more pain,
for we were special ...
Polygamy was for natives, illiterates and all such creatures. Our men would come
a-gliding, clouds of snow behind them,
moving phantomly to the sounds of violins,
looking like Tony Curtis, Fred Astaire and the Duke of Edinburgh!

They will lead us away, they will,
To monogamous havens
And True Romance Bliss.

(From 'When Father Experience Hits With His Hammer (Song for the Middle Class African Woman)', Molara Ogundipe-Leslie.)

We are all mothers,
and we have that fire within us,
of powerful women
whose spirits are so angry
we can laugh beauty into life
and still make you taste
the salt tears of our knowledge —
For we are not tortured
anymore;
we have seen beyond your lies and disguises,
and we have mastered the language of words,
we have mastered speech.

(From ‘Liberation’ by Abena Busia)^

The situation of African women’s writing as indicated by these four excerpts, is one of a self-conscious disjunction. Yet it may be that very condition which provides the ground for creativity, which elicits the specific response of a need and a desire to write. At first glance, it is possible to read the excerpts as illustrating a decisive rupture, between a past (‘traditional’ or pre-colonial) in which women owned and were confident of their powers of expression; and a present characterised above all by anxiety, an all-pervasive ontological insecurity brought about by the intervention of colonial education, missionary values, western consumer capitalism and cultural imperialism.

But such a reading is instantly rendered inadequate by its false binary opposition of then and now, pre-and post, oral and written. To begin with, both the ‘oral’ utterances have come to us through print. Karin Barber, moreover, demonstrates through *oriki*, the unending capacity of oral culture to adapt itself to new circumstances, to reshape and reform itself in response to contemporary pressures and requirements. Orature, by this reading, is less the fossilised domain of anthropology than alive and contiguous to current forms of cultural expression. The rupture so seductively sung by proponents of a nostalgic purity enshrined in the African past now appears, in the light of a post-Negritude, post-colonial reading of culture, itself a little passé. Rather than a definitive closure constituting a decisive break with tradition, it may be more appropriate to see African women’s writing as a process, with both historical and innovative dimensions. This may well be the truer significance of Idu’s ‘You know women’s conversation never ends.’ For both Ogundipe-Leslie and Busia’s poems are situated within a perceived community, suggesting less the anguish of the isolated modernist self than a dialogue, with shared points of reference.

But, you will say, it’s obvious to anyone that the dominant tone of these two textual fragments is, indeed, anguish. They speak above all a highly wrought self-consciousness, a far cry from the confident, celebratory embrace of excess in the ‘oral’ quotations. Neither irony, in Ogundipe-Leslie’s case, nor defiance, in Busia’s, can obscure the pain, the violence accompanying the accession to writing. The colonial school system, whose project it was to undermine custom, paint polygamy as immoral and elevate virginity above fertility as the index of a woman’s value, offered instead a fantasy of romantic love and monogamous marriage. Not only that, but the cultural representations in whose image schoolgirls were invited to construct themselves were classics of imperialism. Jane Eyre, we know by now, only got her Rochester at the expense of the silencing, suppression and death of the colonial Other, Rochester’s first bride. The crossing of the Sargasso Sea, in reality or fiction, necessitates a psychic dislocation. The mirror of colonial education invites its privileged subject to see herself as — white: the
fainting heroine in the arms of the hero on the True Romance covers. Which, of course, is impossible, as experience shows, forcibly, hammering home a different reality.

Meanwhile, the counter-discourse to colonialism, the 'adversarial resistance' (Said) of liberation, necessitates another kind of dislocation, a violent repudiation of that internalised false consciousness, an unpicking and stripping 'naked piece by piece' of that constructed self. But this is not an individualist project, to be undertaken as a lonely quest by the tortured sensibility of the artist. 'For we are not tortured/anymore', having wilfully and collectively performed that transition from helplessness to responsibility. The question at issue in the discussion here is how. The answer, I think, is in the evocation of the oral heritage, the framing by Ogundipe-Leslie of her satirical statement as a Song. It is a 'Song for the Middle Class African Woman', whose experience is demonstrably different from that of the village oriki singer or the rural trader of Nwapa's fictional world, but is inextricably linked to it by powerful bonds of history, heritage and association. In the discourse of the literature of Empire to which Ogundipe-Leslie refers, such women are 'natives, illiterates', unreconstructed by western education, impervious to its civilising influence. Yet both these poems demonstrate the inability of that discourse to eradicate and silence the previously-existing discourse of orature as empowerment.

For the fact is, that orature is not just a convenient literary metaphor of origin, it is a concrete and visible daily expression of a specific relationship to history, to form, to language, to an aesthetics fundamental to a particular world view. From the women oriki singers of Karin Barber's Yoruba town, to the nightclubs of Lagos, Accra, Nairobi, Harare, Abidjan, Dakar, to the battlefields of Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Angola, orature is alive and doing its work of cultural definition and celebration. From popular music to the poetry of resistance, from 'gossip' and children's games to marriage and naming rituals, something functions which is stronger than any liberation rhetoric. It is that communal sense of self-recognition, the counter to the colonial mirror, which finds expression in these poets in their use of the collective 'we'. In her address to the 'Middle Class African Woman', Ogundipe-Leslie includes herself. In Busia's words, 'We are all mothers, with the power and potential to create, once 'your' lies and disguises have been recognised for what they are, and 'our' speech reclaimed for our own use.

It is not too great a leap from this point to the proposition that women in Africa, the educated, middle-class women of whom we speak who have been obliged to undergo this process of self-conscious decolonisation – in other words, writers – have adopted narrative as their favoured tool. Edward Said contends that narrative is a fundamental trope 'an activity in which politics, tradition, and interpretation converge.' He proposes that the great master narratives of western civilisation, emancipation and enlightenment, unable to face the challenge of the Imperial Other, have been replaced by multiple narratives which privilege the representation of the Imperial relationship. The narratives of African women have emerged within this post-colonial context, where the emphasis is not on a naive return to origin, but on retrieval, rediscovery and reinvention.

For Busia a primary focus of African women writers is 'on the significance of narration as the control of the meaning of 'one's own life'. Control and empowerment reside even in the paradoxical decision to write in the colonial language. As W.D. Ashcroft argues in an essay on the relationship between post-colonialism and feminism, both are marked by a concern with language, the 'master tongue', as a means of control. He suggests that the way out of an essentialist notion of 'women's language' is to view all 'authenticity' as constructed, and to focus on the speaker. 'Language is a process rather than a system – something people do.' Hence, for Mariama Ba writing in French or Ama Ata Aidoo in English, their use of the colonial language may be seen as an implicit assertion of distance from the nostalgia for origins, a recognition of the need for a revisioning of culture and their relationship to it from a post-colonial
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perspective. What results is, in Ashcroft's term, an 'intersection of ontologies': 'woman', 'African', 'post-colonial', 'feminist'. These terms, especially the first two, are becoming increasingly problematised as the body of women's writing grows. For too long it has been our project as readers and critics to validate whatever goes in the name of 'African women's writing' without interrogating those very terms. Looking back, we can see the necessity of this response as a strategy akin to the rhetoric of post-independence nationalism. Without in any way meaning to belittle the usefulness and timeliness of a text like Ngambika when it appeared on the scene in 1986, it is not possible now to overlook the prescriptive and homogenising tendency of its (albeit brave) attempt to define an 'African' feminism. Its editors situated their text at the point of transition from 'the early identification of biases in male writers to an exploration of the works of women writers who have remained outside of the purview of literary criticism.' What this irresistibly suggests is our arrival at another point of transition, led there, inevitably, by the proliferation in textual strategies offered by the accumulation of African women writers' narratives. The work of reclamation, of forcibly shifting the perspective which marginalises and excludes whatever is not amenable to the dominant discourse, is valuable, essential and ongoing. But, recent readings of African women's writing in the light of post-colonial theories of language and cultural syncretism, have pointed the way to a possible new perspective, privileging diversity and heterogeneity.

The benefits of this to all of us who practise the business of post-colonial literature is obvious. Criticism is the ground on which creative writing either thrives or shrivels. As Biodun Jeyifo puts it, the relationship of theory to African Literature is one of discursive power, the power to police language (Eagleton), to define and relegate and hierarchise and marginalise. It is 'your lies and disguises' versus the power of 'our' narratives, or, as Jeyifo puts it: '...the question of an African critical discourse which is self-constituted and self-constituting in line with the forces acting on the production of African literature is intimately connected with the fate of that literature.'

The most immediate obvious stumbling block for critics of African women's writing is the fact that so many of us do not live on the continent. In this sense, the postcolonial discourse of marginality and displacement is given a new and ironic dimension by the continual tug away from the geographical site of the narratives towards the metropolitan centres. Jeyifo points out the very real effects on scholarship in Africa of material problems such as a lack of resources, a crumbling educational infrastructure, lack of access to and the expense of books, difficulties of communication, and so on. We deceive ourselves if we overlook the way in which the enormously disproportionate resources available in the west, particularly North America, weight the whole discussion. Which texts and authors are known, which are written about, who gets invited to international conferences, has access to multinational publishers, publicity and foreign audiences, are all decided by criteria which may be as arbitrary as personal encounter.

The question of publishing is crucial. Those who are best known - Flora Nwapa, Mariama Ba, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, Bessie Head - are those whose books are available abroad because published by foreign-based presses. In the anglophone world, Heinemann, Longman and Macmillan dominate. The close economic and cultural ties between France and its ex-colonies mean that, while the leading francophone African publishers are based in Dakar and Abidjan (Nouvelles Editions Africaines) and Yaounde (les Editions CLE), their products are also distributed in France. It is however only those who have been translated into English (Mariama Ba, Aminata Sow Fall, Nafissatou Diallo) whose works tend to be included in discussions by anglophone critics. This inevitably has an unbalancing effect, in turn, on readers' perceptions. African women writing in African languages, like Asenath Bole Odaga in Luo, Colette Mutangadora, Jane Chifamba, Bertha Msora and Katina Muringanise in Shona, or
Barbara Makhalisa in Ndebele, remain unknown and unrecognised outside their own countries. Those writers who, for ideological or practical reasons, write in the metropolitan language but publish with indigenous publishers have to face the fact that they will thereby be confined to a local audience. Despite the efforts of African publishers at co-publishing and distributing in other African countries, import controls and taxation are such as to limit the movement of books across borders. The problem is being addressed by such strategies as the Oxford-based African publishers' co-operative set up by Hans Zell, to bring African published books to Britain, and by the determination of African publishers to succeed in a market dominated by the multinationals. Zimbabwe, which at Independence in 1980 had only Zimbabwe Publishing House (ZPH) and Mambo, now has Nehanda, Baobab and Anvil, and ZPH is in serious competition with Longman and Macmillan for the lucrative educational market. Yet, according to a ZPH editor, very few (perhaps 1 in 10) manuscripts submitted are by women. Tsitsi Dangarembga is the only internationally acknowledged Zimbabwean woman writer, and this is at least partly a result of the fact that her novel, *Nervous Conditions*, was published by the British-based Women's Press (1988). The recently established Ghanaian publisher Woelie is proud of having scooped many of the leading names in contemporary Ghanaian writing - Kofi Anyidoho, Kofi Awoonor and others - yet Ama Ata Aidoo, a Ghanaian based in Zimbabwe, similarly elected to publish her latest novel, *Changes*, with the Women's Press (1991).

There is obviously a need for an African-based feminist publishing house, yet none exists. Individual women have established presses: Flora Nwapa's Tana, Buchi Emecheta's Ogugwu Afor, Asenath Bole Odaga's Lake Publishers, Aminata Sow Fall's Caec (Centre d'Animations et des Echanges Culturelles), but apart from the last one, these publish mainly the author's own works, and do not exist primarily to encourage other women. Women writers are thus at the mercy of a publishing establishment which has tended to apply male-defined criteria of what is acceptable in a literary text. By this I mean that the consensus which has grown up, primarily within the universities, of what constitutes an appropriate form and content for African fiction, has been shaped first by a New Critical colonial heritage and subsequently by the ideologies of nationalism and decolonisation. Neither of these is fertile terrain for the otherness of women's writing, with its tendency towards redefinition of cherished cultural and political norms and its relocation of the centre of interest in the domestic, the personal, or the oppositional.

One area of publishing that women on some parts of the continent have been able to appropriate and use to their own ends is the undervalued one of mass-market romantic fiction. Here the Macmillan Pacesetter Series, aimed at a younger/less literate audience, has been particularly useful, and more women appear as authors in its list than the more 'serious', and therefore prestigious, Heinemann and Longman's Lists. Writers like Helen Ovbiagele, Yemi Sikuade, Rosina Umelo, Yemi Lucilda Hunter and Christine Botchwey have both used and subverted the romance vehicle, adapting the 'formula' so familiar to African readers from the ubiquitous Mills and Boon, indigenising and altering it in subtle and significant ways. That the romance formula has something to offer African women writers and readers is evident too from its use by more recognised writers publishing with Longman, for example, Zaynab Alkali or, most notably, Ama Ata Aidoo's *Changes*. This author's deliberate decision to write a love story set in Accra (for which she tenders an ironic 'apology') is in itself a subversive act, for by now she is recognised as being part of the 'canon', however reluctantly on the part of a male-dominated critical establishment.

It is not only in romantic fiction but in the more ephemeral media of women's magazines, women's pages in the newspapers, television and radio, that women's narratives may be found. The invisibility of women's writing is all too often a function
of a depressed economy and scarcity of outlets. Ghana is a case in point. To discover women's cultural production in Ghana, one needs to look beyond print, in the formal sense of books, to a magazine like *Obaa Sima*, run single handedly by its editor, Kate Abbam. Despite paper and ink shortages, delays and low sales at times of economic crisis, she has kept the magazine coming out for over 20 years, since 1971. Back issues offer a startling store of popular romantic fiction, by women and men, in the form of stories and serials, including Kate Abbam's own romantic novel, *Beloved Twin*, serialised in 1972. Women writers find outlets too in the less formal and structured field of radio scripts, television and journalism, though the press in Ghana (unlike in Nigeria) offers few opportunities for creative writing. One well-known journalist, Ajoa Afari, has published a collection of her pieces for the *Mirror* 1976-1986, *Thoughts of a Native Daughter* (1988) and a collection of short stories: *A Sound of Pestles* with a local publisher, Afram (1992). Apart from this, a decade of economic decline has caused many women to sublimate their creativity in religious activities, including writing, and the religious publisher Asempa encourages creative writing with a religious message. Women are active as performers of *abibidwoom*, a form of prayer in the Methodist Church using a traditional Fanti song form. The Asante and Ewe traditional cultures, too, render up women as contemporary secular performers and composers. The conclusion is obvious: though the view from the metropolitan centres will be that there is very little in the way of women's narratives emerging from Ghana, and while this is true in terms of published texts, there is a stream of creativity flowing invisible to the outside eye.11

Women in African countries are, needless to say, evolving their own strategies for dealing with the problems of economic depression, material scarcity and invisibility. In Kenya, in 1991, a group of university and publishing women organised the first ever women's writing workshop, away from the capital, in Nakuru. Women, canvassed from all the language groups, were invited to write on the theme of 'Our Secret Lives.' Those not able to write or speak English spoke their stories onto tape for later translation. The outcome was two volumes of short stories, many of them openly autobiographical, *Our Secret Lives* (Phoenix, 1992) and *They Have Destroyed the Temple* (Longman). Untutored as these narratives are in any formal, literary sense, they do, nonetheless, represent a collective assumption of power, a counter-discourse to the dominant Kenyan patriarchal dictum that 'Women have no secrets.'12

A similar phenomenon has been brought about in Zimbabwe by the Zimbabwe Women Writers group, formed in 1990. The group is remarkable for including in its membership ‘well-known’ writers like Ama Ata Aidoo and Micere Mugo, both non-Zimbabweans, the South African activist Norma Kitson and numerous white and black educated Zimbabwean women, and yet avoiding the pitfalls of elitism. It has carried out its declared commitment to ‘grassroots’ women by establishing a countryside network of writers’ groups, and by running a workshop in the rural area of Rushinga, where again indigenous language speakers were encouraged to tape their stories. Starting with a cheaply produced publication of selections of its members' writing, ZWW are intending to publish more as resources become available. Such activities as these bespeak a political awareness and understanding of the potential of collective action which runs directly counter to the individualistic, elitist, capitalist ethic represented by the multinational publishers.

I am aware that by choosing to address these other strains and strata of women's writing in Africa, I have excluded many writers whose work, if only because it is more accessible to the readers of this paper, cries out to be mentioned. I have, besides, sidestepped many important issues that need to be taken up and looked at by postcolonial feminist critics. How, for example, do we place the work of a writer like Marjorie Oludhe-Macgoye, whose novels, over a period of decades, have examined the situation of women in Kenya, in different social and cultural contexts. Deeply influenced by the
work of Acoli poet, Okot p’ Bitek, in reclaiming for written literature the oral aesthetic tradition of the Luo culture into which she married, Oludhe Macgoye is by origin white and British. To return to an earlier point in this paper, issues of authenticity, ethnic essentialism versus cultural hybridity, coalesce around this author’s narratives. If the criteria for assessing post-colonial women’s writing are to be, as Ashcroft suggests, empowerment, revisioning and reinvention across the frontiers of race, birth, language and geography, then this writer occupies a significant space in Kenya’s literary scene. By the same criteria, how are we to place a writer like Buchi Emecheta, whose worldwide reputation and acknowledgement by the western women’s movement as an important Black Woman Writer have arisen in a context of displacement, distance from her fictive territory, and alienation from its contemporary social practices. Who is more ‘African’? The expatriate who embraces Africa or the African who embraces the West? It seems the question of what constitutes ‘African women’s writing’ is one that generates a multiplicity of further questions. Without attempting to effect a closure on the subject, I will deflect a conclusion with yet another textual fragment:

Look for me in the silence.

I creep among you, putting shame to your conceit
You, whose attention is turned away to the sky—shout
You do not see the chameleon mocking your fear.
If you still seek me, turn your hearts to the silence,
alert to the forest.13

Notes

9. Particularly inspiring to me have been the essays by Elleke Boehmer, Judie Newman and Lyn Innes in Motherlands (op. cit.), and by Florence Stratton, Biodun Jeyifo and Susan Andrade in Research in African Literatures, 1990, vol. 21, no.1.
11. I am grateful to the cultural researcher, Esi Sutherland – Addy, whom I interviewed, for this information on women’s activities in the churches and as performers drawing on Ghananian cultural traditions.

12. In Kenya, Muthoni Karega of Phoenix publishers, a participant, and Dr. Wanjiku Kabira of Nairobi University, organiser of the women’s workshop, talked to me about its aims and the way it was conducted.


DENISE deCAIRES NARAIN and EVELYN O’CALLAGHAN

Anglophone Caribbean Women Writers.

‘Of Course When They Ask for Poems About the “Realities” of Black Women’

What they really want
at times
is a specimen
whose heart is in the dust

A mother-of-sufferer
trampled, oppressed (Grace Nichols)

Since women have been producing literature in the Caribbean for centuries, the ‘emergence of the Caribbean woman’s voice’ has less to do with a sudden manifestation of talent than with the politics of publishing and the current ‘marketability’ of this writing. In the last two decades publishing houses in Britain and North America, no doubt influenced by the Women’s Movement (and the relative increase in women’s purchasing power) as well as growing interest in black and post-colonial literatures, have recognized both the existence and ‘bankability’ of women’s writing from the Caribbean and have hurried to provide access to this writing via print. Sometimes, in the rush to catch this trend, material which needs further development and crafting has been published.

The very term ‘Caribbean women’s writing’ is problematic, considering the diversity of the work and of the writers. Cynically, one could suggest that the collective label is a handy marketing device. A glance at the covers of a few recent anthologies of Caribbean women’s poetry which feature the image of a strong, stoical, black woman, raise interesting questions in relation to the Caribbean woman. This image functions as visual short-hand for the archetypal, long-suffering, strong, black Caribbean matriarch