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The African Woman writer

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Abstract
It is of great significance that there is such a presence of African women writers at this conference. Women have always played vital roles in our oral literature, but the written form has tended to ignore the women. Until recently, it was a male preserve and women featured in this literature as cardboard characters that answered to the images that male writers have of their mothers on the one hand, and their wives on the other. It is true that Africa holds two contradictory views of woman — the idealised, if not the idolised mother, and the female reality of woman as wife.
The African Woman Writer

At the African Writers' Conference in London in 1984, there was a special forum on the African Woman Writer. This forum was chaired by Lauretta Ngcobo, and what follows were her opening remarks.

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If this is the case with our male writers, what can we expect of the rest of the world? For many, the African woman writer creature does not exist. One shudders to think what happens to all those born artists among African women — what bottled lives they must suffer, and what talents lie wasting within. In some cases, of course, they lie collecting dust in some kitchen cupboard.

Many of our women lack the confidence to confront the world. For us, nothing in our social life encouraged the inner strengths required to develop in the changing cultural patterns. In our male dominated societies our oral traditions extolled the virtues of humility, silent endurance and self-effacing patterns of behaviour for our girls, while young boys received all the encouragement to go out there and triumph and survive. On top of the traditional patterns, the schools that our girls attend or do not attend make it hard for them to express themselves in writing.

Ours is a fledgling literature, fighting for its survival at all levels. Not only do we have to contend with the problems of writing, but we have problems communicating with publishers, with critics, and even with the
institutions of learning — very few in the British Isles concern themselves with the views of African women.

Yet, women have views, vital points of view, which differ markedly in certain respects from those of our male writers — perspectives that reveal how women perceive their societies and their roles in those societies. Some of these writings are burdened with protests which powerlessness and frustrations engender. Some bridge the gaps of incredulity that exist between Africa and the world in a way that few male writers might do — reinterpreting experience in the way Africans perceive it. I call to mind a lesser known woman writer, Aquah Laluah of Ghana, who Africanises the Christian story in her work entitled ‘Nativity’. Not only does she give it an African cast, but the Virgin Mary and the Black Christ are visited by women in place of the male visitors like the wisemen and the shepherds in the Biblical story. The story of the Nativity as it is traditionally known is remarkable for the absence of women; and yet in the African context it is inconceivable to have such a situation — indeed, in many parts of Africa, men keep away from the place of birth until the baby has grown a little.

Our women are caught up in a hybrid world of the old and the new; the African and the alien locked in the struggle to integrate contradictions into a meaningful new whole. Women whose concern has always had to do with customs and traditions have the task to salvage what they can of our way of life, while dissenting strongly from those customs that they feel we have outgrown or ought to outgrow.

There is no doubt that not only Africa but the whole world stands to gain by letting these perspectives come out in the writings of our women.