We too have hands

Grace Akello
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Abstract
When 'My Dear Brother' was published in Viva, I spent a lot of time feeling that I had committed a serious crime. My friends feared for my marriage. My senior officer was reported to have said, 'This means divorce, doesn't it?' It did not mean divorce. What it did mean was that I started from then on to realise that telling the truth, even disguised truth through poetry, short stories, or even folklore, alienates you. My friends at Viva were of course delighted with the poem, especially as it generated quite a number of letters to the editor for a number of issues after it appeared.
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I started writing poetry as an avenue for release, for pain and tears and for love. ‘My Dear Brother’, for example, was my reaction against the oppressive manner in which most of my friends, myself included, were treated by their husbands. It was not, as some people came to say later, exclusively written as a challenge to my husband. If there was any challenge in it at all, it was aimed at making him and other men see that women were their sisters, the other child whom their mothers gave birth to. Unlike them, this other child did not have a penis. And this was the only difference between men and women.

I was brought up by a grandmother who was, among many other things, a midwife. I remember particularly one child that she delivered. It was my cousin. As the time drew near for my young mother (as we call our uncle’s wife) to give birth, my grandmother and aunts were all obsessed with the sex of the baby to come. One thing was certain, they all wished that my young mother should have a son. You see, up to this time, she had only had two girls. Although girls were grudgingly accepted as children, there had as yet been no child who would carry on the lineage. This was very sad indeed. My mother had just died and left my father with three girls! His elder brother had only one child: a girl! If my young mother did not do something at the next birth, our lineage was likely to die out. I remember feeling sorry for grandma because she longed so much for a grandson to name after her dear departed husband.

¹ *Viva*
When she was in her philosophical mood, grandma would concede that whatever child my young mother gave birth to, it would still be a child. I got the impression that she was steeling herself in the event of a girl being born.

The night my cousin was born is among the most exciting memories I have of my childhood. My young mother went into labour and grandma was at hand to assist her. We all gathered into her hut, four anxious little girls. Perhaps our anxiety was heightened by grandma’s mutterings as she wiped our young mother’s brow. She kept re-assuring her to work hard and give birth to her baby. Gone from grandma’s thoughts was the obsession with a male birth. All she wanted to see was that this groaning woman gave birth and rested from the agony. She kept reassuring her that she was squatting right. Grandma’s hands were trembling, but ready and waiting for the little head of the new arrival. My young mother gave birth to a boy. We all rejoiced. Our lineage would no longer be a laughing stock. We had a man who would continue the lineage. All of us girls would look upon him as our protector, even though he was our junior in years. Need I tell you that grandma called him after her late husband. Or that we were (and still are) very proud of him.

But my cousin could easily have been born a girl. For a mother, the pains, fears and anxieties that she has before giving birth are the same whether the child is a boy or a girl. From the moment her child is seen to be a boy, however, the mother gains in status within the lineage. The child itself does not know, of course, that by arriving with that sex, it has fulfilled a role predetermined by the society into which it is born. From then onwards, that child is brought up in such a way that he fulfils these expectations. Hence my cry in ‘My Dear Brother’, and in all the poems where I cry out against female oppression, is really a cry against structures in society which continue to perpetrate this damaging categorisation of humanity. I cannot find peace in myself so long as girls are considered a less worthy creation than boys. As a mother of four sons, I know that.

I have made it to my people’s most honoured and envied position. But what am I to teach these four children who happened to be born by me, a lesser creation than they are? Having struggled in my life against the destructive consequences of upbringing which gives the male a licence to oppress and degrade the female, am I to encourage my own children to continue to believe in this system? In my case the question is rhetorical. In many women’s cases, it is not. It is a pertinent, burning question. You see, they believe in the system under which they are bringing up their
children. Wicked, I think, is the word the Bible would be inclined to use against a system which deliberately and methodically denies the female child and person the dignity which God gave her in creation.

The other frightening aspect of this female denigration is that society sets about in an organised manner to rob itself of the many resources which women have. Who loses? Who gains? Is social short-term gain, manifested in total female subservience, to be preferred to longer-term gain, provided women are given the same opportunities from birth as men are?

I have been accused of being anti-male. This accusation always hits me most when it comes from otherwise open-minded African men. Once I was a panel discussant on a BBC programme on marriage in Africa. One of my male discussants accused me of being too far removed from the reality of African marriage and life. What was it that I had against men, he demanded to know. Another 'enlightened' African male told me once that my problem with men was that I hated them. Now, that really was hitting below the belt, to borrow a graphic male expression. I have always been deeply attached to my father, my uncles and to all my male kin. I was deeply in love with my first husband, until he died, despite the fact that we had parted. I am deeply attached to my second husband. He gives me as much strength as I hope I give him in our daily struggles through life. I have four lively boys from whom I could not be parted for the world. Who hates men? Even God knows that I am a good enough person to entrust male children to. No, I certainly do not hate men, but men alone do not make society. Men and women do. If society belongs to all human beings, but some human beings cling on to it with their fingertips, then they must tell society that they too have hands. Women too want to hold society in the depth of their palms, to feel it, to nurse it, to savour it, and to know that it is wonderful to be alive!

NOTE

1. Viva is a women's magazine in Kenya.