

WOMEN AND BOOKS IN AFRICA: A QUESTION OF SURVIVAL? (1)

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Between 1979 and 1982 I experimented with a small voluntary literacy campaign project involving women from Kibera, one of Nairobi's huge slums. One day my best student, a mother of six, turned up at my house where I held the classes with a swollen face and badly damaged nose. Her husband had come home and had been infuriated to find her reading a book. Describing the activity as a reflection of idleness and a sign of unwomanly conduct, the man warned his wife that she was never again to be caught, at any time of day or night, reading a book. This was the kind of thing done by schoolchildren and not by grown-up married women, he said. He had beaten her up thoroughly - just to drive the message home. In fact, with only two exceptions, all the students attended these private classes under strict secrecy.

In 1982, when the Kenya government banned the drama activities of Kamiriithe Community Centre near Limuru and then proceeded to raze to the ground the structures of the open-air theatre that the workers and peasants had built, the Kiambu District Commissioner gave a speech in which he specifically singled out women for admonition. He ridiculed them for having participated in the drama productions and derided them for spending time idling and jumping around the stage like children, instead of working in their homes and cultivating their *shambas*, as all "respectable" married women should do.

Even though crudely extreme, these two cases reveal attitudes that would appear to look upon the world of books and literature as being quite antithetical to the proper aspirations of women. Women are painted as undignified and idle for daring to penetrate this world. But beyond this, such attitudes have a class bias. Women from the working and peasant classes are shown as having no business,

indeed no right, to associate with books. The book world, then, becomes a special realm for the elite classes and, of course, for schoolchildren - the future educational elite-in-the-making.

In this paper, I would like to address the problem of creating book **apartheid** against working-class and peasant women, for they constitute at least 80% of the female population in most African countries. I would like to examine the particular problems that women face in their attempts to relate to the world of books and academic knowledge. I would like to suggest that writers, publishers and critics need to find ways of combating the negative attitudes and conditions that make women and books strangers and that intimidate this very important majority of our readership and potential artists. The basic cause of the problem at hand lies squarely in the oppressive economic, social and political conditions under which women live and which we must seek to dismantle. This is the challenge that my paper poses to this distinguished community of women and men of books.

The facts in front of us today are both depressing and tragic. Let us first of all look at the overall continental picture of illiteracy. We find that out of the 156 million illiterate people of Africa aged 15 and above, nearly two out of three are women: in other words, 83%. Among the males, the figure scales down to 53%. Although these facts are from a 1979 source (2), one can assert that except in a few African countries that have made considerable strides to combat illiteracy in the last few years (Tanzania and Zimbabwe being special cases that deserve mention) (3), the situation has hardly changed. Yet even in Zimbabwe, where the situation is certainly improving, 66% of the 2.5 million illiterate people are women. Needless to say, the majority of these are peasants in the rural areas, and the rest are mainly from the urban working class. This picture of Africa is, by the way, ironic, considering the fact that writing as an art was invented by Africans of the Nile Valley centuries before Europe knew that it was possible for human beings to communicate in this manner.

The problem of illiteracy aside, working-class and peasant women lead lives that strongly militate against their entry into the world of books. UNICEF's "News of Africa" cites the normal daily routine of a typical rural peasant woman

as stretching from 4.45 a.m. to 9.30 p.m. I would argue that many rural village mothers do not in fact retire before eleven o'clock. Between these hours, the woman is engaged in such physically and emotionally draining activities as taking care of infants and pre-school children; cooking; washing and cleaning the home and compound; grinding cereals; mending and laundering clothes; fetching wood and water - tasks which might involve miles of walking; working in the garden; building; ferrying goods to the market; looking after cows and goats in the absence of herd-boys; breeding chickens; attending to family rituals; and attending to demanding husbands and relatives. In addition, it is this woman who best knows what it means to eke out a living from economically raped Africa. Africa is a continent of extremes: deserts, stone, drought, floods, swamps and, of course, a few acres of arable land out of which we cannot yet produce enough to feed ourselves. So, given this situation, how does the rural woman sit down to read a book after eleven o'clock at night, with only a few hours to go before starting the daily routine all over again? What does she use for light? The tin-can paraffin lamp? The fire at the hearth?

For poor women in the cities, the picture is not any better. Most of the so-called unemployed women from the working class lead a back-breaking life as well. Even when a poor urban woman, unlike her rural sisters, may have tap water, to get a bucket of this water she may have to queue up for hours. Psychologically, this woman has to cope with all the usual pressures associated with urban existence. Divorced from the solidarity of the extended family circle, she often has to deal, single-handed, with most of the problems created by her suffocating economic circumstances. There are other women even lower down this ladder of poverty: the petty trader, the street woman, other members of the lumpen-proletariat. Even if such women were miraculously to find the leisure time for reading, the conditions they live under would almost certainly rule out the possibility of their getting much pleasure from books.

There are other problems. Even at the global level, except in socialist states where the costs of books and publishing are subsidized, books have become so expensive that for a poor person, they remain out of reach. Soon, accessibility to books in the open market becomes the prerogative of the affluent classes. Yet another prohibitive

factor is the size of most of the books that make good, imaginative reading. The average reader from the masses has neither the time, the favourable conditions nor the intellectual energy - let alone the reading skills - to handle a book that is more than a hundred pages in length. Fifty pages alone can be overwhelming and forbidding for most readers just on the literacy line.

Then, of course, there is the language problem. Perhaps with the exception of Zimbabwe, it is no exaggeration to say that 99.5% of our good, creative African output is in foreign tongues - most of it addressed to a foreign audience and the elite class at the domestic level. This automatically excludes from our readership the majority of peasants and workers. Even when literate, such people generally function only in their mother tongues. And, as Frantz Fanon says, "to speak a language is to espouse a culture, to assume a world, to carry the weight of its civilization". Beyond the problem of language, we often have to deal with a literature that is full of alienating elitist images of Africa. Indeed, some of it embraces values that are so Western and bourgeois that it makes us begin to appreciate how psychologically enslaving the ABC of the colonialist classroom is. The visions range from those that are paternalistic to those that are not only condescending towards and dismissive of the masses, but so unrepresentative and negative that their images of the poor and their world become nihilistic. How do the worker and peasants relate to such an oppressive literature?

The underprivileged position of the peasants and workers produces yet another problem that is even more tragic: the attitude of self-debasement. This further alienates the oppressed from the world of books. Following years of exploitation, domination and degradation, the masses are conditioned not only to look upon the oppressor as being superior, but to be self-demeaning before him/her. Paulo Freire articulates this position eloquently in **Pedagogy of the Oppressed**:

Self-depreciation is another characteristic of the oppressed, which derives from their internalization of the opinion the oppressors hold of them. So often they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything - that they are sick,

lazy and unproductive - that in the end they become convinced of their own unfitness.

A lot of peasants and workers tend to look upon the world of books and ideas as the natural, unique and private monopoly of the dominating classes. They are almost apologetic about their intellectual ambitions. Because of this, many shy away from books and writing.

In her moving autobiography, entitled **The Diary of Maria de Jesus**, a Latin American woman tells us of the verbal persecution that she had to live through for daring to write a book. The sad irony is that the taunts and insults mainly came from members of her own class - especially her oppressed sisters, all of whom were living in dehumanizing, abject poverty. But, due to her crying urge to expose her oppressors, the world today has one of its strongest testimonies against the evils of capitalism, from a firsthand victim who was barely literate. The significance of Maria's straightforward, lucid account of human suffering and degradation lies in the fact that it is the oppressed person who best identifies, names and articulates her oppressive reality. Unfortunately, this insistence on penetrating the world of books and ideas by a member of the lumpen-proletariat is rare, especially in a Third World context.

In **Let me Speak**, Domitilla - another Latin American woman, this time from the Bolivian working class - has placed into the hands of the reading world a powerful piece of writing that clearly illustrates the creative potential among the oppressed classes. This work provides a penetrating view of the oppressed as seen from a worker's perspective. It destroys the myth that workers and peasants cannot produce imaginative or scholarly books.

Even African elitist classes deliberately mystify books and knowledge as a means of preserving their prestige. I remember when I was small witnessing peasants suffer humiliation at the hands of a primary-school teacher. Illiterate, they used to go to him to have letters written or read. The teacher would visibly delight in seeing these men and women - some of them elderly - bow before him, acknowledging his superiority. He would take endless time to attend to them. He would strut across his compound, whistle, straighten his collar and drink his tea, creating

suspense and mystery as well as a feeling of dependency in the waiting peasants. Meanwhile, they would have brought him eggs, chickens, fruits and other delicacies - a typical feudal lord in his little intellectual kingdom!

One must pay immense respect to the oppressed African woman for her determination, industriousness and optimism, reflected in her struggles to break through the walls of illiteracy and prejudice that imprison her mind. The majority of adult literacy students on the continent as we speak now are women. Defying age, restrictive customs, oppressive political institutions and a crippling exploitative economic system, these women are advancing resolutely, determined to break the silence imposed upon them by illiteracy; insistent on naming the world for themselves. Needless to say, they can only ultimately overcome following a complete transition to socialism which will create an economic system in which power is in the hands of the proletariat, supported by the masses at large. At that stage the world of books and ideas will become not only a reality but hopefully a basic human right.

In the meantime, what happens? Who will create literature for these staggering multitudes? In the rest of this paper, I wish to suggest several alternatives that we will need to discuss among ourselves. Writers and publishers for women are today faced with a formidable but challenging task: either to make literature "part of the common cause of the proletariat" (4), as Lenin counselled, or to allow it to continue as a monopoly for the elite. As far as some of us are concerned, the luxury of a choice does not really exist. We know the limitations of our privileged class position and agree with Freire when he asserts: "Revolutionary praxis must stand opposed to the dominant elites, for they are by nature antithetical" (5). If we are to undertake the production of books for the oppressed masses, therefore, we must begin by identifying with their interests. Now, in my opinion, the only kind of writing that will truly address their condition is liberation literature. In creating the authentic or true word, as Freire would put it, we will be providing the oppressed with just this. Liberation will become "an instrument that makes dialogue possible" (6), leading to reflection and revolutionary action which will, in turn,

ultimately transform the oppressive reality. As Freire argues:

Human existence cannot be silent, nor can it be nourished by false words, but only by true words, with which men transform the world. To exist, humanly, is to name the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires of them a new naming. Men are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection.
(7)

However, hard as we may try, as members of a privileged social class we will find it impossible completely to transcend our class contradictions and produce authentic mass literature. It is important that we realize this, lest we become cultural invaders, like the colonizer who penetrates the world of the conquered in complete "disrespect of the latter's potentialities", thus imposing his own world view on them and inhibiting "the creativity of the invaded by curbing their expression" (8). The danger of invading the world of female peasants and workers is not imagined, but very real indeed.

I will illustrate the point I am making. Towards the end of last year, I attended a seminar that was deliberating upon the legal rights of women in an African country that will remain nameless. During one of the plenary sessions, I was struck by an irony that seemed too glaring to be left unchallenged. The panel of rapporteurs consisted of seven men and one woman. On the entire panel, there was not one African woman. Further, the seminar delegates were exclusively drawn from elitist and petty bourgeois circles. I repeat: there were no working-class or peasant women at a seminar that was deliberating on women's legal rights. Considering that at least 90% of the women whose problems were being discussed came from these two classes, I sought to know from the gathering how authentically representative of mass interests it considered itself to be. I was promptly and rudely silenced by the chairman, whose action was endorsed by a number of angry petty bourgeois "researchers" and self-appointed oppressed women's representatives, who claimed the authority and right to speak for the masses because they had done a lot of research on them. One of

the delegates actually said this. I could hardly believe that such paternalism and condescension were possible. All I could say was that there are far too many self-appointed petty bourgeois messiahs in Africa.

Thus the question needs to be raised: who are "we" to speak **for** the masses? Surely we can only speak in solidarity **with** them, not **for** them. Our task is to work with them as friends and comrades and not as their intellectual bosses. Let us join Paulo Freire, yet again, in seeking to explode "the myth that the dominant elites, 'recognizing their duties', promote the advancement of the people, so that the people, in a gesture of gratitude, should accept the words of the elites and be conformed to them" (9). Let us not deceive ourselves: only the oppressed can, in the final analysis, liberate themselves. Only they can transform the oppressive reality around them through their own labour. Only they can create new conditions under which to live as free people. For this reason, we must consider, as our ultimate goal, the creation - from among the masses - of an audience that can also participate in composing, criticizing and publishing the works of art that it consumes. That way we shall aim at encouraging creative producers and not just consumers. This will set an authentic dialogue into motion, which is what is required as the initial phase of the liberation process. Indeed, "Dialogue, as the encounter among men to name the world, is a fundamental precondition for their true humanization" (10). And, lest we undermine the urgency of this liberating literature, let us look south and see what is happening in South Africa; in Namibia. Let us look around Africa and see what is going on. All over the continent, the masses are engaged in a life-and-death struggle to throw off the fetters of oppression that deny them their being. What reality can be more urgent to address than this? Unless we face this challenge, the existing economic structures will remain unchanged, and under them the oppressed can neither produce nor consume books and literature. The continuing segregation of women and books can only be advantageous to the economically and socially dominant classes of Africa.

Finally, men and women of books must face the challenge of producing, **together with** the workers and peasants, literary modes of expression that will capture the true rhythms of life, speech and thought associated with the masses' struggle. This dynamic and dialectical approach should release books

from the confines of glass shelves and bring them down to earth - where they belong - turning the messages the covers encase into sources of liberating activity. Poetry and drama - active genres that ultimately demand verbal articulation and actual performance - may well be two of these dynamic modes, suited to the masses' participation. As part of this essential task, too, we will need to address the orature tradition and its aesthetic, revolutionizing them sufficiently to articulate the contradictions that define the class nature of Africa's socio-economic relationships. For, lest we forget, more than 80% of the workers and peasants of Africa are consumers of orature.

NOTES

1. The original text of this paper was presented by Micere Githae Mugo as a keynote address to the 1985 Writers' workshop at the 3rd Zimbabwean International Book Fair held in July-August. Although the paper has been partly edited, the essence of the message, the tone and the rhetorical devices characteristic of an oral presentation have been left intact so that the debate that the presentation was intended to provoke can continue.
2. 'Africa: The Facts', UNICEF News Chart. Information derived from Literacy Targets in the International Development Strategy, UNESCO 1979.
3. (i) Between 1970 and 1981, Tanzania reduced its illiteracy rate from 70% to 21%.
(ii) Since July 1983, over 200,000 adults in Zimbabwe, 71% of them women, have enrolled in literacy classes. Today 350,000 adults attend literacy classes and more than three-quarters of these students are women.
4. V.I. Lenin, 'Party Organization and Party Literature', in **On Socialist Ideology and Culture** (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1962), pp. 27-28.
5. Paulo Freire, **Pedagogy of the Oppressed** (London: Sheed and Ward, 1979), p. 49.

6. **Ibid.**, p. 120.
7. **Ibid.**, p. 75.
8. **Ibid.**, p. 76.
9. **Ibid.**, p. 150.
10. **Ibid.**, p. 136.