
Book review

Their rightful place: Stella and Frank Chipasula's African women's poetry

Stella and Frank Chipasula (eds).1995. *The Heinemann Book of African Women's Poetry*. Oxford: Heinemann. 227pp.

This pan-African anthology of women's poetry is, to say the least, most welcome. The fact that it has been ably edited by the Malawian poets Stella and Frank Chipasula should be a matter of national pride. That it is so long overdue is less flattering to the continent.

That poetry by African women is not available is not in dispute. The reasons for this situation are both complex and debatable: there are very few women poets; women do not have time to write poetry; women's poetry is not so good as men's; great poetry is written by men; women have deliberately been excluded from anthologies by male editors. These explanations clearly fall into two camps. On the one hand women are seen as silent, and on the other, they are perceived to be silenced.

Anthony Nazombe in the introduction to his collection *The Haunting Wind* (1990) states that, despite his going out of his way to find women poets to include, sometimes bending his terms of reference, of the 44 poets in his anthology only six are women. This he attributes to:

...the Malawian lady's general reluctance to participate in matters of a literary nature. Whereas the traditional woman was at the centre of society's cultural life, playing roles in...storytelling and song composition her literate modern counterpart tends to shy away from writing as an art.

This editor apparently concurs with the notion of the silence of women but at the same time posits the potential for a different situation backed up by history. (Although his professed hope that the expansion of Chitukuko Cha Amai m'Malawi might alleviate the situation is surely less than serious.) However, his assessment of the present Malawian situation is certainly that women here do not write poetry, and those that do, do not write as well as their men counterparts.

Elsewhere in Africa a different picture emerges. In an angry review of the anthology *Ten Years of Staffrider*, Boitumelo Mofokeng (1989) comments on the very few women included:

...it is a sad history...because it suggests that women's contribution in that period was very small, almost...non existent... But the truth is that women did write for *Staffrider* and almost all have been excluded from this anthology. No reason can be sufficient to justify their exclusion: its effect has been to deny them not only the recognition which should belong to them as writers of our times but their rightful place in the history of the development of our culture.

The editors of this collection, Stella and Frank Chipasula, also subscribe to the 'silenced' view of women's literary history. In their introduction they record at length the sorry saga of the exclusion of female writers from anthologies of African poetry where, they say, women poets have been marginalised and neglected. Their own anthology seeks to redress the balance as they seek to 'celebrate African women's poetry as a repository of essential cultural and spiritual values that continue to shape our lives.' In their very useful introduction they point to the historical existence of a woman's tradition and include contributions from the whole continent.

The poems in the anthology cover a commendably broad canvas in terms of history as well as geography and experience. The wide range of subject matter is refreshing and exciting and amply demonstrates the comprehensiveness of female poetic response in Africa. The editors seem to take particular pains to include poems which point to the existence of a female poetic response to many of the continent's anti-colonial and socio-political struggles: there are examples of prison poetry from poets like the Algerian activist Anna Gréki. The earliest poem is by Queen Hatshepsut who we are told reigned as a male Pharaoh in the Eighteenth dynasty. However, most of the poets here are living (perhaps completely subverting the accepted canon of dead white males).

The figure of 'Mother' has long been important in African poetry, from the romantic idea of the perfect 'Mother Africa' of the Negritude poets, to the Soweto poets' often angry rejection of this notion. Poems like Irene Assiba d'Almedai's 'Sister You Cannot Think a Baby Out', Ama Ata Adoo's 'Gynae', 'One', 'Issues' and 'For Kinna II', 'Madalena' by Maria Eugénia Lima, Jeni Couzyn's 'The Pain' and the witchy tones of her 'Spell' sequence, Ingrid de Kok's 'Small Passing' and 'Pregnant Woman', and even the hard and complex realities of Noémia de Sousa's 'Call', rescue the mother figure

from its symbolic role and provide an opportunity to compare the representation of motherhood by women themselves with the often stylised treatment of the subject from the pens of their male counterparts.

The anthology also includes a good number of poems which provide a delightful window into female experience. The woman poet's voice is not always (even if it is sometimes) that of strident opposition to male domination but is frequently a call for mutual understanding and progress:

You have touched my skin
Without entering my pores.
Do you know the sores inside
Festering in the dark womb of my mind?

These are lines from one of the 11 entries from the Mauritian Indian poet Shakuntala Hawoldar. This allocation of space is easily justified. In a collection which claims to break new ground the reader should expect to be surprised and this was my first and joyous encounter with Hawoldar's works. Her poems celebrate and explore the depths and complexity, the mutuality and distances possible within a male-female relationship. Deceptively simple language serves to express with an exquisite sensitivity some of the intensity of 'ordinary' everyday life. The poet seems constantly aware of the fragility of her language and medium in the face of the enormity of human experience: one poem begins 'This is far too rich for poetry'. However, as the following lines demonstrate, the awe with which she beholds her (to the uninitiated) mundane subject matter results in poems which seem in their sharpness and precision to be sculpted out of verbal glass:

You Must Help Me Gather
You must help me gather
Broken glasses,
Cigarette stubs,
Dead orchids from the vase,
While the stars gently fall
From the cold night sky.
You remember, when you held my toes
Between your fingers
Feeling them like hands and cheeks,
You remember how I stirred
Questions in your eyes,

While my sleepy fingers brushed your hair,
Counted moles behind your ear,
Whispering answers that you knew;
Now help me sweep the dust
Beneath the board,
Hide the empty plates behind the door
And then black-out back to back
While the stars are gently swept
By the early morning light.

However, even the discovery of such riches and the happy fact of the existence of this often stunning collection can not entirely counter the stubborn reality of women's poetic silence. Any continent-wide anthology would be expected to be met not only with a measure of approval for what is included but with a healthy degree of regret for what had to be left out. There is, strikingly, no apology for omissions from these editors. Perhaps there is none to make. If anything their comment on Malawian women's poetry suggests an even worse situation than Nazombe does. He found four women poets; the Chipasulas include only one: Stella herself.

It is of course true that women poets have been both silent and silenced. It is pertinent to point out the prejudices of male editors and a predominantly male literary establishment. However, in the African context it is perhaps of the greatest importance to examine the reasons for the silence: educational inequality, patterns of male dominance, and strictly prescribed and observed gender roles need to be continually questioned.

The poems in the anthology are drawn from the whole continent. This of course necessitates that a large number of poems are presented in translation. The old thorny question demands to be asked: can a poem be translated and retain its integrity? To many this is a troublesome and strange idea. A poem has to be more than its meaning. What happens to prosody: rhythm, rhyme, alliteration, onomatopoeia, punning? Can musicality be translated? What is the relationship between the original and the translation? In a recent issue of *Poetry Review*, John Greening bemoans the lost musicality of much English verse. How much more important is such musicality to African poetic traditions which claim descent from the oral bards of sung praises? Of course in order to have poetry courses which present African poetry in a historical context then studying in translation the likes of Senghor is perhaps sadly inevitable.

However, even assuming that in a pan-African anthology translation is merely a fact of life, surely translations of translations have to be questioned. Three out of four of the

selections from the work of the Mozambican poet Noémia de Sousa are 'translated from Mario de Andrade's French Version by Jacques-Noel Gouat'. The reader is unaccountably left to conjecture as to the language of the original. Even the editors themselves appear to be confused by this situation to the extent that the lines they quote from 'Call' in their introduction do not match Gouat's text. There are important differences between the 'tired voice' of the bush woman which is discussed in the introduction and the 'weary voice' of the chosen translation. Similarly, being 'leashed' with children and 'loaded' with children is not the same thing. The Chipasulas' interpretation that the 'the mean and brutal rhino-whip' is in the hands of the colonial administrator is certainly not borne out by Gouat's translation:

Io mamane, who then has shot the heroic voice
of my sister from the bush?
Which unknown and cruel horse-whip
has flogged her to death?

Here the questions asked suggest the double exploitation of the woman by her own menfolk as well as colonial forces. These discrepancies seem to be an extraordinary confusion. One would have expected Heinemann's editors to be a little more vigilant. Ironically the translation of the translation of 'Call' is unquestionably one of the most powerful pieces in the anthology. It is undoubtedly poetry. But is it the poem de Sousa wrote?

This is a ground breaking anthology which is of great importance. No longer can teachers of African poetry claim to omit poems by African women from their syllabi on grounds of unavailability. The field is now wide open for critical engagement with these women's texts. At last the vexed question of quality can and should be addressed. These poems also need to be read widely by both women and men. It is sad that the sterling price of this Heinemann volume once again puts African literature well out of reach of so many of those whose heritage it is.

References

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 Boitumelo Mofokeng, 1989. Where Are the Women? Ten Years of Staffrider. *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 1:1, 41-2
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