Women's Voices: African Poetry in Motion

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"I cannot cry my rights"
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The voices of women are on the move. We have stopped, in the words of Shakuntala Hawoldar from Mauritius, "wombing meaningless men in the endless chain of need"[1]. We are in motion. We have come a long way. We are everywhere. Yet we are nowhere.

They are cutting up to pieces
My body and my sun
They are cutting them up into pieces ...[2]
they are cutting everything up into pieces
departments
districts
they are clipping out pictures
with border barbed wire
they are cutting up my body
to make it into History.

Malika O'Lahsen (Algeria)[3]

The cutting up of our continent and the cutting up of women's bodies have immobilised African women writers for centuries. Not that we didn't tell stories; not that we didn't write poems, but nobody bothered to record, publish or recognise these voices until the last days of the old millennium.

This chapter will focus on the spatial movement of women's voices – the places they are coming from and moving into. I will argue that there were few rewards for women in these newly acquired spaces, and will explore whether the wars and struggles savaging Africa affect female voices more than those of males.

Where are we coming from?

There are two very familiar figures in oral literature: the male praise-singer and the female story-teller. Although the woman as story-teller is hardly visible compared with the male praise-singer, the predominance of women as story-tellers has been so widely and consistently noted that it cannot be without substance. Yet few studies, if any, have looked into the connection between institutionalised speaking in the form of story-telling and the systematic silencing of women's voices.

In her book, *We spend our Years as a Tale that is Told* (1993), Isabel Hofmeyr draws a parallel between the division of labour and the division in literary and cultural output in pre-colonial, colonial and current societies. In the rigid division of labour, controlled by household heads, women assumed responsibility for cultivation, while men controlled cattle-keeping. Cultivation requires long hours of hard labour seldom resulting in any storable wealth. Largely barred from access to livestock, women could never really accumulate wealth nor trade in the products of cattle.

Wife of a Husband

His snores
protect the sleeping hut
but the day's
load
and the morrow's
burden
weighs heavily over
the stooping mother as she
sweeps the hut
bolts the pen
tidies the hearth
buries the red charcoals
and finally seeks
her restless bed

His snores
welcome her to bed
four hours to sunrise
His snores rouse her from bed
six sharp
Arise
O, wife of the husband!

Micere Githae Mugo (Kenya)[4]

An overall picture emerges of women being subordinated in both economic and intellectual terms. They are also denied any influence over the major intellectual and media resources of their communities. Like their labour of agriculture, women's labour of culture is also less valued – the bedtime story of women could never match the prestige and glamour of praise-singing and clan tales told about the forefathers at the public place.

The places of the voices

In her studies of the oral tradition, Hofmeyr, and before her, JL Comaroff (1975) in his studies of Oratory and Authority, found distinct demarcated spaces for men and women. In the rural cluster of huts there were male spaces in front, and female spaces in the hut and the yard behind it. In modern houses the female spaces are the kitchen and the bedrooms of the children. Women generally pursue their story-telling in the vicinity of the household, while male story-tellers look for public spaces. In the past the genre for women was the folktale – a term which diminishes the craft by its overtones of quaintness, says Hofmeyr (1993), and which also implies that the genre dealt only in make-believe.

One of the features of female story-telling is informed participation, which makes for emotional involvement and enjoyment on the part of both the teller and the audience. Female stories are inclusive in the broadest sense. "Male story-telling, by contrast, generally occurred in ... a symbolically central place" where men congregated to discuss and resolve issues (Hofmeyr 1993: 30). It also took place in the evenings after the boys had returned from the day's herding. Men then taught the boys the law, obedience, not to fight, family and kin relations, and stories of the forefathers, and what happened in wars. These stories took on a variety of forms, their performance mostly excluding audience participation – the men sitting around doing quiet labour like currying skins, making ropes and carving objects. This spatial division in story-telling would also be found in the status these narratives enjoyed: the women were story-tellers, the men historians. Female stories were regarded as somewhat frivolous, imaginary and fictional. Male story-telling was seen as more important because it dealt with the real world – "it belonged to the glamorous world of public male power" (ibid: 30).

Men, by dominating the media and intellectual resources, controlled words, rituals and judicial arguments, through which they could influence the representation of the world. "Through this representation men ... became models of society, history and permanence (all ancestors for example are male). By contrast women are seen as temporal and, as Comaroff puts it, associated with unstable and repetitive transformations, with seasonal production, feeding, birth and death" (ibid: 27).

The characteristics of our voices

Apart from the fact that our voices always encourage participation and a spirit of inclusiveness, apart from the fact that we employ everyday language to express ourselves, we women have also used our voices for subversion.

In our voices men become women, animals become human, women fall in love with animals, people eat one another. We use the fantastic, the grotesque and the powerfully erotic – one-legged cannibals, four-mouthed monsters, bees nesting in an inverted man's anus and witches with a phallus like a tail and with excessive appetite. We transform and transgress. We use irony – as is shown in this part of an oral poem, recorded at the Dube homestead, Sihuzu, Ngoye, KwaZulu-Natal on 25 March 1976 by Liz Gunner (Gunner & Gwala 1994).

> Fragment of Oral Poem performed by Mcasule Dube (MaMhlongo)
>
> So say I the Wild-Staff-Shaker
> the caller of the shots,
> of this little part, right close by.
> I don't sleep on the high road, I sleep here in the little path
> So say I, I am the Cats that eat the greens
> I am the Chickens flapping their wings within the homestead
> where I chose my love.

These transgressions generally survive only until the end of the story, where the accepted moral order is clearly reinstated. Nonetheless, in upsetting the social order and dissolving dominant ways of seeing, if only temporarily, these stories have a manifestly subversive potential.

Today these patterns of story-telling are of course no longer intact. The courtyards that hosted male story-telling and the households protecting female story-telling have disappeared – urbanisation, wars, displacement, refugee camps, migrations and emancipation have changed the rituals and the spaces. But does that mean that female and male voices now share the same spaces on an equal footing?

Spaces for voices during times of conflict

In her poem *The Vultures Grow Impatient*, Amina Saïd from Tunisia explains how women manage to fuse the notion of a higher life with that of being thoroughly vulnerable in the world:

in order that our real
place be a place created
we must isolate the vision
of a higher life
that time recede from us
from age to age
that infinity lose sight of us
that the heart better to understand
become the prey of the world[5]

In *The Heinemann Book of African Women's Poetry* (Chipasula 1995) there are quite a few poems dealing with birth and they have wonderful titles such as: *I'm My Own Mother Now* and *Sister, You Cannot Think a Baby Out.* There is the poem by Queen Hatshepsut, one of the five female Pharaohs in Egyptian history, and another one written in Swahili for her daughter by Mwana Kupona binti Msham in the early 1800s. But the women's voices in motion also deal with the plight of Africa:

We Have Even Lost our Tongues!

Look,
O heartless ones,
look at our dying people
today.

The freed wife,
the old woman,
our mothers,
no longer find
grains, seeds, tuber
to cook,
to sell.

Uniforms still fill the streets
faces harsh,
eyes restless,
they are armed soldiers,
on the beat,
hungry for anything.

Look,
O heartless rulers,

look at our wretched people
today.

We went to the polls,
we won no respect,
we were losing, losing,
losing everything,
but our mouths.
We could curse them,
we could curse the land,
we could curse the day
they found oil in her.

As we grew
more desperate
with hunger and thirst,
embroideries,
fancies,
on their shiny brocades,
shimmering silk gowns
grew more elaborate
and bold,
so too
tales of more oil
they sold.

Like mighty dreaded masquerades
they claimed the streets,
indeed
every decent space
to themselves,
while our people
became glum,
tight-lipped
distant spectators
waiting, waiting and waiting.

The soldiers have come,
still we have nothing,
nothing, nothing.

Ifi Amadiume (Nigeria)[6]

One can safely say that, unlike male voices dealing substantially with so-called public themes, African women poets today treat both public and private themes with equal ease. This is a remarkable achievement because it is not necessarily the case in the rest of the world. What could be the reason that African women, despite being the world's most oppressed and deprived, have achieved a reasonable degree of movement from marginalised story-telling to a place in the centre where they treat a wider variety of themes than do their male counterparts?

I want to venture a suggestion. If you study the nature of political conflict, you will see a kind of fluidity in the social order, arising from the need to steer resources towards a threat – either perceived or real. This fluidity often involves changes in gender roles. While the men are fighting, the women have to stand in for them, in both the private and the public sphere.

Secondly, the widespread raiding of homes, the disruption of families... These blur the boundaries between household and communal space and at certain moments practically erase them, which in a devastating way makes it easier for women to cross barriers.

Recent studies, for instance by Simona Sharoni (1999), have found that, contrary to conventional wisdom which tends to assume that political conflict invariably has a negative effect on the lives of women, conflict may have positive effects as well. In fact, in some situations conflict is a potential springboard for women's emancipation.

Academics use the term 'accidental activism'. They say it comes of immediate experience of social injustice, rather than as a consequence of pre-existing ideological belief. As a result, women who previously did not see themselves as in any way political, became advocates and agents OF social change (Sharoni 2001).

In the past, national liberation movements have been portrayed as the least friendly places for women. Gender equality and national liberation are seen as irreconcilable. Thus, national liberation movements are viewed as exploiting women during the struggle but, afterwards, embracing conventional concepts of femininity, masculinity and gender relations. This assumption is called into question by more recent studies. They suggest more and more that involvement in popular resistance leads women to an increased awareness of the political character of gender inequality. Liberation movements are often sites of struggle in and of themselves, where men and women fight over whose visions and ideas will constitute the future nation. This was especially the case in Southern Africa.

The rich and complex story of women's involvement in the struggle against Apartheid underscores the need to redefine what is political. The new definition would transcend the public/private divide and its gender underpinnings. The so-called public and private spheres and the division of power and labour

according to gender – these become destabilised, permeable, or altogether irrelevant in times of political crisis and escalating conflict.

In saying this, however, it is equally important to remember that Africa also has another kind of conflict. Conflict that has nothing to offer but famine and death; conflict among the political elite – where money and greed have overtaken justice and inclusive caring. Conflicts that not only retrench boundaries, but kill and kill the voices of the continent.

From ***Stepping Aside***

...
Often by being my body
I have lived
And I am living

Often from a point without place
I glimpse this body
pounded on by days
assailed by time

Often from a point without place
I stifle my story
From past to future
I conjugate the horizon

Often from a point without place
This body I distance it
And from this very stepping aside
alternately
I live.

Andrée Chedid (Egypt)[7]

The time has come, perhaps, to say to the male story-tellers, the male praise-singers, the male poets, the male novelists, the male historians, the male politicians: you have miserably failed this continent. You allowed the divide to continue between exploited labour and profitable labour: those who toil for nothing and those who get rich on oil and diamonds and words; you allowed the divide between public and private – where women, against all odds, get family lives and intimacies going, building the private capacities of all their children, while the male formulators of the public spaces have failed to establish a public narrative of humanity. After the oppressors left, the structures of oppression were intact except for the colour: the oppressor was no longer white, but black. There remains a link between the men of the continent and the

money men of the colonies. No narrative has shattered them. The time has come for women's voices to set up plans for changing the sound of the continent.

> Let me end with words by Amina Saïd of Tunisia:
> and we were born
> without the slightest choice of worlds
>
> the wind gathers
> our solitudes [8]

The time has come for women's voices to invade the merciless male narrative of Africa.

Notes

1. From *To Be a Woman*. In Chipasula (1995: 134)
2. The use of ... here (and in the body of other poems in this chapter) indicates the omission of a stanza, or of several lines.
3. From *It Took One Hundred Years* (translated from the French by Eric Sellin). In Chipasula (1995: 8)
4. In Chipasula (1995: 128-9)
5. From *The Vultures Grow Impatient* (translated from the French by Eric Sellin). In Chipasula (1995: 36,37)
6. In Chipasula (1995: 83–36)
7. In Chipasula (1995: 18)
8. From *And We were Born* (translated from the French by Eric Sellin). In Chipasula (1995: 33)

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