The Woman Artist in Africa Today: A Critical Commentary

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A Definitive Introductory Anecdote

Once upon a time, when I was about ten years old, a paternal uncle came to our home one early evening. My father and a teacher colleague of his who was visiting us, had gone out. My mother and a paternal aunt, a great friend of hers were in the house. A group of us, children, was outside, playing. After greeting the children and the women, my uncle proceeded to ask: *Hĩ! Kaĩ andü matarĩ kuo güükü ümüüthĩ?* Literal translation: 'I say! Are people not here today?'

A telling pause followed the question and then, in a matter of fact fashion, mother answered, *Moimĩte kü? To ng'oombe na mbüri ici üroona!* Translation: 'Where would they (people) come from? There are only the goats and cows that you see'.

Not permitted to laugh at grown-ups, we the children, simply took to our heels and ran to the back of the house where we rolled on the grass and giggled ourselves silly. We missed the rest of the drama.

This story introduces the underlying concern behind the paper's focus on the woman artist in Africa. The paper is both a statement as well as a re-statement of a problem that women continue to pose even as we speak now: why is it that criticism has paid such scanty attention to our women's artistic productivity? Why the imposed invisibility, in the face of so much harvest all around us?

Intention and Scope

Given the forbidding size of the African continent, the particularity of detail will have to suffer under broad generalizations, even though these should apply without falsifying the former. Similarly, under the constraints of time and space, the myriads of rainbows of artistic expressions produced by African women will have to wait while we narrow ourselves to the concerns of orature and literature.

The paper opens with a recapitulation, or if you like, a reiteration, of the question already posed and comes in the form of articulations by a selected group of women artists and critics. The articulations are followed by a review of critics who have addressed African women's creativity, mostly

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concerned with the written tradition. The presentation then proceeds to examine women artists creating in the orature tradition. Following this, the paper looks at statements by African women writers, revealing how they view their art and its role in society. Finally, the conclusion attempts to link some of the issues raised by the paper to reflections on the tasks and challenges that face CODESRIA, twenty years since inception.

Gender Discrimination and Women's Artistic Creativity

A number of critical commentaries on African women's writing have identified gender discrimination as the primary problem affecting women's creativity and the nature of discourse surrounding it.

Jessie Sagawa (1984:164) of Malawi argued as follows:

> *The discussion of African Literature usually centres on the male writer and character. If the critic is concerned with women, it is mostly her significance to the style of the author that interests him. Rarely has the role of the woman in fiction been of serious interest to the critic of African Literature. And the female writer finds herself in similar circumstances. While most of the male African writers have received wide coverage, the female writer has, until recently, tended to be neglected.*

Sagawa goes on to argue that the woman critic has not, on the whole, done much more than her male counterpart to redress the imbalance, pointing to sexist indoctrination as the problem behind the marginalization of and bias against women's writing and female depiction in African literature as a whole. She provides overwhelming evidence to support the case she is making and one so often made by other women before, as well as after her.

In similar vein, discussing problems faced by women artists, a paper entitled 'Women Writers' (Mugo 1984:162-205) explores the question of female writing and publishing, posing a related question: 'Why is it that the written tradition appears to have pushed the African woman to the backwaters of literary achievement?' To answer the question, the discussion takes us back to the history of writing in the West where patriarchal tendencies had led to the appropriation of the art by males to the extent that certain women writers were forced to assume masculine names in order to be published at all. The paper then traces African women's creativity through colonization and colonial education to the current oppressive neo-colonial realities. All these environments are shown as not only promoting patriarchal subjugation of the African woman, but as actively militating against her potential artistic productivity, while she struggles to remain at the centre of the creative process.

Penina Mlama (1990:86) comments on the discriminatory treatment of women artists in Tanzania, further re-enforcing the arguments under labour

and thus demonstrating the universality of the experiences encountered by members of her gender. She observes:

> *I think there are very good women artists. If you look at the traditional performances the women are some of the best performers. But when it comes to writing it is the men who are given prominence. If you look at the village, who are the best storytellers? It is the women. Who are the dancers? It is the women. So I think that, on the one hand, there is a deliberate attempt not to give prominence to women writers. I don't think this trend is confined to Africa alone, because I think this happened in Europe in the past. In many cases men do not like challenge from women.*

Ama Ata Aidoo (1985) pushes the debate further. In characteristic articulateness, she denounces a whole line of male critics, both African and Western, for negligence, discrimination and callous condescension towards African women writers, punctuating her extended argument with classic illustrations, including what she terms, 'a personal detail'. The 'personal detail' reveals how Robert Fraser once went as far as accusing her of borrowing the title *No Sweetness Here* from Ayi Kwei Armah's *Two Thousand Seasons*, published in 1973, whereas her short story 'No Sweetness Here' had come out as early as 1962 and her collection of stories bearing that title, in 1970. Having, further, detailed the 'abuse' of other African women writers by a world of literary criticism, dominated by men, Aidoo (1985:117) observes:

> *In fact, the whole question of what attention has been paid or not paid to African women is so tragic, sometimes one wonders what desperation keeps us writing. Because for sure, no one cares. To have blundered our way into one more exclusively male sphere of activity can be forgiven. After all, clumsiness is a human failing. We all make mistakes. What is almost pathetic is to have persisted in staying there in the face of such resistance and sometimes resentment. Some of us believe that for writers and other creative persons any critical attention is better than none at all.*

Beyond the question of negligence, there are other problems. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, for instance, finds men, as critics of women's writing, 'usually patronizing and legislative', further arguing that: 'many feel the concerns of women are not serious enough since they are about the area of emotions and the private life'. She wonders 'how we got the idea in colonized societies that only political themes are respectable?' And argues that, in fact, 'Great literature has always been about emotions and the actions which spring from them', citing from Soviet literature to illustrate the case she is making (Ogundipe-Leslie 1990:72).

Under interrogation here is the authenticity of gender biased criticism that assesses women's writing using patriarchal values, standards and paradigms. Indeed, Adeola James' book, *In Their Own Voices*, where Ogundipe-Leslie makes these observations, is full of statements by most African women writers interviewed, echoing the sentiments expressed above. The writers include: Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Rebeka Njau, Asenath Odaga, Penina Mlama and others. Historically then, African women writers have not only been sidelined by the application of patriarchal measurements of what is success and what is failure, but through downright sabotage, viewed by women as a ploy to insure male domination. Adeola James (1990:2) summarizes the debate in her introduction to the work mentioned above. These are her words:

> *To say that the creative contribution of African women writers has not always been recognized is to put the case mildly. In fact, the woman's voice is generally subsumed under the massive humming and bustling of her male counterpart, who has been brought up to take the women for granted.*

In *The Collector of Treasures*, Bessie Head (1990:5) blames this male superiority syndrome on erring ancestors. These are her words:

> *The ancestors made so many errors and one of the bitter things was that they relegated to men a superior position in the tribe, while women were regarded in a congenital sense as being an inferior form of human life. To this day, women still suffer from all the calamities that befall an inferior form of human life.*

One can only agree that Bessie Head manages to point one of her fingers in one of the directions where at the root cause of our problems is situated — patriarchal false consciousness. In this respect we do well to remind ourselves that even as we respond to Amilcar Cabral's call and 'return to the source', our journey must be one of search: a critical retracing of ancestral footsteps, avoiding those that would lead to pitfalls instead of to a celebration of self-knowledge. In other words, the perpetuation of patriarchal values that undermine women's creativity must be addressed with uncompromising frankness. Unless this is done we will be condoning oppressive cultural practices designed for the purposes of creating islands of power in the midst of oceans of powerlessness. One is arguing that societies should nurture creative beings and not slaves of fettering traditions. With this understanding in mind, critics at whose hands women artists suffer should be perceived as undesirable intellectual power brokers whose empires and monopoly enclaves must be challenged. The structures that negate women's creativity are indeed a version of those found at the macro societal level. Ama Ata

Aidoo (1990:12) makes a graphic representation of this reality when she observes:

> *Women writers are just receiving the writer's version of the general neglect and disregard that women in the larger society receive ... You know that the assessment of a writer's work is in the hands of critics and it is the critics who put people on the pedestals or sweep them under the carpet, or put them in a cupboard, lock the door and throw the key away. I feel that, wittingly or unwitting, people may be doing this to African women writers.*

Of course the whole of the foregoing debate would be incomplete unless contextualized within the societal, cultural, political and economic formations against which the contradictions highlighted take place. For, it is these that shape the consciousness, or false consciousness that are in a clash as we observe the interplay between the various subjects engaged in the conflict. Indeed, it needs to be argued that the seeming line between males and females, lumped in two generalized opposing camps, cannot stand the rigours of a pointed analysis. Socialization, indoctrination and internalization of the kind of sexist, patriarchal values that deny the female artist her proper place/role and status in society, often cut across this assumed line. The systems and institutions that breed the unjust conditions, as well as the 'myths' and 'lies' that reinforce the false constructions under challenge apply to both men and women, even though to men more so than to their sisters. In this respect, of course African women writers are not the only victims. We hear other women, particularly those from the southern hemisphere and discriminated against groups, complain about similar marginalization and belittlement. Demonstrative cases in point are highlighted in such works as: *Caribbean Women Writers* (Cudjoe 1990). *The Sexual Mountain and Black Women Writers* (Hernton 1987) *Black Feminist Criticism: Perspective on Black Women Writers* (Christian 1985), *Black Women Writers* (Evans 1984) and others.

Cult of the Giants and Celebrities

Another patriarchal construction that has adversely affected women's writing is what might be described as the 'cult of the giants and the celebrities'. This is to say that there is a tendency in literary criticism to exclusively focus on the works of already well established authors (read male writers). Why this 'cult of the giants and celebrities'? Can these literary heavyweights be so fascinating that we can see nothing in other writers? Could it be a need, on the part of the critics, to remain on safe grounds, beaten as these might be? Is it fear of the unknown, the unfamiliar and the unsung? Is it the kind of laziness that shies away from innovativeness? Is it loyalties to personal friendship, ethnic connections, nationalist bonds, ideological camaraderie? Is it careerist calculations that dictate patronage to celebrities so that they can

bring us closer to the limelight in which they bask? Or could it be that we are afraid of touching women writers because of the sensitive gender issues raised by their works? These questions need to be wrestled with, for better or for worse. A celebration of giants is okay, but fascination with them to the point of fixation is wrong. Mesmerization can only lead to a freezing of possible extended action.

One is saying that African literary critics need to immunize themselves from the personality worship syndrome, which is one of the problems in Africa's larger democratization project. In the same way, if the works of women writers are to compete in the book market, as they should, the publishers and their distributors have to rise above the 'big buck' syndrome. More than this, the academicians need to convince us that they are more than professional merchants who are only interested in promoting big names for what they can get out of them professionally. This may well be too much to ask in these days of IMF and World Bank maladjusting economics.

Worse off under this unfortunate contest of the big and the small; the powerful and the powerless, is the plight of women artists working within the orature tradition. Whereas women writers are correct in demanding the critics' attention and calling 'foul' at the way the sexist game is played in criticism, looking at the orature tradition, the class factor becomes just as problematic as the power equation. Women working in the latter tradition have all together been ignored as individual artists, being lumped under broad generalizations encompassing orature composers. Of individual talent and creativity, nothing has been really said. Generally, then, the written word boasts weightier currency than the spoken and under this equation, the woman writer becomes a 'giant' while her sister remains a nonentity.

A Broad Categorization of Critics

At this junction, it is imperative that we focus on the character of critics briefly, because their response to literature can influence creativity either positively, or negatively. More than this, they often shape the direction that the latter assumes. Critics also play a major part in molding the consciousness of the audience to whom creative writing is aimed. Taking into account the debate generated in the previous sections, the first question that we need to ask here is: are *all* critics of African women writers as negligent, biased, arrogant, condescending and sexist as they have been made out to be? Secondly, what about female critics of women writers: are they free of these blindspots? The answer to these questions is obvious. Male or female, critics are not a homogeneous fellowship of identicals. They come in all types, shapes, shades, voices and class positions. At the risk of generalizing, it might be useful to place them in three broad categories: the conservative, the liberal and the progressive. These categories are neither static nor sealed from interference by all forms of social dynamics and dialectics. The point

under labour, however, is that in discussing the role of critics and their influence on women's writing, we need to move beyond lumping them together if we are to pinpoint the source of the problem before us. In other words, conservative critics are likely to do more damage to women's creativity than liberal critics, for instance. On the other hand, if women writers were to call a round table conference to discuss the dismemberment of their creative products and imaginative wholesomeness, they would be making the most progress sitting down with the third category of critics. These distinctions are important in differentiating between creative and destructive criticism.

A Review of Selected Criticism

We now move back to a question raised earlier, namely: has criticism on African women writers been as drastic as articulated? Whereas in the last ten years there have been efforts, some of them more than determined, to address the existing dry land of commentaries, sporting thorn bushes and shrivelled shrubs, the situation still leaves a lot to be desired. A condensed survey of the literary scene will have to suffice. What follows is really an abridged review and update of the discourse initiated by Ama Ata Aidoo's paper, 'To Be a Woman Writer — An Overview and a Detail', in 1985.

Up until the eighties, criticism on African women artists appeared in way of book reviews, conference papers, journal articles and book chapters. Perhaps the most consistent of the journals in soliciting submissions on women's work has been *African Literature Today* (Jones *et al* 1987), originally edited by Professor Eldred Jones of Fourah Bay College and now co-produced by him with Professor Eustace Palmer and Majorie Jones as Associate Editors. *OKIKE*, edited by Chinua Achebe, has had a similar policy and has featured women both as critics and as writers. Hans Zell's *A New Readers Guide to African Literature* and *Presence Africaine* (Paris) have also included coverage on women. As intimated, there are a number of undergraduate and graduate theses out there, inside and outside Africa, a few of which I have personally supervised, devoted to women writers and writing. Indeed, individual critics, both male and female, have been persistent in their insistence that African women's creativity be brought to the fore for serious, extensive discussion.

It was not until the nineteen eighties, however, that full scale published studies on women's writing started to emerge. In 1984, Oladele Taiwo published the first volume of work devoted to African women writers, under the title, *Female Novelists of Modern Africa* (1984). In 1985 the Zimbabwe International Book Fair focused on Women and Books and devoted the workshop to discourse on women, creativity, publication and related issues. The proceedings, including presentations by outstanding African artists such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Nawal El Saadawi, Flora Nwapa, Barbara Makhalisa

Nkala, and others, were an overwhelming experience. Unfortunately, up to now, it would appear that the proceedings do not yet exist in printed form. 1987 saw the publication of a whole issue of *African Literature To-Day* (1987) devoted to African women writers. Molara Ogundipe-Leslie's essay on 'The Female Writer and Her Commitment', an excellent piece of criticism in that issue, has been widely debated since then. In the meantime, Adeola James was busy compiling her research, embracing fifteen African women writers, featured discussing literature, criticism and their own creativity. The work came out in 1990 under the title *In Their Own Voices.* Currently, a full scale study of Ama Ata Aidoo's works, compiled by Vincent Odamtten, is ready for publication. There is, of course, a lot more going on, especially in those parts of Africa which the Berlin Conference's partition removes from one's historically censured eye. Still, other than the forthcoming publication on Ama Ata Aidoo, we are generally speaking of 'small scale', not 'intensive', or 'large scale' criticism.

Hence, dissatisfaction still remains with what is obviously such a tiny drop in the sea of creative productivity on the continent. Perhaps the greater challenge is on women intellectuals themselves to get on with the task of generating criticism, in the interest of self-representation. For, other than Adeola James' *In Their Own Voices* and Rudo Gaidzanwa's (1985) *Images of Women in Zimbabwean Literature*, the thinness of women's own publication record of full blown volumes of criticism is on the carpet.

This challenge is real and obviously urgent, considering the fact that women writers are obviously not amused by some of the voices of their male critics. This, for instance, is what Ama Ata Aidoo (1984) has to say about Oladela Taiwo's work:

> *In 1984, Oladela Taiwo published 'Female Novelists of Modern Africa', a book whose publishers blurbed it* (sic.) *'as an important study' and for which the author himself claimed in the preface that it is a 'celebration' of the literary activities of female novelists in modern Africa. For any writing woman, reading that 'important study' should be a fairly sobering experience ... he virtually treats those African women writers whose novels he discusses (and short stories when the spirit moves him) as though they were his co-wives to whom he dishes out his whimsical favours. He constantly remarks on their intelligence or story-telling capabilities in the best 'dancing dog' tradition, or as if they were a bunch of precocious six-year olds who had demonstrated some special abilities to the headteacher.*

The angered writer leaves Taiwo there, to rest in pieces!

Women Artists in the Orature Tradition

First of all, why orature and not oral literature?

During the last three decades, some areas of the African Academy have demonstrated a very productive response to Amilcar Cabral's call for African societies to 'return to the source' as part of the agenda for cultural emancipation, which this intellectual, freedom fighter, rightly perceived as a necessary revolutionary act in the struggle for eco-political independence. Scholarship in African orature has been one such area, the term orature itself being an innovative coinage on the part of the East African School, best articulated by Austin Bukenya and the late Pio Zirimu (1977). The coinage liberated the heritage from the begging posture that the term 'oral literature' tends to subject it to as scholars debate whether or not the African creative tradition can be taken as seriously as literature. Orature has achieved much needed independence as a result of this coinage, standing as a defined heritage on its own terms.

So, How do we Define Orature?

African orature is an art form that uses language to create artistic verbal compositions. The verbal art culminates in dramatized utterance, oration, recitation and performance. It has its distinct set of ethics, aesthetics, values and a philosophy that distinguish it as a unique heritage which has existed in the African world since time immemorial and which is still consumed by the majority of Africa's population up to this day. In this respect, it should be understood that African orature continues to be created and consumed, even as we speak now. It also continues to influence creativity in written drama, poetry, fiction, music, song and other forms of artistic expression. As Africa's indigenous popular art form, it is dynamic and is still evolving, continuing to define itself alongside current trends in econo-political development and underdevelopment.

There is, for instance, a difference between the way orature is generated in a rural set up as opposed to an urban setup. There is also a difference in the way the various social classes preserve, consume and generate the art, with the affluent hardly having any use for it except for 'decorative' and expedient purposes, while the masses use it on an active basis. Further, it is possible to distinguish between progressive orature and reactionary orature. Orature that celebrates patriarchal values of domination, all forms of injustice and the silencing of the powerless in any society, is negative. On the other hand, orature that affirms life, growth, self realization, human rights, self-determination and so on, is progressive.

Women Orature Artists

African women have always dominated the African orature tradition as cultural workers, storytellers, singers, dancers, riddleposers, dramatists and

so on. As creators, educators, guidance counsellor and often, as the family historians (which is a common arrangement in horizontal social formations), women artists become, so to speak, the collective memory and stream of consciousness that links a specific social unit from one generation to the other. This role, the woman artist doubles with those of mother, aunt, grandmother and at times, big sister. The woman artist sits at the heart of a community's well being and fans the fire at the hearth of its imaginative furnaces, especially those of its youth. But, let us not fall into the trap of either idealizing or generalizing, for, as intimated, like all other artists and culturalists, women creators in orature have never constituted a uniform group.

It is nonetheless, safe to generalize and say that of their own free will and given a choice, most women artists will belong to the positive orature tradition. Political coercion and enforcement under neo-colonial military and so-called civilian governments have, however, exploited the negative aspects of orature to notorious levels, abusing the powerlessness and vulnerability of women as performing artists in the worst possible manner. Witness the arrival of African dictators at airports, often following trips during which they have either squandered national resources through extravagant shopping sprees abroad, or brought back foreign aid packages with all kinds of strings attached (once, ironically, mistakenly referred to as 'AIDS' by a peasant woman). On such occasions, women are rounded up, often in their thousands, to dance and ululate for the returning 'heroes'.

Wearing prints overwhelmed by humongous images of these ugly neo-colonial rulers, the poor women carry — on their backs, on their stomachs, across their chests and upon their heads — the weight of these symbols of Africa's betrayal and oppression. Roasting in the sun, dancing themselves lame, they sing praise poetry and ululate these dictators as they swell with flattery, the lies caressing their ears. This coerced 'waheshimiwa' orature is part of what may be termed neo-colonial 'ululation culture' and not people's authentic orature.

A few years ago, a crowd of such 'ululation culture' artists actually referred to a senile octogenarian dictator as 'a man in his prime, full of youth, vitality and virility!' The subject of praise waved back his fly whisk in self-appreciation. Now, whereas one may not be in possession of personal details that could possibly testify to this octogenarian's 'virility', it is clear that, physically, he cannot possibly be so agile. Some days following this praise song, it became evident that the subject of the song was far too old to even climb down an insignificant flight of stairs. When he tried to do so, the results were disastrous. He went plunging down, causing commotion in a capacity filled conference centre.

Another notorious dictator, under whom children and youth have been so impoverished that their plights will leave a telling scar on the future of the

land to which they belong due to the extent of their dispossession, thrives as a national father figure. Even after fifteen years of economic mismanagement, repressive rule and sheer police terrorism, coerced teams of 'ululation culture' artists continue to poetize him in song, dance and orations as 'mtukutu raise', (almighty president) and worse still as 'baba wa taifa', father of the nation and particularly, father of the children. Imagine these economically exploited and socially deprived mothers referring to this man, as the father of their children! The creative imagination of Africa's orature tradition is under serious abuse and the result is what East Africans calls a *kasuku* culture (parrot culture) in Kiswahili. The abduction of orature through state patronage is a very serious cultural coup in the hands of today's African ruling classes.

Luckily, alongside this 'waheshimiwa' orature, the resistance tradition of *mapinduzi* orature is being created in the mines, the factories, the *matatus*, on the farms, in homes and other arenas of productive democratic praxis. In this connection, it needs to be noted that it is during peoples' historical struggles that human beings have created positive orature in volumes. In this undertaking a lot of African women combatants and sheroes have been active creators. Slave narratives, dramas, protest poetry and songs were composed as much by men as by women across the middle passage and in the lands of enslavement. These creations conscientized, uplifted and spurred victims of unspoken atrocities and dehumanization to not only defy oppression but to overthrow it. *Mapinduzi*, orature inspired liberation struggles in Algeria, Kenya, Angola, Mozambique, Zimbabwe, Guinea Bissau, Namibia and others places, producing a body of creative compositions that continues to influence the direction of art in these countries up to this day. *Mapinduzi* orature artists have nurtured the collective memories of their communities. They have exposed and decried the abuse of human rights and have been active participants, mobilizing for democratic change. They have played the role of articulators of the people's collective vision, even as the collective group searches for more humane alternatives of defining who they are. They have created orature that affirms not only the resiliency of the human being, but one that asserts people's humanity and capacity to defy oppression, while rising and lifting heads high, in order to show the true face of humanity.

It is no wonder that dictatorships have panicked whenever *Mapinduzi* orature has mushroomed amidst oppressed groups in our societies. The panic has worsened when the creators and participants have happened to be women. The example of Kamiriithu, near Limuru in Kenya, demonstrates this:

> *In 1982, when the Kenya government banned the drama activities of the Kamiriithu Community Centre, near Limuru and later, sadistically proceeded to raze the structure of the open air theatre that the workers*

> *and peasants had built to the ground, 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 production, deriding 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 and old mothers do* (Aidoo and Mugo 1984:87-8)..

Clearly, *Mapinduzi* orature women artists are a threat to neo-colonial dictatorships where *kasuku* and 'ululation culture' producers are used not only to ensure the validation of the dictators, but to promote escapism, tourist entertainment and false conscientization. As Laura A Finke argues, '... we must understand utterance as an ideological construct produced through conflict and struggle within a specific historical and social context' (Finke 1992:3). Utterance by women orature artists, who are a part of the oppressed world, becomes an 'ideological construct' that interrogates the agents of enslaving systems and structures which negate their existence and this is threatening to the status quo.

Paulo Freire argues that utterance of the 'authentic word' is a liberating act. This is so because true utterance leads to reflection and possible action. Meaningful action impacts on structures of oppression and threatens to change them. Thus for as long as *Mapinduzi* orature women artists continue to struggle to transform the stifling reality around them, they remain a threat to the systems that create the injustice they fight. Consequently, they become agents of development. One does not need to be a soothsayer to predict that this kind of people-based, people-generated orature will far outlive neo-colonial 'ululation culture', composed in praise of *waheshimiwas*, their fly whisks, *fimbos* and guns.

Women Writers Speaking for Themselves

Self-articulation and self-definition are very important processes on the journey of attempted self-determination, which then enables an individual to become a full participant in collective social human development. For this reason, it is crucial to listen to women writers sharing and analyzing their experiences in creativity. As we have seen in previous sections of this paper, most writers are not in the least bit satisfied with what the world of criticism has done with their creativity. In this concluding section, pronouncements by some of the writers will be commented and elaborated upon, in an attempt to show their relevance to African and human development. The main sources of the ideas summarized here are Adeola James' (1990) *In Their Own*

Voices, Jane Wilkinson's (1990) *Talking with African Writers, African Literature To-Day*, No. 15 (1987) and the 'Writers' Workshop', 1985 Zimbabwe International Book Fair.[1]

So, what do African women writers have to say about their writing? What they write about? Why they write? And how they write.

In August 1985, the Zimbabwe International Book Fair had as its theme of focus, 'Women and Books'. Among the women writers who were gathered at the Book Fair were: Ama Ata Aidoo, Nawal El Saadawi, Flora Nwapa, Barbara Nkala, Bertha Musora, Freedom Nyamumbaya, Christine Rungano, Asenath Odaga, this writer and others. Bessie Head could not be brought, at the last moment. In the keynote address, 'Women and Books', since then published in a number of sources, this writer had highlighted the concern that 'book apartheid' had tended to exclude women from among the masses as creators. Later on in the workshop, a hushed audience listened to a sad story from a Zimbabwean primary school teacher who had laboured on a manuscript for years and then had suffered the pain of seeing her husband shred it to bits before throwing it into the fire. Re-living a part of the hurt, she had remarked something to the effect: 'he had torn up so many years of my life and set them on fire'! At the same forum, Nawal El Saadawi and Flora Nwapa had described writing as a part of themselves, arguing that those who shared their lives would have to accept 'the writer' in them as a vital part of 'the person' to whom they were united. Buchi Emecheta once referred to her books as her children and she too has a sad tale about another shredded manuscript. Tsitsi Dangarebga has stated, 'I write to save myself ... I really believe that's the only valid reason for writing' (Wilkinson 1990:193). What sobering pronouncements!

These writers are speaking about what is obviously a very shared need by women in the profession. Writing and creativity are lifelines, as far as African woman writers are concerned. They are means of achieving what Okelo Oculi once described as 'explosion of silences', a neat poetic conception which I have since then expanded on to read, 'explosion of negative silences', seeing that silence can be positive or negative. Negative silence is imposed: positive silence is self-willed.[2] Women are indeed sinking under the weight of mountains of negative silences that need to be exploded. Some of the stories that the woman writer has to explode silence over defy narration. The torture that Bessie Head narrates in *A Question of Power* (date) is

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1 The writer of this paper presented the keynote address at the workshop which focused on 'Women and Books', as well as attended most of the sessions. Her oral evidence here will have to suffice, given the absence of written information.

2 See preface to Mugo, Micere Githae, *My Mother's Poem and Other Songs*, forthcoming, East African Book Publishers.

not just a work of imagination: the harrowing nightmares there are real. Ellen Kuzwayo, similarly, tells of the years of pain and suffering that she had carried as heavy baggage until she sat down to write *Call Me Woman*:

> *I want to tell you that previously I lived with my emotional pain: the tensions of my first marriage that broke up, the tensions of the son that was taken away from me, the tensions of when my aunt sent me away from home, all these I lived with and sometimes I didn't want to talk about them. I was shutting them up inside me because I felt people might laugh at me. Then suddenly I wrote, and when I was writing the tension floated onto the pen and it has released me. Today I discuss every aspect of my life with no question and no shame.*

In a lot of societies, African women are socialized to believe that suffering in silence is a virtue. Among the Giküyü of Kenya, a married woman is, in fact, known as *mütumia*, literally meaning, the one who keeps her mouth shut. At marriage ceremonies, almost every woman is reminded that one of the ways of ensuring a lasting marriage is to shut up, to be a *mütumia*. It is a real wonder that mental asylums are not bursting with occupation by women! The tragic storyline of silences that need to be exploded stretches between here and the beginnings of history, under all kinds of terrorizing experiences: patriarchal oppression, slavery, colonization, imperialism, war, etc. Women writers are attempting to break some of these silences. But, as Molara Ogundipe-Leslie has argued in her essay 'The Female Writer and Her Commitment' (Jones *et al* 1987:13), these explosions will have to occur outside the present conventional structures and means of naming women's oppression. Women will have to 'invent themselves' as Maya Angelu has argued time and again. Only such self-inventions will release stories and tragedies such as rape, abuse, enforced self-bashing and others that women have been coerced to bury in their sub-conscious. Women will have to 'remember' and 'articulate'. Luckily, such stories have had beginnings in works such as El Saadawi's (1975) *Woman At Point Zero*' Kuzwayo's (1980) *Call Me Woman*, Ken Bugul's (1991) *The Abandoned Baobab* (its, ideologically, problematic areas notwithstanding) and others. The shame of humiliation will need to give way to the 'utterance of the liberating word' (Finke and Freire). In this respect, it is relevant to point out that biographical and autobiographical writing will provide key sources in helping us understand the strength, spirit and imagination that keep women going in the face of a rejecting world. In this respect too, it is absolutely essential that African women network with other women of African origin in sharing the proposed forms of action that African women have to turn to in order to ensure a lasting explosion of silences. This is one of the forms of commitment that Ogundipe-Leslie discusses in 'The Female Writer and Her Commitment'. 'The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action' which the late

Audre Lorde (1980:18-23) so articulately discussed in an article under that title, is of utmost importance here.

Another statement that emerges from most of the fifteen women writers interviewed by Adeola James is that creative writing is empowering. In fact this is perhaps the answer to the rhetorical question raised by Ama Ata Aidoo, in a quotation made earlier, where she wonders what kind of insistence it is that has kept women writing under the trying circumstances that she outlines. Concern with the need for empowerment partly explains why a lot of women writers not only insist on writing, in spite of the great odds that face them; but more than this, the reason why they have created such strong women characters in their writing, an issue that clearly emerges in Adeola James' interviews. Ama Ata Aidoo (James 1990:12) says, at one point:

> *... If I write about strong women, it means that I see them around. People have always assumed that to be feminine is to be silly and to be sweet. But I disagree. I hope that in being a woman writer, I have been faithful to the image of women as I see them around, strong women, women who are viable in their own right.*

This compelling need on the part of the woman writer to empower not just herself but other women symbolized by the female fictional characters in her writing, comes out clearly in Ellen Kuzwayo's (1980:53) *Call Me Woman* which is more than a personal autobiography: It is the life story of a whole line of South African sheroes. She says:

> *I was challenged by the lives of so many, many women, who have made such tremendous contribution to the development and growth of our country, in particular to the development of the Black woman (sic) ... In fact, when the publishing process of the book was coming to an end, I noticed that the publishers had edited so many women out. I had to tell them to push me out of my book and put the women in because those were the people who inspired me to write.*

Empowerment must be a key issue here, or we would not be dealing with the kind of violent reactions to women's creativity earlier discussed: the shredding of manuscripts, the imposition of 'book apartheid' on women from the masses and the ridiculing of underprivileged women when they participate in artistic creations/productions. Indeed, *In Their Own Voices* reports women asserting that being women writers has enhanced their statuses both within the family and in society at large. A number of the writers interviewed, for instance, say that their children express special pride in them as writers, over and above everything else that their motherhoods symbolize.

Indeed, on the question of empowerment, Buchi Emecheta makes it categorically clear that to her, writing is power. Describing her young days in the village, she says:

> ... *Some women will* (sic) *sit for hours just peeling egusi (melon seed) or tying the edge of cloth or plaiting hair. Some will be telling stories, and not to young children. I saw it and I used to sit with them. I liked the power these women commanded as storytellers. Since then, I thought I would like to be a storyteller myself* (sic) (James 1990:47)

This leads us to the third point consistently made by women writers: the fact that they have been influenced by the mothers, aunts, grandmothers, or older sisters who told them orature stories. (Interestingly, none of them claims to have been influenced by male orature artists). There is, therefore, not just a connection but a bond between many women writers and the orature on which they were nurtured. There is no doubt that part of the strength in the voice of the female writer draws from the attributes of what I have earlier identified as positive orature, including the following: the conception of 'my story' as 'our story'; collective s/heroism; refrain from enigmatism; re-definitions of notions such as strength, courage and achievement; preoccupations with human rights for the powerless and so on. The concern with human rights is of special relevance when we look at the effects of war, famine, refugee existence, the fate of the African child and everything else that this paper cannot even begin looking at. In *African Orature and Human Rights* (Mugo 1991), the present writer has tried to touch on some of the ways in which connections with orature might provide us with a set of ethics and aesthetics that we have come to either disregard or belittle, centered as we are in Euro-ethics. The woman writer has an important role to play in all this. Indeed, a lot of women writers are creating their works, drawing from positive orature frameworks of reference.

Another woman writer who defines orature as a major influence upon her and her writing is Tsitsi Dangarebga. She observes:

> *Another very significant experience was in fact the 1980 independence celebrations. I heard the most beautiful poem I've ever heard being recited, and of course it was in Shona. It brought back to me that* (sic) *we have an oral language here. It isn't written, it's oral, and when it is reproduced in the medium in which it is meant to be, it is absolutely astounding* (Wilkinson 1990:195).

Brief as it is, this discussion on the bonding between orature and women writers would be incomplete without a look at the work of Penina Muhando, a playwright who has: i) created all her ten plus works in Kiswahili; ii) deliberately written in Kiswahili in order to address her local audience; iii) consciously researched in the ethics and creative forms of orature in order to

explore her themes, as well as evolve her aesthetics; and iv) spent a good part of her theatre career operating in the community theatre mode, as a means of applying her art to the reality that her works address. She is a true popular artist in the Brechtian sense of the term, as well as literally being extremely popular and admired in Tanzania. How many people have heard of this artist in the conference halls that discuss language, community theatre and popular culture? What about this as a case, in illustration, of the 'giants-celebrities' syndrome? In the following space, I will deliberately let Penina confront us with her arguments, making as few interruptions as possible, to avoid watering down the impact of what she has to say to us:

> *I have been using the Tanzanian traditional forms like songs and storytelling, dance and recitation, so as to come up with plays which will appeal to the Tanzanian cultural identity* (James 1990:77).
> *We use theatre as a means through which people can discuss and analyze their problems, put them into a theatrical performance, show it to the audience and then discuss what the solutions should be. When we first started working on the popular theatre movement, we did not design it deliberately to engage 'the women issue' as such. But as soon as we started working, the women issue always came up whichever problem we dealt with at the village level* (James 1990:83).

Above, Penina Mlama demonstrates the way the type of community theatre she is engaged in has tapped orature creativity, using performance to provide a people's platform for naming the problems facing their communities and then dramatizing them, in an effort to find solutions. She also shows how, over time, these performances have provided space for addressing sexism and the women question in society. On the issue of women as performing artists, she has this to say:

> *In the area of drama, it is even more serious because many people still feel that women should not be performers. It is seen as profession which is despised, therefore respectable women should not be performing on the stage. This is a big contradiction because in a society like Tanzania, if you go to the village, our mothers are the dancers and the storytellers. Why is it that when you come to the city and a woman stands on the stage performing she becomes cheap? There are all these contradictions which really don't make sense and they have all contributed towards making the woman writer remain unrecognized compared to the man* (James 1990:86).

Mlama's statement takes us back to the debate on women censorship as creators, artists and performers. She demonstrates that in Tanzania, community theatre is an area of contention for women artists — a regrettable fact — seeing the potential that performance offers, combining, as it does,

orature and the written tradition. We are once more reminded that women artists are continuously being stifled by patriarchal conscription and prejudice, even as they struggle to remain creative.

It is not possible to exhaust the discussion on what women see themselves as contributing to society through their art in the limited space allowed by this paper. As intimated, the subject has been quite extensively covered by the sources cited at the beginning of this section and in particular, by Ama Ata Aidoo (1985) and Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie (1990). The paper's objective was to facilitate access to more voices and to highlight some of the concerns seen as being key to the promotion or negation of women's creativity.

In conclusion, let us summarize the issues raised by this paper in a poetic statement that is both an elaboration of the role of the African woman artist in society and a celebration of her undaunted determination to remain at the Centre of history and human development:

Prosaic Poem

In commemoration of those moments
when we make prosaic statements
that end up sounding poetic and then
we are reminded that ordinary human
dialogue is often punctuated with poetry.

Refrain: One Day!

One day, we shall rescue our lives from precarious peripheral hanging on and assume the centre of historical action. We shall explore every avenue that runs through our lives and create life roads that know no dead ends, extending them to the limits of human destination. We shall put an angry full-stop to the negation of our human rights.

One day!

One day, we shall undertake a second journey along the bushy path of denied human development, chasing away the wild beasts that prowl the route of our narrow survival lest they make a complete jungle of our already beastialized lives. We shall then cultivate a huge global garden and plant it with the seed of true humanity.

One day!

One day, we shall emerge from the wings and occupy the centre stage in full visibility, refusing to be observers and understudies who wait behind the curtain of living drama. We shall liberate the word and become its utterers, no longer cheer crowds or ululators who spur on and applaud the molesters of our affirmative speech.

One day!

One day, we shall explode the negative silences and paralyzing terror imposed upon us by the tyranny of dominating cultures and their languages of conquest. We shall discover the authentic voices of our self-naming and re-naming, reclaiming our role as composers, speaking for ourselves, because we too have tongues, you know!

One day!

One day, we shall make a bonfire of currently dismantling and maladjusting economic structural adjustment programmes, then engage in the restructuring process, producing coherence around our scattered daily existence till it is full to bursting. We shall stop at nothing short of holding the sun to a standstill until the job is complete.

One day!

One day, we shall move the sun of our existence so that it truly rises from the east of our lives, reaching its noon at the centre of our needs. We shall then release it to set in the west of our perverted and dominated history, never to rise again until it learns to shine upon the masses of global being, not only Islands of pirated living.

One day!

One day, we shall exterminate the short distance between the kitchen and bedroom of our lives, storm out of the suffocating space between the factory and the overseer of our exploited creative labour, paving a path that leads to the buried mines of our suppressed human potential. We shall walk it if it stretches unto eternity.

One day!

One day, we shall celebrate this earth as our home, standing tall and short, boasting of the abundance and multifariousness of our fulfilled human visions. We shall not look to the sky waiting for unfilled prophecies. We shall upturn the very rocks of our enforced stony existence, converting them into fluvial banks of life sustenance.

One day! (Mugo 1991:89-90).

Conclusion

Although contextualized in the creative arts and centered on women's artistic production, this paper has direct and indirect relevance to the deliberations on CODESRIA and its achievements during the last twenty years. The concerns and problems articulated by women artists complement many of the goals that CODESRIA has set for itself as a centre for research and human development. The conclusion summarizes the key issues in the form of statements, followed by questions.

1) Domination of the woman artist by her male counterpart
   Does CODESRIA share a similar experience in terms of women versus male researchers? If so, what is being done to address the contradiction?

2) Negligence of women's issues and concerns
   Are women's issues at the centre of CODESRIA's research agenda? If this is not the case, what is CODESRIA doing to focus special attention on these, given the simple fact of a majority female population on the African continent?

3) The giants/ celebrities syndrome
   It is important and necessary that we celebrate the giants who symbolize collective achievements and communal goals. However, it is equally important not to do this at the expense of 'unsung sheroes'. What has CODESRIA done to highlight and promote contribution by the rank and file of unknown academics on the African scene, especially the younger generation of scholars?

4) The 'Return to the Source' call
   How accessible to the ordinary people is the research knowledge and information generated by CODESRIA? To what extent has the research contributed to the solution of their problems? Has CODESRIA made any contribution towards the affirmation, preservation, promotion and generation of people's 'indigenous knowledge'?

5) Collaboration between the Arts and Social Sciences
   Has CODESRIA done enough to create networks between the arts, the humanities and the social sciences? As an observer once remarked, what most people know about Africa has mainly come from the literature works that they have read and the films they have viewed about the continent. Literature and film leave one in a dilemma as to where art ends and where social science begins.

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