

AFRICAN WOMEN, LITERATURE, LANGUAGE, AND CULTURE

MUJERES AFRICANAS, LITERATURA, LENGUA Y CULTURA

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Abstract: This essay will link African women's writing to culture, including literary culture and the politics of literature. It describes how African women's literature can act as a mirror, reflecting African cultures to Africans, and how it can serve as a window and a door, revealing African cultures to those outside of them in whole or in part. It ends with a description of "communal agency," an example of how scholarly writing can act as a door for both those who are and are not a part of a literature's culture. **Key words:** African literature; African women; literary culture; publishing; translation; The Gambia.

Resumen: Este ensayo vincula las obras de autoras africanas con la cultura, tomando en cuenta la cultura literaria y las políticas de la literatura. Describe cómo la literatura de mujeres africanas puede actuar como espejo que refleja a los africanos la diversidad de su cultura, y cómo puede servir de ventana y puerta: qué desvelan las culturas africanas, parcial o totalmente, ante los que viven fuera de estas. Termina con una descripción de "agencia comunitaria", un ejemplo de cómo los textos académicos pueden funcionar como puerta tanto para los que forman parte de la cultura literaria como para los que no son parte de ella. **Palabras clave:** literatura africana; mujeres africanas; cultura literaria; edición; traducción; Gambia.

(Translation by Zinnia Cintron)

1. Introduction

This essay will link African women's writing to culture, including literary culture and the politics of literature. Many of my examples will reference Gambian literature, not only because it is the African national literature that I know the best, but also because I think it is important to include writing from small countries in our discussions of African literature.

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I want to begin with an extended quote by scholar Rudine Sims Bishop:

Books are sometimes windows, offering views of worlds that may be real or imagined, familiar or strange. These windows are also sliding glass doors, and readers have only to walk through in imagination to become part of whatever world has been created or recreated by the author. When lighting conditions are just right, however, a window can also be a mirror. Literature transforms human experience and reflects it back to us, and in that reflection we can see our own lives and experiences as part of the larger human experience. Reading, then, becomes a means of self-affirmation, and readers often seek their mirrors in books.¹

I find Bishop's analogies useful, and below I will describe how African women's literature can act as a mirror, reflecting African cultures to Africans, and how it can serve as a window and a door, revealing African cultures to those outside of them in whole or in part. Throughout, I will also be addressing language.

2. Literature can reflect culture like a mirror

The "Great Man" approach to historical scholarship, in which history is told through the life of one extraordinary male, is unfortunately also evident in relationship to literature. It is not at all unusual to hear, for instance, Leopold Sedar Senghor referred to as the Father of Senegalese literature, or Chinua Achebe the Father of Nigerian writing, or Lenrie Peters as the Father of Gambian literature. These declarations give authority to men as the authors who were first and, by implication, who are the most important. Only years after these men were published did we hear about a few "mothers" of African literature such as Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana and Buchi Emecheta of Nigeria, even though there have been female authors who preceded or were contemporaries of the men named as "fathers" of national literatures.

In reality, of course, it takes many writers to create a national literature. African countries are heterogeneous, with many languages and ethnicities, and with complicated histories and contemporary realities. To be able to see ourselves accurately, we need many mirrors. Women writers, in fact, often show us reflections that are so different to look at that some people don't want to see them

[01] Rudine SIMS BISHOP, 'Mirrors, Windows, and Sliding Glass Doors.' Reading Is Fundamental. <http://www.rif.org/us/literacy-resources/multicultural/mirrors-windows-and-sliding-glass-doors.htm> 22 April 2014. Originally published in *Perspectives: Choosing and Using Books for the Classroom* 6.3 (1990).

at all. Writers such as Gambian Augusta Mahoney, author of the novel and play *The Rebellion*, and Ghanaian Ama Ata Aidoo take the dramas of the family seriously –as seriously as the more traditional national and political dramas written by some men–. A more recent example of a challenging mirror is Lola Shoneyin’s novel *The Secret Lives of Baba Segi’s Wives*, which dares to discuss polygamy from women’s perspectives. In their respective communities, these topics are realities, and Africans –women as well as men– need these mirrors to see our whole selves.

Lenrie Peters’ *The Second Round*, William Conton’s *The African*, as well as Mahoney’s *The Rebellion*, are all Gambian works published in the 1960s, and all portray protagonists who leave Africa to be educated, and then return to work in and for their native country. Fiction was actually mirroring life; at the time, Kwame Nkrumah’s Pan-Africanism was popular, Gambian independence was on the horizon, and many young Gambians and other Africans were excited about helping to build their new nations. However, what is different among these books is the presence or absence of female perspectives. Peters’ and Conton’s novels focus on men. However, not only does Mahoney’s book focus on a woman’s experience, it also explicitly includes the issue of gender: it portrays a teenager in a rural village who fights to continue her education rather than get married.

In fact, some of the themes Gambian women write about are also found in the work of other women across the African continent. Throughout Gambian women’s literature, education is seen as the way girls can improve their lives and status in society. This is also seen in classic works such as *Double Yoke* by Buchi Emecheta of Nigeria and *Nervous Conditions* by Tsitsi Dangaremba of Zimbabwe. And sensitive topics such as polygamy and abuse have been addressed by writers such as Senegal’s Mariama Bâ in *Si longue une lettre* (*So Long a Letter*) and, more recently, Nigeria’s Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*.

Most independent nations have books by local authors on the national curriculum. This itself has been a huge change, providing a literary mirror in a formal context, and emphasizing to children and young adults that their experiences are worthy of being in books, and are worthy of both appreciation and analysis. Similarly, the recognition and inclusion of women’s literature confirms that African women’s experiences are important to the lives of their families and countries, and to the international cultural fabric.

Language –the language readers use, the language authors use– is extremely important because it impacts expression and audience. I believe authors should write in whatever language they can best use to express

themselves. I agree with Kenyan novelist and scholar Wa Thiong'o (who writes in Kikuyu) that is important for Africans to write in African languages. *And I also* agree with the late Nigerian novelist Chinua Achebe that English, French, Portuguese and Spanish are now African languages –especially as they are used by African people and authors who do not always use the standard version of a language, inflecting it with indigenous African languages and pidgins. And even when the words are in the standard European language, the syntax, the way we put them together, can differ from how it is used on other continents. My point is that at least some of the literature that people read should be in the same language that they use, a language *that mirrors* their own. There is a particular depth that comes from reading literature that was written in one's own tongue.

3. Literature can reveal culture, like a window

Of course, the specific experiences portrayed in any given novel, story, poem, or play may not exactly mirror the experiences of the reader, even if the language and ethnicity of the reader and the work of literature are the same. When these experiences vary to a greater or lesser degree, literature can be a window or a door, an opportunity for observation or transformation. Which metaphor is appropriate depends upon both the literature and the reader. For instance, if the reader of Mahoney's *The Rebellion* knows nothing about the Mandinka and does not speak their language, the presence of untranslated Mandinka phrases emphasizes a certain distance. On the other hand, a Mandinka speaker who is from Senegal but not The Gambia may well be able to imagine her or himself in the world of the novel. And yet, the cultural details provided in the novel will encourage an adventurous reader to intellectually and emotionally enter that world, and to consider how the narrator's culture is similar to and different from the realities of their own life.

The work of South African author Bessie Head, on the other hand, is often very cerebral. Her novel *A Question of Power* includes few cultural details and takes place as much in the protagonist's mind as in a particular place. So *A Question of Power* serves as a door –if one is willing to walk through it– into an unstable mind, but *not* as a window into, for instance, life in Kwa-Zulu Natal or Cape Town.

Literature can also, of course, serve as a door or window to those who have no connection to the continent. Because African women's experiences and perspectives are significant beyond our own cultures, nations, and languages, it is important for a wide variety of people on and outside of Africa to have access to this important literature. For many readers in the global North, literature is one of few windows into African lives and cultures. And for many of those readers, their

experience will stop at observation; the window will not transform into a door. This is to be expected, and observation has its benefits. While it is a fact that African literature and literacy can be traced back hundreds of years (and that the Greeks learned much of their knowledge from the Egyptians), too many people still view Africa as an uncivilized and undifferentiated place. Literature can enable a reader in Madrid, Brixton, Lyons, or Vancouver to realize that a modern Africa exists, that African women are often agents on their own behalf, and that the continent includes a multitude of cultures and opinions. Even if a reader's response is simply "Hmmm. I didn't know that!", such responses are good and important.

The importance of reaching a wide readership is one reason why so many authors choose to write in standard formerly European languages (another is the fact that these are the languages of education in the majority of Africa). But translation is also extremely important. Gabriel García Márquez, Toni Morrison, and Maryse Condé can be read in a dozen languages. African women's writing should be available in at least the primary common languages of the continent, and publishers and NGO's must make a greater investment in translation.

Publishing and distribution are also key aspects of creating access to African women's literature. Three institutions from three different countries provide three very different models: Kwani Trust in Kenya, Cassava Republic Press in Nigeria, and Balafong from The Gambia. The Kwani Trust was created by Kenyan author Binyavanga Wainaina with the money he won from the Caine African Writers Prize, and is a major force in Kenyan and East African literature. It sponsors prizes, readings, and a journal, among other projects. But what I think is the most inventive about the trust is the Kwanini series of pocket-sized books that cost about the same price as a ride in a local van. This series, which like other Kwani projects includes women authors, makes literature available to the public in an affordable, inviting, and accessible fashion.

Cassava Republic, a publishing company in Nigeria co-founded by Bibi Bakare-Yusef and Jeremy Weate, is also creating exciting African literature. The core of their business is traditional publishing, including fiction, non-fiction, and children's literature. Cassava Republic has made waves by publishing novels with controversial content such as the aforementioned *Baba Sile's Wives* by Shoneyin. They are currently pursuing innovative projects including publishing novellas as text messages sent to subscribers.

Balafong is a website that includes a number of blogs and electronic forums largely related to Gambian art and culture (the name refers to an instrument found in The Gambia and other parts of West Africa). There is not a single literary publisher in The Gambia, so books are either self-published or are

published outside of the country. *Balafong* uses technology to publish mostly young authors outside of more formal –and less accessible– paper publishing. *Balafong*'s online format also offers its first electronic book free of charge to anyone who has an Internet connection, and the PDF can be downloaded, printed out, and disseminated even more widely.

I mention these projects both because they are creative and because they include women as a matter of course, not as a special initiative. I don't think it is a coincidence that all of these endeavors have African women involved at the leadership level. I encourage you to look them up and support them.

4. Scholarship as a door

Scholarly writing can act as a door for both those who are and are not a part of a literature's culture. Scholars are sometimes criticized as arbiters of taste, although today, sales are far more important than reviews in determining the success of a book. Nevertheless, scholars do help to create what are sometimes called canons, the lists of books that are respected enough to be taught in schools, to be chosen to represent nations and cultures at home and abroad, and to appear on various lists of recommended reading. Scholars, through our criticism, also provide context –historical, cultural, and literary– that can expose the structure of a work of literature and how it relates to other works. So I would like to give a brief example of how scholarly criticism can help transform a reading experience from one of observation through a window to one of understanding, that is, how it can open a door.

“Western” feminism is often seen by Africans as an imported and imperial construct that threatens “traditional” African culture. But as Gambian women's literature shows, foreign ideologies are not necessary to transform gender roles –African women and men are doing this work on their own–. One example of this is the presence of what I call ‘communal agency’ in Gambian literature. ‘Communal agency’ occurs when the desire and action of an individual combines with the actions of others in his or her community to affect an action, decision, or change. Often in Gambian literature, the impetus to change a woman's life, community, or society comes from the woman herself. But even in these cases, someone else's intervention and community consensus are required to actually effect the desired change.

Furthermore, in a community in which women do not always have overt social or political power, one strategy left to women is influencing men. Because communal agency depends upon at least some community consensus, it can lessen combative feelings, and eliminate or ameliorate the sense that conflict has resulted in “winners” and “losers.”

‘Communal agency’ is not only different from individualism, it also diverges from identity politics. A female doctor in *The Rebellion* influences the male Chief Lamin to contradict tradition and allow his daughter to pursue advanced education. The daughter, in turn, expands opportunities for her sister and for other women in her country, and together these actions begin to transform how both women and men see their roles in the society. Again, these differences represent larger societal distinctions. In many texts from Europe and North America, the character’s ultimate goal is to become an autonomous individual. Gambian female characters also want to be self-determining, but they mostly do not separate the desire to be an individual from the desire to be part of a community. ‘Communal agency’ is a strategy that can succeed not only in improving the life of the individual woman, but because the community in whole or part endorses her change, the lives of other women and girls—as well as men and boys—will also be affected. It is a particularly useful strategy in cultures that privilege the community over the individual. So it is not surprising that communal agency is also used by some Gambian activist organizations. One way that the Gambian Foundation for Research on Women’s Health, Productivity, and the Environment combats the cutting aspect of female circumcision is by convincing the oldest women in a village that the practice is harmful and unnecessary. These women then convince the rest of the community to change. I hope other scholars will investigate whether communal agency is a strategy used in other African communities.

5. Conclusion

It is nice—and in most African cultures necessary—to acknowledge the importance of the mother and father. But not only do we need the whole family, we also need to move beyond biological metaphors which, especially for small countries, imply that there is only room for one or two national authors and one or two understandings of the collective national experience.

In May 2013, I organized *Yari Yari Ntoaso: Continuing the Dialogue*, an international symposium on literature by women of African descent that was held in Accra, Ghana. There, people from more than 20 countries presented creative and scholarly perspectives on topics such as: literature and activism, the publishing process, the use of technology, and the act of writing. I was pleased to contribute to the “Africa con eñe” gathering in the same spirit; there writers and scholars came together to discuss the possibilities of African women’s literature, and small countries such as The Gambia and Equatorial Guinea were included. These kinds of events—which live on through the print and online dissemination of their proceedings—emphasize and facilitate African literature as multiple mirrors, windows, and doors.

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