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AFRICAN WOMEN'S WRITING — POSTCOLONIAL AND FEMINIST INTERSECTIONS

A Vast Unvisited Territory

Now that feminisms have well researched "a room of one's own", including Virginia Woolf's famous text, there is an increasing interest to do so with "other rooms" occupied by women who write. Feminisms which deal with the experience of a "non-western" /other woman's identity or rather multiple identities, appear under terms such as postcolonial, colonial, Third world, which all seem inappropriate in some way or another, and deal with concepts of displacement, decentred realities, marginal experiences, representation, bodies, and last but not least, difference. However, feminism within postcoloniality is still a fairly new theoretical field and more often than not the identification with it seems a rather artificial joint venture. Postcolonial praxis did not initially seem to be too interested in feminist issues, and feminism joined its discourse only later on, although there had been many parallels which eventually led to interest in actual and possible intersections of both sides.

The attempt is to look at African women writers through two main perspectives, postcolonialist and feminist. Placing African women's literature into a postcolonial perspective, gives it an opportunity to focus on what effects colonial, postcolonial, and other foreign dominations had on African social realities. Feminist perspective helps to see the roles of African women subjectivities, in their locality and universality. In short, while postcolonialism seeks to understand the differences between the Occident and the Orient, the presented feminisms try to go beyond the concepts of difference by seeking links.

Prefixing Postcolonialism

A landmark for the postcolonial discourse was placed by Edward Said's book "Orientalism" (1978). It was followed by a collection of essays "The Empire Writes Back, Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial

Literatures" by Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (1989). Soon afterwards the western discourse was flooded with postcoloniality, until it diffused into many theoretical positions and is somehow in danger of losing its effective meaning altogether.

Postcolonialism may be the study of the interactions between European nations and the societies they colonized in the modern period. However, the term is loose, as it cannot grasp the divergent experiences of all the different countries that used to belong under European empire, Africa, Carribeans, Asia, or Australia, not to mention US colonies, such as Canada. The Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo made a worthwhile remark about postcolonial, saying that it "may be relevant to the United States after its war of independence, and to a certain extent, to the erstwhile imperial dominions of Canada, Australia and New Zealand" but "applied to Africa, India, and some other parts of the world, "postcolonial" is not only fiction, but a most pernicious fiction, a cover-up of dangerous period in our people's lives" (Aidoo 19916: 152).

The view to what time span postcolonialism should be concerned with, is divided to those who also deal with colonialism itself, and to those who don't. It is also difficult to talk about the ending of colonialism, as many claim colonialism never ends with a mere act of establishing national independence, and so it still exists in their realities. Postcolonialism is therefore subject to sharp criticism. It took place in the face of the growing theoretical consecrations of postmodernism, but also because of the space created by postmodernism and its disruption of metanarratives (Davies 1994: 81). Its aim may be too ambitious and maybe exaggerated, even totalizing, as it deals with the processes that already went on in colonialism, as well as with the decolonizing ones. One of the main criticisms emphasises that postcolonialism is a wholly western construction (even though many of the postcolonialists come from a different ethnic background, as does Edward Said), a western theorising need to properly articulate transformational, "minority" discourses, without giving the space to those spoken about to speak for themselves and to self-reflect their positions. As such, in attempt to cover such a historical period, so many cultures, peoples with a singular concept, seems farfetched and implies western hegemonising.

It seems that postcolonialism has come ahead of its time, there is not enough historical lapse. It has been prefixed before its ripe time — while the circumstances were not yet ready for its existence, but the need and interest for the field "to be ploughed" was great.

Despite the all terminological and content problems that seem to be burdening the whole field of postcolonialism, it is still providing a wide range of interesting approaches dealing with the relevant issues of cultural, political, ethnic backgrounds which apply also to African women's writing and cannot be covered solely by feminist practices.

Black, Third World or Plain Feminisms

Motives and the direction of work have to be continually interrogated, otherwise there is a risk of furthering a discourse on difference and otherness that leads to greater marginalisation. While the keyword for researching in postcolonialism seems to be *difference*, many feminisms also deal with discourses of difference based on different philosophical backgrounds. However, many (post)feminisms have researched *difference* in order to go beyond it and sought key terms and concepts for defining a common ground for women regardless of their cultural, national, class, etc. background. Such terms are various, such as *nomad*, *migrant*, even *hybrid*. These subjectivities are privileged. Their core is not based on fixity, any kind of essentiality, confinement to place, in national or any other category, but on transcendence, fluidity, border-crossing. In nomadic discourse the idea of centre and authentic identity is given up. The nomad theory comes from a desire for an interconnectedness between different (feminist) subjectivities. Rosi Braidotti, one of the feminist theoreticians, is involved with the figuration of woman's feminist subjectivity in order to go beyond the dualistic concept of phalocentrism and resistance. For her as well as for black postmodern feminist critic bell hooks, nomad consciousness is a political imperative at the end of this millenium. For bell hooks consciousness equals *yearning*. She finds "discourse" about "difference" dangerous for the struggle against racism, sexism, and cultural imperialism. Yearning helps to overcome the confinements of them all and gives basis for empathy and leads to solidarity and coalition (Bell hooks 1990).

Braidotti's nomadism relies on that kind of critical consciousness,

which resists settling into socially coded ways of thinking and behaviour. She develops a vision of women's feminist subjectivity in the trope of nomadism, nomadism not only being a figuration of physical activity, but implying also its metaphorical meaning. Nomadic subject is a myth, it is anti-essential, its identity is in continuous change, the borderlines still exist, but in this form it is much easier to transcend them (Braidotti 1994). The criticisms of nomadism speak of evading the question of space/place and the idea of space in constructing gender, race and national identities, as narratives of identity grow out of this engagement with local space (Porter 1995).

Another concept of fluid subjectivity is *migratory subjectivity* by Carole Boyce Davies. Her idea resembles Braidotti's and hook's in what they are aiming at; the identity of a subject, which exists in more times and places, (expresses its *elsewhereness*), is thus redefined out of marginalisation, and re-connects, re-members black women. Migratory subjectivity differs from nomad subject in one main issue, it moves to specific places with specific reasons, it is a subject with an agent (Davies 1994).

African Women, Black Women — See(k)ing Their Rooms

Metaphorical concept of nomadism seems to be very handy in overcoming obstacles, barriers, and borders women are facing or being confined by. But again, the problem arises when it has to be applied to fiction, when the concept of space and locality becomes indispensable. Social reality cannot avoid being bound into space and time.

African women's writing could be approached in two ways; through locality and on the other hand, universality of African (black) women's experience. A somehow simplified explanation would be that the locality viewing is connected to ethnic, nationalistic, (post)colonial realities of African women, while universality deals more with woman's identity regardless of all those categories, as talking about female identities cannot always be clean cut from their complexities.

The diversity of African women's writing still has one thing in common: the role of a woman often seems a central issue. African's woman's reality is very political. Her struggling for place and position in the society is defined by patriarchal repression, poverty, economical

problems of undeveloped world, and (post/neo)colonial repression, which results in changing of values, redefining meaning of rural and city life.

Law practices are often extremely unfavourable for women, as they legalize abuse and deprive women of basic human rights. These are the problems many women across the world, in underdeveloped as well as developed countries, can identify with on various scales in their specific existencies.

The situations more or less urgently call for political activism as the South African writer Sindiwe Magona would claim so often. The slogan "Art is political!" sounds a very authentic outcry in Africa. By describing the situation generally, we should not overlook the fact of diversity of women's situations in different national contexts, political regimes and wars which have so drastically influenced the quantity and quality of literary productions. On the one hand there are Sudan or Angola where long wars have literally stopped any writing practices, degraded human existences into mere survival. There is Mozambique, getting itself slowly together after a long war, where there are few women writers, but three of them renown, who have also taken leading positions in the national writer's associations, as for example Lilia Mople, who is the president of the Writers Association. On the other hand Nigeria, Ghana, and Kenya have long and well known literary and academic traditions. Namibia, Zimbabwe, and Uganda are producing more women's texts every year. The same is true of Côte d'Ivoire, whose women writers are in liberal and advanced position, but only those from Abidjan, as there is a clean cut between opportunities in the city and rural life.

Ama Ata Aidoo critically tackles the issue of how life in Ghana has been influenced by the period of being British colony, how native people have turned to different values which are much more materialistic, and are losing their own selves. The heroine Sissie in her story "Everything counts" painfully recollects all this, when her relatives ask her on her visit back home "What car are you bringing home Sissie? We hope it is not one of those little coconut shells with two doors, heh? ... And oh, we hope you brought a refrigerator. Because you simply cannot find one here these days" (Aidoo 1970: 6). Sissie, who has been to the west, sees all these material objects as a rope with which they are hanging

themselves. Her bitter disappointment makes her wonder if she had returned back to the right country. The life is changing and it is also changing in African countries, people are making their individual adjustments, partly retaining old traditional habits and notions, partly adjusting to the ways of white people. But what Aidoo is concerned with is also losing one's innocent eye. In the novel "Changes", the heroine Esi is a young, urban, independent, educated woman, who chooses many modern, "western" ways. She seems very rational, emancipated and aware in what she wants, but loses control of herself over the love for a man who eventually leaves her for another woman. She also leaves her child with her mother, which in the western ways would be condemned while in African communities children are part of an extensive family and many young women leave them behind in pursuit of work.

Women who come to the city with their partners, but remain equally dependent on them, betrayed by them and at the same time deprived of their families and communities, are a common theme in African novels. These themes occur in the novels by Ghanaian writer Amma Darko "Beyond the Horizon" (1995) and Kenyan writer Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye in "Coming to Birth" (1986). Macgoye deals with a young rural girl's development into maturity against the backdrop of Kenyan history coming to independence and the violent evolution of Kenyan nation. The city has its myth of prosperity and opportunity which is soon shattered. Dim situations sometimes lead to prostitution as the only way to become economically independent. Young girls who come from the villages, leaving behind their relatives and friends, who believe in their wellbeing and prosperity, end up as prostitutes, or struggle in other states of miserable conditions as happens in Aidoo's story "In the Cutting of a Drink". The only possibility to find their way out of that state of life is through education, but for the majority it remains an unreachable goal. An exploration of this theme which does have a "happy ending" occurs in the novel "Nervous Conditions" by a Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangaremba (1988). This is another moving story of a girl coming to age with a critical insight into the repression of a traditional way of life. It speaks of what sacrifices it takes to catch an opportunity to get education and on the other hand reveals the schizophrenic identity imposed on her

cousin who lives in traditional Zimbabwe, where she as a girl is expected to be less bold and daring as she learnt to be while living in United Kingdom. It expresses human loss involved in the colonization of one culture by another. The existencies of African women are in many ways comparable to other women's existencies in their relationships with men, friends, their motherhood, their loneliness and struggles, and happiness and all other range of feelings and states of mind. There are many similarities, especially relating to feelings and emotions or on the other hand, to (patriarchal) repression, surpassing the place and time in which women exist.

African women are a source of inspiration for the "western black women", who seek, often successfully, connection with their African sisters. African American women writers are trying to write stories which transmit history and tradition, starting with their African roots. Historicising as a concept should reconstruct the destroyed historical consciousness. This process is happening through establishing new links (*re-connection*) and recalling back memories, or re-joining (*remembering* — the term was invented by the writer Toni Morrison) again what has been "dismembered" and dehumanized by involuntary deportations from Africa into "western" slavery in the Trans-Atlantic passage history. Even though African American culture has hardly retained any African material culture, it deconstructed African society norms. Metaphorical memory, the past "as food for utopian fantasy" (Willis 1990: 9-10) in African American women's writing is transcended through the concept of matrilineality. Women in some African societies have important roles as traders as well as hold important positions as heads of the family. Matriarchal women, high status of elder women, and women powers as healers are all concepts that have roots in African traditions. For African American women this seemed a good way to avoid accepting patriarchal patterns and values and find positive cultural heritage.

If we look at contemporary issues of African women writers who have already undergone colonization, and experienced postcolonial realities, we can find out that they sometimes overlapped those of African American ones, which leads to the comparison of African American

double race-and-gender repression with the African term of double gender-and-colonization repression. Such examples are the ideals of physical appearance, as the wish to be white(r) and have straight(er) hair. These themes are common in African American women's literature. Such theme is taken to an extreme in Toni Morrison's novel "The Bluest Eye" (1981), where her tragic heroine Pecola, an adolescent girl, eventually goes mad wishing she had (and finally thinking she truly has) blue eyes, in her mind the only possible ticket to happiness. Of course the circumstances of her story evolve around oppressive racism in the States, which affects all intimate and external aspects of her life as of lives of so many other blacks. The wish to be white also penetrated into African countries with colonialism, where you can find bleaching cremes sold in shops and stalls at the quite remote villages all over Africa. It is also the major theme in the story "Everything Counts" by Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo where the young woman narrator, who is educated and worldly, doesn't understand why all women wear wigs and eventually sees "she is the one *black* girl in the city," but restrains herself from saying anything, as "she did not want to look more of a stranger than she already felt" (Aidoo 1970: 4). Here Ama Ata Aidoo poses that being black does not only mean being born with dark skin; it encompasses an identity, pride that goes with it. "Being black is feeling black". The heroine returns home from abroad, to find "Home", but instead she discovers that her view was utopian, that she has become displaced, that home is a destroyed romantic utopian concept and that her brothers, lovers, and her husband had been right when they said "they found the thought of returning home frightening" (Aidoo 1970: 7), and preferred to stay abroad to study more. In the unending circle we come around again to the issues used by African American writers, as Gloria Naylor and many others.

Links and Gaps in the Trans-Atlantic Bridges

Fighting, struggling, achieving, publishing, writing, are the words commonly understood in African literary scene. But interestingly enough, we can notice the difference in the (in)authenticity of these issues among those who were also passionate in claiming their rights, but cannot sound equally persuasive as their position is different. They live in the West,

they are the privileged ones who have the necessary (academic, artistic...) background, don't have to worry about surviving on a daily basis and can speak with the language expressing western ideology, such as Marxism, leftism, socialism. Kirsten Holst Petersen speaks about the same thing: "African women had very different notions of mother and daughter relationship than their German sisters which made her think that universal sisterhood is not a given biological condition as much as perhaps a goal to work towards, and that in that process it is important to isolate the problems which are specific to Africa or perhaps to Third World in general, and also perhaps to accept a different hierarchy of importance..." (Petersen 1995:251). In other words, while western feminists discuss the relative importance of feminist emancipation against class, the African women discuss female equality against Western cultural imperialism.

African American women writers find their own visions of Africa and African women as a source of new ideas, themes and energy, which give them identity. Such is the novel by Sandra Jackson Opoku "The River Where the Blood Was Born" (1997). Africa is their blood, their re-connected link, their re-membered limb. Such usage could be formulated as a form of mental exploitation, as a mental form of postcolonialism. On the other hand, the West recognized many of those African women writers who in some ways (and not always on purpose) meet the western standards of what is Africa and what is African experience, and are in different ways present in the western structures and institutions. They have to meet some western standards, they publish in the West and often live in the West as well. Such writers are also some of the ones presented here, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, Tsitsi Dangaremba, Micere Mugo, Nozipo Maraire, etc. By no means is this a disqualification of their literary oeuvre. They represent Africa authentically, their works deserve all praise. It is just important to point out the discrepancy between the women writing in Africa and those who are recognised in the West, last but not least by using the language of the colonizer. They are establishing the "postcolonial canon" while the rooms inhabited by women in Africa still remain terra incognita, a vast unvisited territory.

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