

ADEA Conference on Book Development in Africa

Nairobi, Kenya, October 3-5, 2011

WRITING FOR AFRICAN CHILDREN: A WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE

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1. INTRODUCTION

A writer's perspective of the process of creating literature is as complex as the human mind from which creative work evolves as it takes shape and finally expresses a certain point of view. The process itself which engages the emotions, the spirit and the intellect is both a conscious exercise- involving the choice of language, vocabulary, approach, subject; that is, the craft of writing and the sub conscious force at play, which mirrors the writer's beliefs about life, her/his position (imagined or real) in it, and which in turn colors her/his opinion regarding the issues put on the table for discussion.

In light of this, I am inclined to say, yes, there is a woman's perspective in writing, not only for children, but in writing for adults as well. This means there is a man's perspective too. The fact that a writer, like anyone else, is a human being and a product of her/his culture, upbringing, time and education puts her/him at a point of advantage regarding issues closer to social life. Further, a writer, is also influenced by social division of labor within a definite historical time, which in the course of growing up creates her/ his reservoir of experience, gained from social interaction and from the interaction with the environment. During the creative process, writers project themselves and their experience in the characters they portray, in the way the characters talk, think, act and react and deal with the challenges they are faced with. Sometimes, as a result of strong influences in life, some characters may

emerge contrary to the writer's conscious decision, forcing themselves, so to speak, into the story in their own fashion.

On the other hand, one can argue that, a social conscious writer- female or male, struggles to rise above her/his own social conditioning to project the ideal worldview, an alternative world from the one in which she/he lives. In this case, I would say there is a gender perspective, which would interrogate gender constructs and relations in a certain place and time. A vulnerability perspective which would analyze or project aspects of poverty, HIV/AIDS, early pregnancies, FGM, engagement of children in war, child labor, etc; and an empowerment perspective which would aim to give voice and power to characters in the story, to challenge and interrogate a certain position of vulnerability.

According to Dr. Andindilile, a lecturer at the literature at the University of Dar es Salaam, the difference in the two positions is brought about by the writer's social consciousness and education. Education enlightens the way a writer looks and analyses issues, but does not remove the advantages that a woman writer would have due to her proximity to children's lives. Women tend to be more sensitive to children's needs- emotional, social and economic- than men. It is particularly so in patriarchal societies in Africa where mothers are closer to children than fathers. The importance of understanding women's responses to development issues is what led to studies of gender in literature and it has become necessary that students study women's writings in their third year in order to highlight their perspectives on the social issues they write about.

This paper will focus on Tanzania, with the expectation that a Tanzanian picture will reflect some aspects of the African situation, which, hopefully the discussion will bring to light.

2. THE ISSUES

What are the issues in African children's lives and how are they reflected by women writers writing for them today? Do the issues appeal to women writers more than they do for men? In order to answer these questions, I will examine some female and male writers who have participated in Children's Book Project for the last ten years. The Children's Book Project was started early 1990s to promote the writing and publication of children's books in Kiswahili.

Issues in children's lives and the children's book writer

The status of children

Africa is witnessing a period of extreme cruelty to children and a time when their rights are flaunted with impunity. Children are being recruited to fight in civil wars and taught to kill without mercy; to work under the earth in mines in extremely dangerous conditions; they are recruited to engage in sex business; they are forced to marry at a young age to men that are much older than them; they are orphaned young and left to fend for themselves; they are raped and others made pregnant in an early age; others are living with HIV and AIDS and lacking care and support, and in all kinds of other difficult circumstances.

There are other more complex issues in their lives, such as the lack of a welfare policy that protects them from abuse and neglect; lack of access to quality education which denies them opportunities for a future with hope and lack of stable and safe environment for them to grow, survive and develop.

One can argue, however, that should children's literature be about their life condition or should it be fantasy, something to make them dream and bring light into their difficult lives? Asked about what books children love to read, Pili Dumea, the Executive Secretary of Children's Book Project for Tanzania said children enjoy fantasy in animal stories, humor and stories which reflect or touch their life experiences, confirming what is often said of children everywhere that they read what fascinates them and holds their attention firmly, no matter what their social condition is. They have to be motivated to read. I think books provide an escape to children. Naturally, they want an ideal life, where they are respected, happy and safe, and books that offer them that alternative life are the books they relate to

So, what issues do women writers address when they write for children? Namtulli Mpembulles, one of CBP children's book writer said that she gets her motivation from public discourse about children, girls and women; from reportage of children's issues in newspapers. Asked about how much she draws from her experience as mother, she said that sometimes motherhood is a challenge more than motivation and so child rearing does not always motivate her writing. For her, it is more the issues which put the child's life at stake rather than the actual rearing experience. This is one perspective. I have read books projecting the simplest things like a child not wanting to eat vegetables, or wanting too much ice cream, not wanting to take a bath, or the first day of school. Yet these are child rearing experiences that fascinate children.

I read more than twenty children's books by women, in which content covered: environment; days of the week; adventure; WWI; the five senses; right to education; selfishness; Albinism and stigma; HIV/AIDS; poverty; folktales; coloring and picture books;

coming of age; life skills; identity; work ethics; sexual abuse; friendship and cooperation; child labor and abuse; friendship; the girl child. Although the selection was random, it says something about the choice of topics. It goes further than social constructs experience etc, to show how women's writing is also influenced by the changing social economic and political dynamics. This is good, because whatever they write becomes relevant to children at that particular time.

3. PERSPECTIVES

Gender and Abuse

From the books I read, women writers are writing mostly about girl children. Their concerns focus on sexual abuse, (*Nani wa Kumwamini* (No one to Trust) by Namtulli Mpembulle). The girl struggles out of the clutches of her uncle, escaping from one situation only to fall into another until finally she wins to loosen herself from the chains of exploitation. *Tuokoeni* (Save Us) by Amina Mohamed is about child abuse and maltreatment in the family by a drunken father. The mother finally leaves the children to the father and disappears. The girl becomes a maid and the boy ends up in the streets and gets involved in drugs and crime. They get rescued by good Samaritans and one day the media helps in the reunion with their mother. In *Mnyama Mwenye Huruma* (A Kind Animal) by Rebecca Nandwa, a mother gets twins and abandons baby girl in the forest because her husband, the king, does not want girls. The baby is picked up by a creature which is half animal, half human (woman) and raises her in the forest. Time passes, mother is unhappy, and the king ails. The twin brother meets his twin sister, lets the mother know and both go searching for her in the forest. Finally, she finds the medicine to heal her father, the magical mother dies and they all live in the king's palace. *Madhila ya Faidha* (The Plight of Faidha) by Faraja Ngakwira is about stigma shown to an Albino child. Fellow pupils refuse to sit with him, at same time Albino body parts are being sought to be sold. One day, his school participates in a competition in the district where he wins first prize in drawing. People hunt him down in the night, but he is saved by his father and his teacher.

A common perspective in these four stories is that all children overcome the challenges they are confronted with and there is a happy ending. Their allies are adults and so are their foes. I think women are struggling, as adults, to speak for children on these injustices. They are being critical to fellow adults by making the statement that what is being done to children is not right. Are the happy endings a solution? Can writers provide solutions to such entrenched social issues? I pose the questions for discussion.

However, the gender perspective leaves something to be desired. There is an issue that can perhaps be addressed through a training intervention. Balance is quantitative rather than qualitative whereby in two stories, male parents are cruel and the good Samaritans are both female; in one a woman abuses the maid and in *Plight of Faidha*, both male and female parents and the teachers are united in protecting the child against harm. One notes some remnants of belief in the strength and superiority of the male when a mother leaves her twin daughter in the forest fearing the wrath of her husband. The fear of male authority by the mother and unjustified bias of the king against girls are issues that could have been interrogated in order to show a sense of justice for the children's benefit. One way of guiding is showing what is wrong and what is right. The risk of leaving injustices uncorrected is that children may think it is okay to do wrong to others, to mistreat and beat, to be drunkards and irresponsible. They may also think it is okay for women to be weak and defenseless against male cruelty and maltreatment. In *Save Us*, male behavior is also glossed over and so is child labor and abuse done by the woman employers.

Rights and voice

This is an important area because all the evil happening to children amount to denial of basic rights. Who is the ombudsman of children and their rights? Is it writers, including those of children's books, mothers, adults or children themselves? I propose that it is all these groups and others too. The perspective of women writers as mothers is clearly evident in the cases mentioned above where mothers feel for the children, they see the injustice. The writer interviewed above, said that she uses her experience of motherhood in characterization because of her proximity to the child's life. She knows what makes them happy, sad, and angry. She knows how she may respond to certain situations. That said, one still notes the influence of African tradition on the writers that children often put their trust on adults who, traditionally, are responsible for their upbringing. That perspective shows that children are not strong enough to deal with challenges on their own with adults taking the supportive role but assuming responsibility for their safety and wellbeing. Pili Dumea, CBP executive says that her experience with women writers show that most of them are not adequately knowledgeable on the complexity of gender issues and how to deal with such issues in writing for children. That could explain the reason that children are portrayed as being defenseless against adult weakness (of mothers) or cruelty (of fathers), so they run away only to meet another adult who saves them or continues the retinue of abuse. The perspective which is influenced by patriarchy is therefore unlikely to give children any voice, or independent power to question their parent's actions and stand up to injustice done to them.

Mwendo (Footsteps); *Ndoto ya Upendo* (Upendo's Dream); *Safari ya Prospa* (Prospa's Journey) by Elieshi Lema, address the issue of rights and attempts to give voice and power of action to children. In *Footsteps*, the aunt questions the lack of counseling services in school for pupils to get educated about their bodies, as a right. Most of them confront body changes while in school. The girl character takes over the narration in order to tell her own story and seek the knowledge she needs from her relatives. She needs to know about life, about a woman's struggle in society, how to become strong and about initiation as a ritual of change. In *Upendo's Dream*, Upendo dream to know the magic of letters. She is denied the right to go to school. Her parents send her younger brother instead, with the excuse that they are poor. She gets very angry, stays home, but demands to know why it is her who has to wash, cook, clean and care for her baby while her brother goes to school. One day she goes to school and tells a teacher that she looking for the secret of letters and the teachers take it upon themselves to plead for her case. In *Prospa's Journey*, the characters, Prospa and Sara, travel on their own to Dar es Salaam city and on to Zanzibar and back to Dar again. They survive in the city, joining a band of street children, who show them the geography of survival. Building on logic, common sense, experience on the street, they find the child who is returned to his mother. This perspective is also experiential. As a mother, I have observed children's incredible capacity to do things out of the sight of parents and their high level of creativity in problem solving.

Identity, history and environment

This perspective of providing knowledge on certain aspects takes note of the writer as guide, a view which is particularly important in the context of changing societies and the fluidity in cultural integration. Questions are: Who are we? How did we do things? Why did they do that to us? These questions may not be asked by children, but they will register in their minds as they acquire knowledge in school, through play or as they interact with their environment in different ways.

Mwanasesere wa Mosi (Mosi's Doll) ; *Lupompo and the Baby Monkey* by Demere Kitunga; *Usiku wa Balaa* (The Night of Peril) by Pili Dumea, all these stories in a way attempt to show the child that reality is complex and there is more than what the child can see and perceive. *Mosi's Doll* is about being black among other races and being proud of it. The power of selling in global business can bring white dolls from anywhere in the world and place them on a child's lap as she plays at the backyard of a village home. The doll may be one with white, long and silky hair and fair skin. And the girl child will most likely love the doll and play mother with it. In the story, mother brings home a doll looking just like her child. She holds a mirror in front of her to show just how similar to her skin the black doll is. The doll is

resisted, because the child has not heard it being depicted as beautiful, so mother explains that beauty is also in the black doll which looks like all of them. The writer here tries the difficult task of imbuing in a child, an attitude of self respect and self love, that is so basic to self empowerment. *Lupompo and the Baby Monkey* and *Maji Msituni* (Water in the Forest) by Helen Elinawinga show the importance of forest ecosystem in which animals live happily and water is plenty until the destruction of trees and fauna begin and pollution set in. *Lupompo* gives a comparative view of the traditional ways of conservation with more modern ways. *Water in the Forest* is a straightforward exposition for younger children. *The Night of Peril* shows the destruction to people and societies which happened during the First World War and how it could never to be the same again for a little girl who lost her family.

Ethics

In oral story telling which happened by the fireside, or outside under a shining moon, the narrators performed stories at the end of which was a moral teaching. The issue of ethics has been at the center of social order and cohesion and therefore of importance throughout history. Oral story telling was a socializing agent, integrating children into society as acceptable social beings. In telling, the narrator became a character and an attraction to an enraptured audience. The telling was then a prerogative of grandmothers and grandfathers, because they had lived long, and had witnessed the outcomes of certain behaviors considered unsuitable for the wellbeing of society. In the context of changing social structure, norms and traditions, children's book writers take their place in telling/guiding children on what is acceptable and what is not. In this respect, women writers' perspective on ethics is drawn from the accumulated knowledge of being caretakers. Women have always been and still are the propagators of culture and in many ways shape the way children think from a young age. They continue to be the propagators of culture through their writing, using both the folk narration of animal stories and the creative narration of current social situations.

Nataka Keki Yangu (I want My Cake) by Teddy Chacha; *Urafiki wa Ngedere na Mamba* (Friendship Between Monkey and Crocodile) by Namtulli Mpembules and *Kuku na Marafiki Zake* (Chicken and Her Friends) by Irene Minja & Lina Gerson, all give a moral lesson at the end. The stories are constructed to end in action which delivers the moral. Being selfish is not good, (I want My Cake); Being faithful and true to friends or people that are close to us (Monkey and Crocodile) working in unison yields better results than working alone on a problem (Chicken and Her Friends). The story of Monkey and Crocodile stands out alone in

giving the perspective that children are innocent of evil but are influenced by parents to accept it. The child Crocodile questions the logic of taking the heart of his friend to heal the king, when that action will kill the friend. You will get another friend, the parents say, but innocently, the Crocodile divulges the secret and Monkey escapes by trickery. This perspective projects children as active setters of their own moral standards, where money is less important than friendship and loyalty is more valuable than betrayal.

Moral stories are few in new creations compared to folk literature which is awash with them. Even this area is changing so that what was considered ethical is no longer thought so. With rising corruption, including sexual corruption, which has become entry ways to success and fame, moralizing has become ineffective and redundant. Still, I believe that the moral story is still very relevant today, especially for children who are expected to construct a future society with alternative moral standards. There is a role here for all of us.

Life Skills

Why are life skills so important for children today?

My perspective as writer is that the most basic social unit- the family- in which children are reared and given values, has been slowly disintegrating. Now children have to be guided, through writing, on how to negotiate their way into becoming responsible and successful adults, since the social structures which used to do that are no longer functioning. Grandmothers, grandfathers, aunts and uncles are professional people with no time to spare for children, even their own. In the context of change, the child belongs to the nuclear family and not to the clan or to society.

The books, Mkatu Mtamu (Sweet Bread), Jipende (Love Yourself), Jilinde (Protect Yourself), Jijue (Know Yourself), Jithamini (Value Yourself) by Elieshi Lema, are life skills books focusing on empowerment of the individual child in order to meet the challenges of life. They take the perspective that children do have great capacities for survival and the role of the writer is to build on them and strengthen them. Sweet Bread takes the perspective that every experience, especially women's experience as caretakers and social food providers can be turned to gold and used for their development. The phenomenon of women food vendors, throughout Africa, which is almost becoming an industry, is a good illustration. The other four books were motivated by the challenge of explaining and guiding children through the HIV and AIDS pandemic. It takes one character, Maisha and her spirit friend Fresh, throughout the series, tracking her growth from a young girl till she completes primary school, ready to enter secondary school.

Men writers' perspectives

I will state the obvious and say that there are far more men writers in Africa than women. This situation is the same in individual countries. Unfortunately, I could not come across up to date data that showed the number of men and female writers by continent or by country.

I read five books by different writers to see if their perspectives differ from those of women. *Tamaa ya Chura* (Frog's Conceit) by W.E. Mkufya; *Vipaji vya Helena* (Helena's Gifts) by Onge Mnyaka; *Kigari Chake na Changu* (His Toy Car and Mine) by Said Mohammed; *Swala Swali* (Impala the Questioner) by Richard Mabala; *Fikiri Kabla* (Think First) by Jumaa Msuazi.

Of the five titles, two- Helena's Gifts and Think First are about girls. The others are about conceit (Frog's Conceit), class selfishness (Your Toy Car and Mine), inquisitiveness (Impala the Questioner). Helena's Gifts is about a girl who escaped the Rwandan genocide, goes to Congo and later to Tanzania and is adopted by a British couple. She is clever and gifted as an artist, this makes her famous. Think First is about a girl who becomes pregnant at a young age, is thrown out of home by her father, delivers the child and throws her away. The child is picked up by an old woman who cares for her until she becomes a nurse. Later, she is reunited with her parents.

Frog's Conceit and Impala the Questioner could be classified as moral stories. The Frog wants to be as big as the Cow, at any cost. But a Frog cannot be a Cow. In trying to be big, the Frog bursts into pieces. The moral- do not try to be what you are not. The Impalas are twins, one polite and un-questioning and the other very inquisitive, constantly asking questions. When they meet a lion disguised as another animal, it is the polite Impala who is almost eaten but is rescued by the tricks of the inquisitive one, showing that asking questions is a good habit. Your Toy Car and Mine brings face to face the urban sophistication and materialism and rural simplicity and poverty. In the end, the boy from town takes away even the simple toy car of the poor village boy, because he *wants* to have both cars- his, driven by remote control and the other one he can move around.

The stories have appeal to children of both genders because conceit, inquisitiveness or lack of it, are vices and virtues found in children of both genders and it is important to address them in literature. The major difference in the stories about girls by women and men writers is that in men's writing, the depth which highlights the challenges the girls face is not very evident. On the other hand, the Impala twins are actors and problem solvers and

demonstrate a basic life skill. Your Toy Car and Mine reflects the typical curiosity and love of cars that boys and men have. The urban/rural dynamic may not offer any new information, but it may motivate rural children who always aspire to leave the village and go to towns and cities. Except for the boys fighting over one toy car, the story does not offer conflict or interrogate the class exploitation issue.

4. CHALLENGES AND WAY FORWARD

“We cannot escape the study of women’s perspectives in literature and in all development issues which they tackle in their writing.” Michael Andindilile, Literature Department, University of Dar es Salaam

Challenges

The complex knot of issues that surround women writers, women as social beings, women and their relationship with children’s lives and interaction of women in a world which continues to oppress, abuse and deny the rights of women and children is going to require multi –pronged, short, medium and long term interventions in order to solve them. It touches on education, social welfare, publishing and writing, access to books, empowerment and training.

The University of Dar es Salaam started to offer creative writing classes two years ago. Of the twenty- two students, only two are female. Of the twenty male students, seven of them show potential to become good writers. Unfortunately, the female students did not join the course to become writers, one needed to fill a slot in her courses and the other thought creative writing was a lot easier than the other subjects. The Literature Department is looking for ways to motivate female students to join creative writing course. This picture alone brings two obvious tidings: one; that our education system is not instilling values for love of knowledge and pursuit of it for continuous learning and two, writing, as a discipline is not motivating or inspiring young women to engage in it.

But why is this so?

Generally, readership stands out as a critical challenge for most of Africa because reading is so entwined with education development, which in most African countries continues to suffer for lack of serious investment in the elements which promote quality, such as access to variety of books, well stocked libraries, quality education delivery, etc. Current education systems in Africa (Tanzania particularly) are not creating readers, and without readers, how do we get writers? Then there is the issue of culture and cultural values in relation to gender. What are we telling our girl children to be? What values are we showing/giving/projecting regarding the search for knowledge and continuous learning? What transformative values are we transmitting to boy and girl children?

In a recent survey on reading capacities, covering the East African region and done by an NGO called UWEZO; there were cases in Tanzania where a primary seven pupil could not read fluently a Kiswahili text for standard three. Reading proficiency for English language was not any better. Further to this, writing as a language skill, is not given the importance it deserves in the curriculum. What results from this grim situation is marginalization of literary related skills and professions and lack of appreciation and recognition for writers, publishers, librarians, teachers, etc.

The struggle of women to maintain professions and home, juggling the two fronts, is known the world over. In my own case as a woman writer, I am constantly confronted with choices that I have to make about my profession, social and family responsibilities, which item to spend money and time on, etc. Perhaps the young women referred to above were asking themselves what they should study so that they could earn enough money quickly, to enable them to live alone and maintain an independent life away from their parents. Perhaps they have just found themselves into the poverty vulnerability because they are expected to shoulder responsibilities like paying for their school needs. Exploring ways to interest women students to join creative writing classes would help to nurture emerging competencies, so that they do not get lost into the daily pushes and shovels of life.

In the short talk with Namtuli Mpembulles, she mentioned, among the challenges that hold back her writing, to include her lack of resources like money to travel and research for a story; and as a single mother who also has a demanding job, she hardly finds time to write. Her writing has to be spongy, easily squeezable in a thin place between more urgent and important chores. The Executive Secretary of Children's Book Project mentioned major constraints for women writers as being lack of writing skills; insecurity about the quality of what they have written; lack of guidance and feedback; and fear of rejection from publishers. And when they have a publishable manuscript, they lack the negotiating power to make the best of their writing achievement.

As a woman writer and publisher I feel particularly challenged with women writers. Some of them need a bit more attention than male writers, and fortunately, they do demand the attention. Often, they need more feedback and guidance; they have greater expectations from a woman publisher, expectations which I sometimes cannot meet because publishing is a tough business.

On a happier note, the Children's Book Project has been running training courses for young female writers since 2008. Twelve names were recommended from the Zonal Writers Associations from Arusha, Tabora, Dodoma, Southern Highlands and Zanzibar. The project started the training program because women writers were not visible in CBP. Why? The CBP found out that women were writing, but producing un-publishable manuscripts due to lack of skills. The Project also learned that one off training course did not help, because they still did not assert their presence in the Project. So, CBP ran the course using the same students every year twelve in number, from 2008 to 2010. They are facilitated on the basic skills of writing, and then taken through the process of story development from idea to a manuscript, interspersed with extensive discussions about each other's ideas among themselves. In this way, by end of 2010, they were able to get three publishable manuscripts and in 2011, they received two, clearly demonstrating that writing has to be looked at as an investment if it has to bear fruit.

The Children's Book Project plans to run courses on short story writing in 2012 with the aim of getting an anthology of young Tanzanian women writers. That will be a commendable achievement and a good influence and inspiration for others.

Way Forward

This paper tries to show that women do have and can contribute an interesting perspective in a body of children's literature in Africa. It also highlights the constraints and challenges that are facing African women writers today. Given their proximity to children's lives and the challenges that face the African child today, women children's book writers have a possibility to bring to light a more positive image of an African childhood for children to read and be inspired by. They are better placed than male writers to deal with the difficult issues that afflict the wellbeing of children in Africa today. However, more focused attention will have to be paid to capacities development in the areas of writing, gender and development. Investment can be vested in:

- Training, in the form of writing retreats

- Creative writing classes which will not require full time attendance
- Writing competitions, followed up with feedback sessions
- The strengthening of and/or establishing women writers associations in Africa.
- Support to purchase women's writings and distribution of the books to school libraries.