European University Studies

Bettina Weiss

Tangible Voice-Throwing: Empowering Corporeal Discourses in African Women's Writing of Southern Africa

PETER LANG

This study is the first book-length analysis of African women's writing of Southern Africa with a focus on writing the body. The thesis is that women are not voiceless, but hold a powerful, liberating potential: they "throw their voices" by implementing a strategic corporeal. Notably, this mode is not carried out in a way of emphasising corporeal difference by lack, but by attributing positive markers to the body. It reaches beyond a speaking which only represents women's thoughts and emotions physically – a mode which might render the impression that they are incapable of expressing their conceptions and sentiments linguistically. It is an empowerment that reflects their skill to break up the bonds between language and body. This study is wide-ranging in its choice of authors and themes.

Bettina Weiss gained a PhD in African literature from the Humboldt University of Berlin. She is editing a book on contemporary literature of Southern Africa dealing with topics such as socio-sexual experiences of black South African men, HIV/AIDS, prostitution, the re-negotiation and restoration of identities, and the past as mediator for the present. The author is working as a freelance journalist.

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The woman I am is inside the writing, embraced and freed by it. For me writing is light, a radiance that captures everything in a fine profile. This light searches and illuminates, it is a safe place from which to uncover the emotional havoc of our experience. Light is a bright warmth which heals. Writing can be this kind of light. Within it I do not hide. I travel barely beyond that light, into the shadows that this light creates, and in that darkness it is also possible to be free, to write, to be a woman.

Yvonne Vera, "Writing Near The Bone" 1997

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PART II

Acknowledgement

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A Note on Terminology, Orthography, Glossary, and Language

The adjectives Coloured, Black, and White are capitalised to demonstrate the socio-political identities and not possible biological features. I refrain from encapsulating the term Coloured within inverted commas as I have partly encountered in the reading of secondary literature. Within academic and political discourse, the ambiguity of coloured identity is also accompanied by the uncertainty about whether to use the so-called appellation as well as doubts about whether to use a capital C or the lower-case c (Grunebaum and Robins 170). Several discussions during my study in Southern Africa, from 9 February to 27 April 2002, revealed that inverted commas would render a fuzzy status to the term Coloured and only perpetuate the confusing discussion of dislocation.[1] As for *apartheid*, sometimes also seen capitalised, I follow the conventions of Françoise Nel's Style Guide entitled *The South African Style Guide: A Usage and Reference Dictionary for Media Writers.*

In following Michael Chapman's example, I use the plural form: African literatures. I do agree that the singular form, African literature, reinforces the implication that it is a pan-African or homogenous concept which in fact it is not. African literatures are, as the plural denotes, polyphonous – they differ largely in theme, style, language, and in their cultural and historical background (Chapman 1-17).

When referring to both genders in the text, I distance myself from the common usage 'he/she' or 'his/her' and apply the wording 'she/he' or 'her/his' instead. In the context of my study which is situated within gender discourse, it is a small, but nevertheless important contribution to draw the reader's attention to the fact that our language and

[1] As to the problematic terminology of Coloured, refer to chapter "Specification of Study."

perception is dominated by the "MAN principle" (Braun), that is, the 'male as a norm' principle.

Wherever possible, I cite secondary sources from English versions. Where this is not possible, I translate the text into the English language, indicate where my translation came into play and transcribe the original cited text in a footnote.

Words in indigenous languages, in Afrikaans and typical terms from Southern Africa are listed and explained in the chapter entitled "Glossary." Yet, in order to understand fully, the reader will find a translation of longer citations of proverbs in the corresponding chapters of this study. As to the object of completion, these are listed in the glossary as well. The corresponding language is put in parenthesis. The words listed in the glossary will be put in italics when first mentioned.

Acronyms used in the text and footnotes are written out in full when first mentioned. A separate list of abbreviations is not maintained.

Date references following the title of the novels, shorts stories, autobiographies, and life stories within the running text show the publishing date of the first edition. Page citations refer to the edition listed in chapter "Bibliography" which indicates the book on hand.

Details on the selected African women writers' lives and a list of their published works is given in a separate chapter entitled "Biobibliography."

PART I

First Steps in Examining Problems, Findings and Prospects

1

'Women Have a Mouth': Re-theorising Voicelessness

The Myth of Voicelessness

> Tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter
> until the lion learns how to write.
>
> Norah M. Mumba, 2000.

"Women have no mouth" goes a Beti proverb of Cameroon and the attitude of African women being voiceless is a statement which, I insist, is as such not accurate. In the course of my study, I will verify the hypothesis that African women have indeed a voice.

South African-born Sindiwe Magona paints a very drastic picture of contemporary women's voicelessness. It is true that African women's writing is much too underrepresented, but Magona's argument is much too eccentric when she makes women's voicelessness responsible for the destruction of African nations:

> My sisters, let us wait no more for others' permission to be heard, to have our say. Others' concerns are not women's concerns. A woman is unique for having a womb. This does not mean she is the womb and only the womb. That is but part of who she is. Together, all her parts make her uniquely equipped to nurture. She is not a predator. She values life for she is the source of life. But as long as she has no voice in the scheme of things, so long will nations self-destruct. If you need

> proof, look! Just look at the state of the world! Look at Africa, bleeding, bedraggled and begging for crumbs from the tables of other nations. (21)

Her call for a collective "upliftment," a "revoicing," that will "catch fire," "ignite and blaze on – to [their] destined glory" (22) is rather too emotionally charged.

Others, like Nigerian Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, argue that African women are not and have never been voiceless. The assumption may arise because one only fails to "look for African women's voices in women's spaces and modes such as in ceremonies and worksongs" and she invites us to take a closer look: "[w]e must look for them in places such as kitchens, watering sites, kinship gatherings, women's political and commercial spaces where women speak, often in the absence of men" (11).

Ogundipe-Leslie's counter-arguments may sound like the other end of an extreme, like an appeasement, which pretends that there is no need for questioning women's voicelessness. This conclusion is, however, misleading. If one follows Ogundipe-Leslie's train of thought, it becomes quite clear that her argument implies the notion that African women should not be regarded as dumb, passive victims because the underlying idea of victimisation will necessarily always lead to a dead end.

In her article "Some Reflections on Voicelessness" Jane Bennett refers to Terence Ranger's closing speech at the Indaba 1999[2] on the so-called conception of voicelessness, which carries not only the danger of victimising women, but also a mechanism of self-fulfilling prophecy which should be avoided by all means:

> an emphasis on the idea that women in 'developing countries' in Africa are 'voiceless' precludes a focus on the systematic practices of patriarchy and neo-capitalist energies which daily amputate most men's access to all-too-audible discussions (n. pag.).

Bennett further states that

> [w]hile it remains true that gender hampers many women writers' access to publishers, resources, and time, and true too that 'gender and/or women's issues' remain at best exoticized within most sites of knowledge production, 'voicelessness' is less of a problem than deafness. (n. pag.)[3]

Deafness, here, does not denote an impaired hearing, but carries the symbolic conception of not wanting to hear.

I argue in concordance with Bennett that the term voicelessness is a rather unsuitable expression. It evokes the impression that women are without a voice, that is, they are close-mouthed and tongue-tied. It is not a matter of discussion whether the term voicelessness means women have de facto a voice, but it is being suppressed. That is to say, the intention of what is being meant, but it is a matter of discussion what picture is being transmitted. On a psychological level, it works in the same way as the mechanisms of advertisement – the effect lies in what is transferred ad hoc. Language as a psychological instrument relies on the immediate picture, instant emotions and ideas that are triggered off within seconds. This is what manifests itself – and the term voicelessness is a politically highly charged one.

Clearly, the denotation of voicelessness means to have no voice and the allegory of a woman with no mouth makes her a dumb, docile, and passive victim. It is only in traumatic experiences such as rape, for instance, that the claim women have no mouth left rather justifies the cause as no mouth "can carry a sight such as that" (Vera, *Nehanda*

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[2] The forum preceding the annual Zimbabwe International Book Fair in Harare.

[3] Bennett's essay appeared in an *AGI newsletter* which is only available on the internet, cf. <http://www.uct.ac.za/org/agi>. As to voicelessness also cf. Krüger 64.

23).[4] However, the implication and its consequences of 'women have no mouth left' in contrast to 'women have no mouth' is definitely quite a different one.

So, I rather suggest that voicelessness, which is in fact more a problem of deafness, should be replaced by 'voices under (patriarchal) control' or by 'veiled voices', in the sense of hidden, but present in women's spaces and modes which does not corrupt women's endeavour. Veiled voices seems to be especially suitable as it creates a sensual image, which adds a new element of understanding.[5]

The word veiled also subtly incorporates all those bottlenecks and obstacles caused by curbed education, bans, profit margins, and literature suppressed by anthologists and critics, which Cecily Lockett of Rand Afrikaans University in Johannesburg describes as follows:

> These black women's voices have also been suppressed by the anthologists and critics who have documented the black poetry phenomenon of the 1970s and '80s. In anthologies such as *The Return of the Amasi Bird* (1982), *Voices from Within* (1982), *One Day in June* (1986), and the *Staffrider* tenth anniversary publication, black women poets are given minimal representation. (58)[6]

Susan Chitabanta, a Zambian fiction writer, has a whole collection of unpublished manuscripts. Nevertheless, she keeps on writing because, as she says, she has "ideas that need to be expressed, so I sit down and write" (qtd. in Mumba, "Women Writers in Zambia," n. pag.). Norah Mbalose Mumba, president of the Zambia Women Writers

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[4] Cf. also other novels of Yvonne Vera such as *Without a Name* 86 and *Under the Tongue* 3.

[5] The proposed term 'veiled voices' may be debatable. Voices are immaterial and the non-physical cannot be veiled, one cannot wrap a veil around something that is abstract, so a possible argument. However, one can as 'veiled voices' names the abstract as if it is concrete, i.e. the term is hypostatised – a common technique in communication and literature. As the following chapters will reveal, voices in fact unfold and grow, and they embody the disembodied and vice versa.

Association (ZAWWA) in 1994 and a writer herself, portrays the situation for female writers with a corporeal simile of "a perpetual state of pregnancy" and she rhetorically asks, "What is the point in carrying a pregnancy if you will never see that baby emerge from your womb [...]?" ("Women Writers in Zambia," n. pag.). At the ZIBF Women Writers' Conference in 1999, she once more pointed out the deplorable state of women writers' publishing possibilities and, again, she did this with a rhetorical challenging question: "I have a manuscript but where are the publishers?" (Mumba, "At the Bottom" 70).

When we consider these circumstances, minimal representation does not necessarily mean that there are no women's voices, that they have been made voiceless. It would be more justifiable to put this minimal representation down to the deafness caused by patriarchy and androcentricity. Thus, analysing the true circumstances makes a lie of the, in this context, often referred to and preferred Cameroon proverb "Women have no mouth" as one may find in Flora Veit-Wild's essays "Borderlines of the Body in African Women's Writing" and "Women Have No Mouth. Flora Veit-Wild Analyses Body, Pain and Authorship."[7] One should acknowledge that the notion of "voicelessness of African women is becoming a thing of the past" (Busby, "Women Writers" 35), that these women have long since "broken the yoke of voicelessness [... and] are speaking out" (Kolawole 193).

The myth of voicelessness has to be deconstructed and the deafness unplugged in order to unveil women's voices, to make their own choices heard and with that enabling them to make their contribution to the development of their society. Women writers should be given a stimulating and constructive platform to "draw [.. their] story into

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[6] As for the ignorant treatment of Black South African women's writing cf. also van Niekerk, review *You Can't Get Lost in Cape Town* 94.

[7] Whereas in one of Veit-Wild's essays, issued in Smit's edition, the proverb is printed incorrectly: "Women have mouth" (172); it should read "Women have no mouth." For proverb cf. Schipper, *Source of All Evil* 88.

history" (Cixous 351). What Virginia Woolf once claimed for the Western women writers: a room of one's own, for Zambia, Mumba claims "a ream of one's own" ("Women Writers in Zambia" n. pag.).

My study thus concentrates on dismantling women's alleged voicelessness by investigating the literary corpus of African women writers of Southern Africa. The reasons for and implications of this myth are closely examined. I argue that African women writers indeed have a voice and that their stories show an utmost zeal to air women's troubles, agony, desires, and pleasures. The notion that women are considered as passive and submissive is still prevalent today. It is, therefore, necessary and productive to show that there is in fact a high potential of women expertise in general, and – in the context of this study – in the literary field in particular. On the one hand, African women in Southern Africa still suffer from the imbalances in the distribution of knowledge production, but on the other hand, there is a courageous surge of 'voice-throwing,'[8] that is, airing one's opinion, which impressively depicts a multi-faceted literary corpus. This study examines and expounds this corpus with special attention to women's skill in describing their oppression and denigration as well as their passion and their skill to deconstruct prevailing notions on women's so-called Otherness.[9]

Demystifying Old Myths and Creating New Ones

A mode to deconstruct persisting debasing images and their implied connotations of womaness is: speaking up. Mumba once drew attention to the necessity of women to

[8] 'Voice-throwing' or 'to throw their voice' respectively, is a term I encountered when speaking with Black women in Southern Africa.

[9] The chapter "Specifications of Study" will explicate the topic of this study in detail.

make their voices heard by applying a Zambian proverb to her speech: "Tales of hunting will always glorify the hunter until the lion learns how to write" ("At the Bottom" 71). It is an apt figurative argument, I would like to add, as this proverb might remind the reader of Ernest Hemingway's glorious and lengthy descriptions of hunting where man is confronted with his prey eye to eye, always in danger and yet always triumphantly victorious where hunting expectations and hunting indulgence mix with the wild beauty and graciousness of the animal and form a masculine primeval experience. The lion's point of view remains unheard, until – as the saying goes – he "learns how to write."

This proverb implies two notions: a narrative will always be followed by a counter-narrative even if it takes a longer period of time to tell or to write it down, and it contains the illustrative urge which Mumba has used in the context of a woman's obligation to write down her own story. This compulsion derives from two responsibilities which are "first, to tell about being a woman and secondly, to describe reality from a woman's perspective" (Mumba, "At the Bottom" 71). The proverb implies a "process of expansion"[10] – an expansion which enables women to deconstruct old, negative myths and to create new, positive ones.

The reader may now hesitate to accept the idea of creating new, positive myths as the term 'myth' itself has been criticised by scholars as early as Plato as being untrue or unconfirmed and therefore of doubtful value.[11] Of what use then would the creation of new, positive myths be for women? A discussion on what is true or real and thereby trying to settle the justification of existence or non-existence, would be an endless and fruitless endeavour. What one may consider as true or real respectively is based on a rather shaky foundation as "[t]he *impression* of reality depends on constancy, on

[10] Term borrowed from Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* 204.

[11] Cf. also Nünning 388.

permanence" (emphasis added)[12] and it seems that these constructs resemble more – to use Paul Watzlawick's provocative words – "a knife without a blade and a missing handle."[13] It thus makes more sense to focus on the myths' relation to culture:

> A mythology is [...] a cultural model, expressing the way in which man wants to shape and reshape the civilization that he himself has made (Kolawole 53).

Mary E. Modupe Kolawole, a Nigerian scholar, also draws our attention to the fact that

> [a]lthough mythic imagination structures human thought and actions in many societies, it does shape lives and values more profoundly in Africa than in Western societies. [...] To many people *in traditional African societies, myths* are imbibed in such a near sacred way that they *possess some factual values.* [...] In the African context, mythology plays a central role in transmitting values and instilling discipline. (53-55, emphasis added)

Even if "[t]he anonymous origin of myths may play down their appropriation by individuals," they often operate without our knowledge, as Levi-Strauss has observed; thus, influencing and shaping imagination unconsciously and therefore constituting a "productive power" (qtd. in Kolawole 61).

Thus myths hold universal messages for a people or a community and serve for the interpretation of their world. It is a tool to structure the way one sees the world into acceptable patterns, it helps to comprehend complex structures, to find an orientation in life, and it transmits values. "The study of myths is indeed a valuable tool of studying a

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[12] Own translation from the German language: "Der Eindruck der Wirklichkeit hängt [..] von der Stetigkeit, der Dauerhaftigkeit, ab" (Nabokov 74).

[13] Own translation from the German language: "Die Wirklichkeit – ein Messer ohne Klinge, an dem der Griff fehlt?"; cf. Watzlawick book cover.

people's culture, and literature in particular" (Kolawole 56), especially if one looks at the central position which myths take in oral tradition. Myths also determine gender biases and offer "the *raison d'être* for male domination of the power structure" (Kolawole 54). Following Kolawole,

> [t]he internalization of values is relevant to the analysis of African woman's positioning. African myths, legends, encomiums, proverbs and folktale play prominent roles in shaping the woman's place. (55-56)

As an explanation she gives some examples, most of them of Nigerian origin, but she also introduces a few Zimbabwean Shona proverbs, two of which I would like to quote here. "Mukadzi munaku kurega kuroya anoba / A beautiful woman always has a blemish; if she is not a witch, she is a thief" (64). Although beauty is a much sought after and appreciated asset (who would exchange a beautiful woman for an ugly or ordinary one?), a radiant beauty might confuse a man and tempt him to do or say things he later regrets or would not have done otherwise. A woman's beauty beguiles, bequeaths power, and men are afraid of losing their control and domination over women. The paranoia of losing this masculine primeval sense justifies their taking measures in whatever way suitable to arrange the so-called deranged and to order the alleged disordered women respectively. The Shona proverb "[m]usha mukadzi / Behind the successful family there is a woman" (63) might induce, compared with the aforementioned proverb, an ambivalent stance towards women as on first sight this proverb seems to be a favourable one. However, as Kolawole argues, the "attitude of respectability" underlies the notion that the importance of a woman resembles more an "arbiter" than a "custodian of authority" and as such the proverb again shows the limitations of women in society (63).

In a seSotho proverb of Lesotho, a woman's body is compared to an animal's: "A woman is like the merino sheep: her beauty is judged by her backside" (Schipper, *Source of all Evil* 55) and a linking of female sexual organs with unfavourable behaviour is expressed by one of the sayings of Ellen Kuzwayo's seTswana proverb collection *African Wisdom* :

"O tshwara nnyo gabedi ka letsogo/ Do not grasp a vagina twice with your hand." This proverb is applied as a warning in the sense of: "Do not return to a situation which was nasty. Learn from your previous experience, for example, if a marriage has been bitter, think twice before remarrying" (48).

Not only proverbs, but also riddles, tales, songs, and anecdotes, mostly straightforward in their moral and didactic function, are still very common in African societies and "are replete with gender myths that project negative values" (Kolawole 55).

In Sotho, Tswana, and Ndebele villages of the 19th century, a trend to gender divided storytelling existed. Fictional stories were mostly told by women, associated with the hut area and often aimed at girls and young women whereas men told their narratives to a male audience in courtyards. Male narratives tended to deal more with historical aspects like warfare and hunting stories of forefathers; women's tales related more to social conduct for girls and women. Storytelling touching topics like law, justice, duty, obedience and virtue was conducted by both women and men, but likewise these stories were linked to the specific audience (Hofmeyr, *We Spent Our Years* 9). And indeed, women's participation in constructing and deconstructing narratives was quite impressive. Their stories were not mere gender-conductive folktales as "*go bolela dinonwane* (to narrate stories) can also mean to tell tall tales" and by many women these narratives were considered as

> an important and potentially powerful cultural resource from which status could be wrung. [...] Most *dinonwane* can, indeed, be construed as subversive and unsettling accounts in which all known social categories and boundaries are upset. Men become women; animals become human; women fall in love with animals; people eat one another. The stories are also characterised by hallucination, vision and illusion that undermine 'realistic' ways of seeing. As a whole, the body of stories that make up the *nonwane* tradition are fantastic, grotesque, humorously scatalogical and powerfully erotic. (Hofmeyr, *We Spent Our Years* 35)

Thus, despite negative gender projection in orality, women participating strongly in oral traditions are powerful and their voices, as Kolawole reminds, "remain audible, as we see in satirical songs and poetry, which are women's domain" (74).[14]

The common notion about women being in general passive, voiceless, and powerless seems to be doubtful especially if we look not only at orature,[15] but also if we try to find some evidence in the past where women have held various influential social and economic positions throughout the African continent as well.[16] I will address this phenomenon in a following chapter entitled "Women's Authority, Voicing and Writing in Southern Africa."

As to the danger of myth creation and victimisation of women, I would like to add an example. To speak of women's inactivity, passiveness, or voicelessness is to fall victim to the same biased erring as achieved by critics when talking about, for example, the general and overall discrimination of *lobola*,[17] the traditional bride price or dowry. Reducing lobola to 'women for cattle' and condemning it on general terms as an example of discrimination against women, may serve as a justifiable paradigm nowadays, but it does not show its complex implication. To neglect speaking about the original, traditional function of lobola is to foster a negative myth. It is a myth which, although it seems favourable to speak up against the oppression of women, actually undermines women by implying that tradition has long since forced them to be a commodity for men.

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[14] Due to the male migrant labor policy and the far-reaching forced removals of the 1960s, historical storytelling by men has almost entirely disappeared whereas female storytelling still continues; cf. Hofmeyr *We Spent Our Years* 37.

[15] This term has been coined by Piu Zirimu, an Ugandan linguist and literary critic. Orality + literature was coined to orature giving oral storytelling/performance the same importance as literature.

[16] Kolawole impressively describes woman and social transformation in pre-colonial and colonial Africa in her book *Womanism and African Consciousness*; also cf. Ekechi 1996.

[17] The term *lobola* (isiZulu) is the most common used term in Southern Africa, although indigenous languages have their own terms, e.g. *roora* in chiShona or *bohali* in seSotho.

Originally, lobola was a symbolic gesture in form of a reasonable, affordable present and was meant to show a woman's worth (not worth in the European sense, that is, economic worth, but in the sense of esteem). While the notion 'women for cattle' has "persisted to some degree, [... it has] increasingly been challenged as over-simplistic, and criticised for [.. its] representation of those participating in lobola transfers as simple bearers of productive and reproductive capacities" (Ansell 700). The meanings and functions of lobola were multiple

> relating to the distribution of material resources; the establishment of relationships within and between lineages; the maintenance of social control and the construction of social identity. (Ansell 698)

It also functioned as a kind of social security system, as for example in traditional Shona society. The person who received lobola would have to take responsibility for the women in case of separation from her husband (Magaisa 129).

A dowry could also consist – in case the husband in spe could not present a proper gratitude – of several years of labour on the bride's parents' homestead. Ansell refers to Murray who reported that in Lesotho some twenty-five years ago full payment might take ten to twenty years and the marriage would not have been considered as formally fulfilled before the time service had been completed:

> [M]arriage should be regarded as a process in time and not as a single point of transition between the unmarried and the married state. Indeed the Sesotho maxim bohali ha bo fele is perhaps best translated as 'affinity never ends' (qtd. in Ansell 701).[18]

[18] Ansell also refers to Gelfand, *The Genuine Shona* 49, who notes that also in Zimbabwe *lobola* was seldom paid in a single installment.