

Noise, Odour & Politics of Representation

Pius Adesanmi

DURING an electoral campaign in the early 1990s, Jacques Chirac, the incumbent president of France, found it expedient to exploit the growing anti-immigration ambience in France with a view to whipping up nationalistic sentiments. The average French worker, he complained, does not only undergo the unbearable agony of sharing his space with an immigrant who, most often, has more than one wife and a horde of children, but must also contend with 'the noise and odour' generated by those unwanted 'Others.' It is needless pointing out the fact that in contemporary France, the pejorative term 'immigré' (immigrant) has come to refer mainly to Africans of sub-Saharan and Maghrebian extraction.

Chirac's seething representation of 'othered' immigrants as purveyors of offensive noise and odour draws powerful attention to the power relations between the West and its others, spelt out in terms of an agelong politics of representation which has become the cornerstone of post colonial discourse. Indeed, the works of Edward Said, especially *Orientalism* constitute the most extensive illustration of the politics of representation. Said argues convincingly that the power to represent the native, to construct him as lazy, indolent and barbaric is foundational to the power to dispossess him under the guise of a jaded 'mission civilisatrice.'

Interestingly, representation provides the theoretical praxis for understanding the issues at stake in *Eye of the Sky*, the first novel of South African writer, Rayda Jacobs. Set in the eighteenth century, the novel traces the beginnings of uneasy contacts between white settlers in the Cape and the brown-skinned Sonqua people, contacts which eventually culminated in the horrors of apartheid.

Willem Woof, a farmer and prominent settler lives with his large family in Woof's Nek, the farm site where the story begins. Conflict sets in when Roeloff Woof, Willem's youngest son begins to demonstrate his love for the disempowered Sonqua natives. Realising the danger in the young boy's incipient liberalism, Harman Woof, Roeloff's grandfather quickly moves in to justify a politics of dispossession which Roeloff finds reprehensible:

We live by the same laws of the Veld, Thoff. Bosjesman (bushman) takes what he can from the land by his nature, we take by the smoke in our guns. Both of us have to live (37).

And, of course, the settlers in this interesting novel do not leave the reader in doubt that the

Rayda Jacobs, EYES OF THE SKY, Heinemann, Oxford, 1996, 231pp

only nature they are ready to ascribe to the natives is that of noise and odour. The language of the Soqua is to them incomprehensible babble. When Roeloff pushes his liberalism to the point of trying to get married to the only girl he truly loves, Zokho - who happens to be a native - the elderly Wynand quickly draws his attention to the dangers ahead:

Bosjesmans are at the bottom of the heap. They have no status... when you marry Zokho - and don't get me wrong, I like the girl! - you'll set the course for the rest of your life. People won't look at who you are, only at what you have done (124).

But Roeloff is not the type to be discouraged easily. He believes in the concept of hybridity. His long association with the Sonqua, especially with the ageless Twa who plays the role of his spiritual guide and slave at once, convinces him of the possibilities of a negotiated existence that can be energised by his multiple identities.

Unfortunately, these possibilities fly off in the face of the acute pragmatism and near-fated pessimism of Zokho who knows deep within her that Roeloff

...wasn't Soqua. Would never be. He spoke the language and played at being one of them, but he was what he was and would always be: the son of a whiteman. (50)

But we must not conclude too fast that Rayda Jacobs has written one of those painfully familiar novels in which the natives are merely objectified as marionettes incapable of thinking and making any meaning of their distress. Indeed, the natives in *Eyes of the Sky* know the enemy. And they are not afraid of naming him as exemplified by Limp Kao's emotional outburst:

The whiteman has not treated us kindly. Everyday he pushes us further and further to the sun. We are not selfish about his tak-

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ing a piece of our land but he wants the fruit of the soil and the animals on it, and doesn't want us to have anything...This was all ours before he came here with his guns...soon we will fall off the edge of the earth.

Unfortunately, the racial and cultural tensions are left largely unresolved at the end of

the novel. Roeloff eventually marries one of his kind and goes back to join his people. Can this apparent failure of hybridity have deeper implications for the post-apartheid polity of contemporary South Africa?

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Women of the South

Ayo Olukotun

Nina Emma Mba, **NIGERIAN WOMEN MOBILISED: WOMEN'S POLITICAL ACTIVITY IN SOUTHERN NIGERIA, 1900-1965**, International and Area studies (IAS), University of California & Crucible publishers, Lagos, 1997, 344pp

HISTORY may be a sloppy teacher, in that historical parallels are fumbling or inaccurate guides for the more complex challenges of our generation, but it certainly does cast a long shadow over today's giddy events. History may not explain the present, but it does help to situate it in perspective.

In a world in which

Ibadan history school. Mba fills several gaps in our understanding of the role-definition and self-image of women in Nigerian society, as those roles and images have evolved through the rapid flux of the colonial experience and the early postcolonial period.

Anchored solidly on primary sources in the shape of painstaking interviews with major compatriots such as Mrs Olufumilayo Ransome-Kuti, and Chief (Mrs) Janet Makelu as well as archival material and the private papers of women activists, the book conducts a detailed investigation into the many battles fought by several women organisations and shows us the connecting threads. It delves into the organisational character, leadership styles, mobilisation frameworks and the concerted factors which informed such women unprisings as the *Nwaobiala* -the anti-taxation protests, the water rates conflict and the political party involvement of women in Eastern and Western Nigeria. In focusing specifically on the role of women in well known anti-colonial protests, she uncovers a fresh perspective which she employs to retell the social and political history of colonial southern Nigeria. For example, although much of the history

of political parties has been ably condified in such monumental works as Richard Sklar's *Nigerian Political Parties* this is the first book I know that extensively treats both the problematic and unfolding of women's participation in colonial politics. In this way it shows up the gender bias of the male-dominated accounts upon which our knowledge, until now, is based.

Mba shows as well, through case histories that women activism, as exemplified in Miss Adunni Oluwole and Mrs. Ransome-Kuti, while it sometimes dovetailed with male protest, often ran deeper, and had autonomous sources even as it employed innovative techniques of mass action. Equally valuable are her sketches of the place and prestige of women in the pre-colonial social milieu, in which she seeks to demonstrate that women's representation in politics at the highest levels was institutionalised, and therefore, conferred with more power and influence than the succeeding colonial and postcolonial period. Some may quip at this startling conclusion, which could only be arrived at, I feel, if we

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women's empowerment and gender parity have become not just buzz concepts but the resonant slogans of a call to arms of an omnipresent struggle, a scholarly search for the roots of activism is a much valued undertaking. Dr. Mba's prodigiously researched book reflects on exacting standpoints of the