

Afrikaans Literature and Other Themes

Dapo Adeniyi

Robert Kriger and Ethel Kriger (Issue eds.) AFRICANS LITERATURE: RECOLLECTION, REDEFINITION, RESTITUTION (Matatu 15-16), Rodopi, Amsterdam & Atlanta, G.A., 1996, 336pp.

Raoul Granqvist and Jurgen Martini (Issue eds.) PRESERVING THE LANDSCAPE OF IMAGINATION: CHILDREN'S LITERATURE IN AFRICA (Matatu 17-18), 1997, 361 pp.

Kenneth W. Harrow (Issue ed.) WITH OPEN EYES: WOMEN AND AFRICAN CINEMA (Matatu 19), 1997, 263pp.

I OBSERVED the gradual metamorphosis of this journal nearly from inception, more than ten years ago; even contributed an extract from an on-going work - a translation from Yoruba language literature into English. I was struck even at the time by the most explicit declaration of its commitment to 'servicing Africa', that being its very name, appropriated, I believe, from a modern-day Kenyan lore, actually a well-circulated national term for contemporary public transit.

It had peculiarities which promised it a pride of place amidst similar publications not based on African soil, but with similar promises of publishing Africa, its writers and intellectuals as well as provoking discussions on issues that would be of interest to that world.

Matatu adopted the strategy quite early, of sourcing for material mainly from field workers in Africa and leaving the organisation of editorial matter in the hands of general editors who had sufficient subject insight on the specific fields of study that it marked down to specific issues. Today the pattern has largely remained, with only slight mutations from the earliest points of beginnings - more attractive cover and page design spiced occasionally with hand-drawn and photo illustrations, cartoons

and felicitous headlines; all seemingly measured or sparing, and sufficiently serious to keep in the frame of dignified intellectual publications.

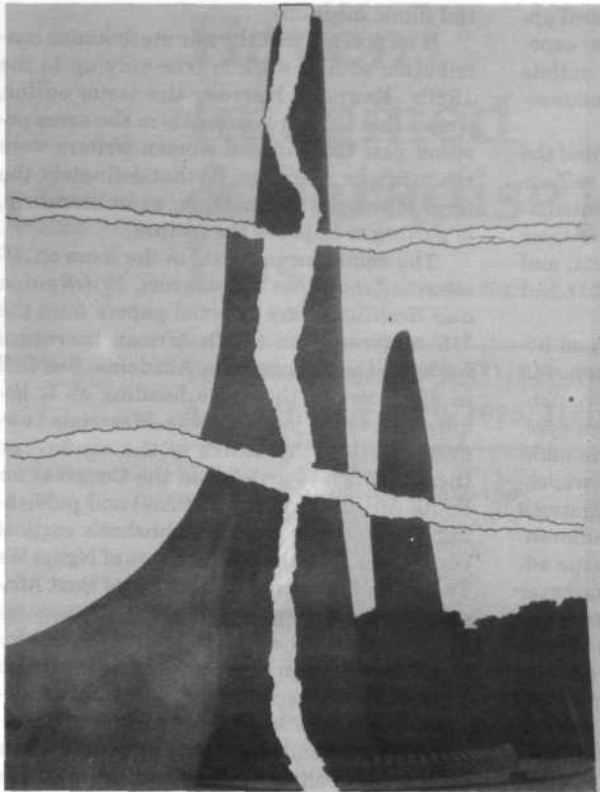
Three more recent volumes, but accounting for five issues (two double issue, one single) on *Afrikaans Literature: Recollection, Redefinition and Restitution (Matatu 15-16)*; *Preserving the Landscape of Imagination: Children's Literature in Africa (Matatu 17-18)* and *With Open Eyes: Women and African Cinema (Matatu 19)* have clear indications of current interests by the journal with possible glimpses into the near future when the present is contrasted with the past.

And *Matatu* grows text heavier; matters which it throws up implicate vast regional as well as cross-regional African landscapes. Ordinarily the broad spectrum of African national literatures in English ought to assure a ceaseless flow of matter and - barring other limitations - regularity of publication. This unfortunately is hardly always the case, and the present writer should know! - conversations with editors of African literature and ideas (including *Matatu's* very editor) reveal common problems, showing that they know quite well the joys of producing, and in particular the inexpressible pleasure of soliciting for contributions among authors and scholars, even the well advertised, publishing starved young and talented ones who dot the canvass of urban and suburban African centres.

The achievements or perceived shortcomings of the publication must therefore be viewed against the backdrop of problems emerging in the contexts of African publishing and publishing in Africa (a subtle but telling differentiation recently made by Kurt Komatek in the *African Publishing Review*).

Running through these volumes is an obvious striving towards topicality - implying that discourse is often tied to concrete reality or occurrences. They consequently denude much of the writings of abstraction and help the reader, particularly the African reader, to relate observations by the writers to familiar issues and happenings with new insight. Holger Ehling's ' "Please Don't Kill Me" - Children in the Liberian Civil War' (*Matatu 17-18*) for example employs the context of the Liberian war to reflect on child creativity. We meet Liberian children in a rather short but captivating review, only a couple of paragraphs long, signposting

>>



publishing for children. Her very tone has the effectiveness of pressing for action, right from the opening paragraph-

The picture book scene in Africa is not an inspiring one. Very few picture books are produced in the region and most of them come from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Ghana and Nigeria. This paucity is due to a dearth of good authors, a scarcity of trained children's book illustrators, the inhibiting economics of publishing in four colours and a general lack of awareness of the importance of illustrations in children's books.

Her speculations which hold out some hope by identifying exceptions - as in the case of good authors for example, and the availability of institutions training illustrators - find a complement in Jurgen Martini who incidentally weaves his own contribution on autobiography for children around archetypes published by Segun herself.

Strengthening in the main claims in Segun's paper, Martini observes (yet reviewing an unpublished article by Walter Schicho rendered at Bayreuth University) children's inconspicuous place in African autobiographies for adults and in the novel, alleging that they are only glimpsed darkly, often in roles of first person narrators or as characters emerging in reminiscences of adult protagonists portrayed in much amusement, as objects of fun and ridicule. When we add the facts that autobiographies for children are generally in short supply across the world and not only in Africa, and that they are further undermined where they share space with the adult figure, the scene is certainly less than inspiring as Segun has said, from the child's point of view.

The backdrop to the foregoing scenario in Africa's case cannot be ignored, painted with yet again - facts and figures by issue editors, Raoul Granqvist and Jurgen Martini; in their forenote they observe that fifteen per cent of all girls in sub-saharan Africa attend secondary schools while for the boys the figure is at twenty-two per cent and by contrast the respective figures for Europe stand at ninety-three per cent and ninety-one per cent. With the overwhelming majority of potential contributors to, and consumers of juvenile and children's literature outside school, the prospect for all types of literature (adult, juvenile or children) is obvious. This means of course that the oral tale is placed at an advantage, helped particularly in Africa's urban locations by children's fasci-

>>

their own images of the war in pencil sketches solicited by The Catholic Education Secretariat in Liberia jointly with UNICEF, sourced from pupils in about forty schools across Liberia. Similarly Andree-Jeanne Totemeyer in 'Desert Survival and Wilderness Adventures' dwells on Namibian juvenile literature in a manner that appropriates Namibian history, thereby contextualising the problems leading to the paucity of adolescent literature in that country. This article (an observable feature in Mataru), is illustrated with much data and statistics, almost signifying a sort of stylistic unity.

Apart from being richly topical and in contact with realities surrounding the subjects in discussion (i.e children's literature, gender perspectives to African film-making and the issue of national language(s) for post-apartheid South Africa) there is also a striking lucidity about the essays, reportorial in sections and bent on informing. Exceptions to the rule exist though, in Kenneth Harrow's title essay and Stephen Zack's article around Trinh T. Minh-ha's *Reassemblage* in the issue on film which have theoretical overtones.

Mabel Segun's contribution on 'Illustrating for Children' suppresses anger which in any case is justified with situational descriptions of the state with writing, illustrating and

nation to multimedia and a multicultural approach (interview with Kofi Anyidoho) especially as oral forms of literature find outlets in the electronic media and through commercial soaps.

Matatu throws its whole weight behind the recognition of children's creativity as self-existing entities, valid as autonomous contributions to human dialogue and worthy of their own categories, modalities and dialects, and not as mere appendages of adults' creative and literary types.

A unity of purpose may be discerned between the focus on children - and the even more vulnerable adolescents - and women. Dedicated to women, women with open eyes, venturing into the wild fields of movie-making dominated by the males, interviews, essays and film reviews bristle with allegations of male disparagement and attendant unevenness of possibilities for women. The issue admits that female writers have a head-start over the female film-makers, even though in many cases African women film-makers double as writers, or started off as writers, with film which only initially provided attractive outlets of expression to book production eventually virtually supplanting their literary creation.

The temptation is to measure the contribution of women to film development in quantitative rather than qualitative terms. And also to define film as including areas like television film and documentaries. It is quite helpful in the end that contributions consider women both behind and before the camera.

Before the camera, the representation of women against social signifiers like the female body, sub-divided in Susanne MacRae's reflections on 'Matured and Older Women in African Film' into nubile women, young women and older or matured women, identifies symbols such as shapes (of body) and appearance (or adornment) as informing the cinematic portrayal of the female folk. Beti Ellerson in a similar vein reads the images of women through the filmic medium as more than fortuitous symbols telling of change and dichotomy in post-colonial settings.

Discourse follows the same ring of African films, with few variations, except where home videos are implicated as in Nwachukwu-Agbada's 'women in Igbo-language videos'. Since most of the movies are male creations, they represent womenfolk in ways harmonious to existing social stereotypes, which are not necessarily read as always negative or derogatory. However more women behind the camera would mean more women participating in shaping or reshaping the way women are represented and perceived in the influen-

tial filmic medium.

It is reported that the minute feminine contribution to film work is true only up to the 1980s. Kenneth Harrow, the issue editor, writes that they are currently in the same position now that African women writers were ten to fifteen years ago. So that definitely, the force of women film-makers, as in literature, is moving to improve the picture.

The dominant material in the issue on *Afrikaans Literature: Recollection, Redefinition and Restitution* are selected papers from the 7th conference on South African literature hosted in the Evangelische Akademie Bad Boll in 1992, under the same heading as is bequeathed to the journal issue. Materials however overflow the banks of the conference theme to inclose articles on the Congress for South African Writers (COSAW) and publishing, recollections from a publisher's earliest encounters with the manuscripts of Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's fiction and a checklist of East African Women Writers.

Aspects like the interview with South African Writers Lesego Rampolokeng and also with Miriam Tlali especially serve as useful accompaniments to the writings on Afrikaans literature which actually broaden to cover the whole issue of a national language in the context of a new national arrangement. The inclusion of creative writing, a recurrent feature in *Matatu*, may also have been some kind of response to the call by conference participant Patrick Petersen that manuscripts and talents which had been buried in the locations and townships in the era of apartheid be uncovered and restituted.

The theme was perfectly in keeping with the times even as multi-party negotiations in RSA began to signal the emergence of a truly democratic state. After all the dictatorial language policy usage which the conference placed on the platform was the primary cause of the protests leading to the Soweto massacres of 1976. So that recollection would mean a review of the claims of Afrikaaner history about the Afrikaans language; redefinition one of correcting the doctored history of Afrikaans language and redefining its relationship with other South African languages; and restitution, to take the very words of issue editors Robert Kriger and Ethel Kriger

rewriting curricula, re-designing syllabi, commissioning new textbooks, stories, plays, films etc which could / would reflect past iniquities, present challenges and future opportunities.