Desegregation without Integration : Women in African Fiction

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Integrating Nature into American Democracy: The Creeping People, and the Standing People

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We tend to approach the issue of integration in purely human terms. Whether we name it nationalism, racism or sexism, we do not think that the limits of exclusion may apply beyond the human sphere. Nature is ignored. Yet, with the emergence of ecology as a science in the nineteenth century, and the environmental revolution of the 1960s, we are witnessing a potentially dramatic change in our dominant representation of the world, and the place of man and nature in it. The slow realization that we all depend on the complex ecosystems of our planet for survival has exposed our responsibility not only to our own species, but also to nature and the other species. Environmental ethics now demand that we include not only the rights of animals and plants into the sphere of our jurisdiction, but those of rivers, forests, rocks and ecosystems. Will rocks have a legal standing?

The question seems odd, to say the least, in a society that still claims human rights to be its foundation, and the pursuit of material happiness its obsession. But if we consider the Native American worldview, we find a remarkably seductive picture which puts man not right at the centre of the universe, but

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women's role as future builders is also becoming a commonplace of development studies. A U. N. report for 1990 demonstrates that the idea of the importance of women in development is continually gaining conviction. "La prise de conscience du rôle important de la femme dans le développement . . . n'a cessé de progresser depuis l'année 1975."[4] Women, in spite of their traditional exclusion from political and economic power, are increasingly perceived as the vital agents of change and progress in society.

African novelists, in accordance with their tradition of social responsibility, have not lagged behind. As Chinua Achebe said as early as 1965:

> The novelist cannot expect tot be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done. In fact, he should march right in front.[5]

At the time when Achebe made this statement, some African novelists, such as the Senegalese Sembene Ousmane, were already marching right in front for women's development. Others, including Achebe himself, joined the march only much later. As has often been pointed out, the female characters in his early novels exist strictly on the margins of the plot. The makers and doers are all male. In *Things Fall Apart* (1958) the most telling praise that the protagonist Okonkwo can offer his favourite daughter is the reflection that she should have been a boy. But in his most recent novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) the ultimate hope for the future society is expressed symbolically in the final chapter in the birth of a baby girl. This child, the daughter of a man killed in his struggle for a better Nigeria, is given a boy's name, Amaechina, meaning "*May-the-path-never-close*." The path in question is certainly that which leads to the just society envisaged, though not achieved, by the baby's father. The suggestion, therefore, is that it is for women to lead towards the new world. Since Achebe comes as a comparatively late convert to this way of thinking among African novelists, the fact of his conversion must be seen as an indication of the force of the trend.

"Women in development" has thus become an established part of the message of African novelists, just as it is part of the programme of international aid agencies. But the process, unfortunately, is incomplete. In recent years, development specialists have come to realize that the encouragement of women's

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4. *ABC des Nations Unies* (New York: Nations Unies, 1990), p. 132.

5. Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher," *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975), p. 45.

projects in isolation can be counter-productive. There are advantages in integrating women's activities into national programme, and for this reason international agencies now distinguish between "les projets intégrés et ceux qui visent en priorité les femmes."[6] Integrated projects are seen to be the more effective, in that they increase the "visibility" of women in society and can work to modify traditional perceptions concerning their role. It is not enough that women should be allowed to emerge from what UNIFEM refers to as "la ségrégation sexuelle"[7] which results in their effective exclusion from economic and political power. They must also be seen to succeed *in integration with their communities*. In this further dimension of thinking about the place of women in development the African novelists lag behind. Though they show women as fully capable of taking progressive initiatives, their initiative, in whatever field, is never shown as successfully integrated into a programme benefiting the community as a whole. Women succeed strictly as individuals, and not in solidarity with their fellow citizens. Sometimes, indeed, their activity is frankly anti-social. It seems that no African novelist has yet been able to sustain the presentation of female characters at once active, successful and positively engaged with their compatriots in the creation of a new society. In denouncing segregation and discrimination against women, the writers speak out clearly. On the integration of newly empowered women in society their voices remain either muted, or silent.

One of the earliest and still most vigorous fictional accounts of the role of women in development is also one of the most disappointing. Sembeme Ousmane begins *God's Bit of Wood* (1960) with a scene in which a little girl insists, against all custom, that she wants to attend the men's meeting at which a strike is to be debated. In spite of her grandmother's suggestion that she would do better to learn how to prepare a good couscous she gets her way, and is present at the meeting. This opening exchange sets the scene for a novel in which women are shown involving themselves in what had traditionally been viewed as men's affairs. The women's support proves crucial to the men who go on strike, and the final success of the strike action comes about as a result of a march to Dakar by the women. As the novel ends, the women's entry into public life is seen as influencing their private life too; women's readiness to share public responsibility with men is rewarded by men's willingness to share domestic duties with women: water-

6. *Fonds de Développement des Nations Unies pour la Femme* (New York: Nations Unies, 1986), p. 3.

7. *Les Femmes dans le Monde 1970-1990* (New York: Nations Unies, 1992), p. 6.

carrying, formerly seen as an exclusively female task, is performed by husbands too. Integration of women into the development process seems to be assured. But, at the moment of maximum engagement, their leader, Penda, is abruptly eliminated. As a childless and sexually liberated woman, Penda first appears in the novel in the role of social outcast, despised by virtuous wives and daughters. Her action in organizing the march demonstrates her potential as a leader, but as she enters Dakar at the head of the column she is shot dead. Thereafter, though she may retain a positive function as a martyr and a memory, she ceases to operate as a living force for progress. Her role is to reveal women's potential for public, political action, and then to vanish. The process of her integration, from super-outcast (triply inferior, in that she is at once female, childless and liberated) to leader and representative of the group, is cut off at what might have been the most interesting point. The male protagonist, Bakayoko, is left musing, not on the public role which she might have fulfilled in the post-strike society, but rather on whether he might have married her. Thus the brightest prospect offered to her, in retrospect, is that she might have been granted the opportunity, in Millamant's words, to "dwindle into a wife ."[8]

Seventeen years after the publication of *God's Bits of Wood*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o produced *Petals of Blood*, in which he pays conscious tribute to Ousmane's pioneering work in calling for a new social order. Like *God's Bits of Wood, Petals of Blood* recounts the mobilisation of the masses in their search for justice. Like the women of Thies, the villagers of Ilmorog plan a march. But this time men, rather than women, take the lead. Wanja is the only female among the four leaders, and one of the men, Abdullah, is the hero of the day. Indeed, though Wanja is bitterly conscious of injustice to women in society, she seems incapable of considering the development issues which interest the other leading characters. When the union activist, Karega, starts telling her about the condition of dock-workers in Mombasa, she interrupts him to enthuse about Mombasa's tourist attractions: "Coconuts . . . sandy beaches . . . Fort Jesus."[9] Moreover, though she deplores the exploitation of women, she is herself an exploiter, proceeding from a career as bar-girl to a career as proprietress of a brothel, from selling herself to selling other women. She continues to live by what she calls the law of "eat or be eaten" until at the very end of the novel she finds herself unexpectedly pregnant,

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8. William Congreve, "The Way of the World", Act IV, sc. i, in *Complete Plays* (London: Mermaid Series, 1961), p. 346.

9. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (London: Heinemann, 1978), p. 288.

and prepares, apparently, to find full satisfaction in motherhood and private life. Thus in a novel explicitly concerned with development issues, the leading female character remains conspicuously self-absorbed until the end. Another female character, Akinyi, makes an appearance in the final pages, supporting the unionist Karega in his struggle for justice. She, unlike Wanja, is socially conscious, but her role is slight. Ngugi appears, in fact, less progressive than Ousmane in his view of the role of women in development.

In *Petals of Blood*, Wanja achieves financial independence by the use of "bottom power." This has become a commonplace of African fiction: women are shown as routinely obliged to use their sexuality as a route to economic advancement. The choice is not usually seen judgmentally: women, the authors imply, have traditionally been exploited by men, and it is only just that they should seek to redress the balance by exploiting male weakness. In *Double Yoke* (1982), Buchi Emecheta's heroine Nko is not represented as compromising her integrity or dignity when she drives a cool bargain with the professor who has pressured her into an affair: "I want a First Class honours. I don't care how you do it, I want a First Class honours."[10] In the same author's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) the heroine, Nnu Ego, slaves at petty trading to ensure a secure future for her children. Meanwhile her junior wife elects to pursue the same end by leaving the matrimonial home to earn money as a prostitute. In a short time she earns enough to buy a market stall, and her action in choosing to "strike out successfully" on her own is compared favourably to Nnu Ego's "dying hopes and demanding children."[11] The attainment of wealth by "bottom power" is thus implicitly recognized as good sense. It is not, however, socially productive. For women "bottom power" can lead to economic power, but this economic power does not operate for the development of society as a whole. Indeed, it is often presented as socially destructive.

In Flora Nwapa's *One is Enough* (1981) the protagonist Amaka is forced to leave the matrimonial home as a result of her failure to fulfil the essential female role as breeder. She decides on a business career in Lagos. By the intermediary of an amorous Alhaji she obtains her first Ministry contract, for the supply of 10,000 naira's worth of toilet rolls. Her profit on the deal is 3,000 naira. As her career

[10]. Buchi Emecheta, *Double Yoke* (Glasgow: Fontana, 1984), p. 139.
[11]. Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (Heinemann: London, 1985), p. 172.

advances her government contacts expand. Presently she begins to deal with the army:

> Amaka was to go to the Brigade Headquarters in the morning where she would meet a Brigadier who would give her the next contract papers. All it entailed was twenty five percent of the profit.
>
> Amaka was there in the morning, got the contract paper, and nearly swooned. Half a million naira's worth of contract for building a wall around some barracks . . . She went round to the barracks and was astonished to see that the job had been done. The wall had been erected. Perhaps she had made a mistake. So she went back to the Brigadier, but he was not in, so she told someone who was there. He told her that she must be foolish to talk in this way. She should just send her bill for payment . . . Amaka was paid half a million naira within four weeks.[12]

Though it is clear from the text that "Cash Madams" such as Amaka are willing to work hard for their economic advancement, it is equally clear that such advancement contributes nothing to national development, and is in fact achieved at the national expense. However, the author seems more inclined to congratulate Amaka on her success than to deplore the means by which the success is achieved. The title *One is Enough* seems in itself to endorse a strictly individualistic attitude. Amaka's prosperity is for herself alone: after the failure of her first marriage she sees no need to share her life or her wealth with anyone else. One is enough, economically as well as emotionally.

Women like Amaka are determined to succeed, to improve both their standard of living and their standing in society. Too often, as many African novelists point out, the women do the work but the men in their lives reap the rewards. Thus Cypriot Ekwensi's *Jagua Nana* (1961) uses the proceeds of her "bottom power" to finance her young lover's studies in London. In this context the rising African heroine's determination to succeed for herself alone may be seen as a justified reaction to years of sacrifice to undeserving menfolk. In Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter* (1980) Ramatoulaye finds herself after twenty five years of marital partnership supplanted by a young second wife, on whom the husband proceeds to lavish the savings from their joint account. Her friends admonish her: "You are letting someone else pluck the fruits of your labour."[13] Ramatoulaye begins to reflect on the economic facts of marriage, and when after her husband's

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[12]. Flora Nwapa, *One is Enough* (Enugu: Tana Press, 1986), p. 77.

[13]. Mariama Ba, *So Long A Letter* (London: Virago, 1982), p. 48. All future references are to this edition and appear in the text.

death her brother-in-law comes to propose that she marry him, she does not mince her words:

> To help you out with your financial obligation, one of your wives dyes, another sells fruit, the third untiringly turns the handle of her sewing machine. You, the revered Lord, you take it easy. (58)

Women work; men profit. It is natural, in these circumstances, that women who become aware of this situation should no longer wish to share with the men in their lives. But their new awareness apparently does not extend to a feeling of solidarity with their exploited sisters. Ramatoulaye *says* that her heart rejoices "each time a woman emerges from the shadows" (88), but her joy is strictly limited to the emergence of middle-class women like herself. For her friend Aissatou, who after a failed marriage has gone on to make a successful career in the U.S.A., she has nothing but admiration and sympathy. But for the "Lady-Mother-in-Law" whose daughter becomes Ramatoulaye's co-wife, she feels nothing but contempt. Yet this woman too is seeking economic security in the only way she knows. Ramatoulaye sneers at her humble origins, the "unsteady hut with zinc walls covered with magazine pages," (49) and mocks her unfamiliarity with modern bathroom and kitchen fixtures. Evidently the desire to see women integrated as equal partners in the race for prosperity and dignity is restricted, for Ramatoulaye, to one class only — the minority class of educated middle-class women. The rights which Ramatoulaye claims for herself are not to be extended to the likes of Lady-Mother-in-Law.

All the fictional heroines cited so far are compromised, in one way or another, in their movement towards development. Penda, potentially the most hopeful, as well as the earliest of them all, is removed from the scene before she can assume the role in society which she merits. Wanja, with every opportunity to develop an understanding of the problems of exploitation and underdevelopment in society as a whole, persists in taking everything personally, and is apparently unable to think beyond personal revenge and personal satisfaction. Amaka seeks to improve her own economic position at the expense of society, and Ramatoulaye embraces the cause of women's development exclusively for members of her own small group. None of these women, except perhaps Penda, seems capable of a vision of social development in which women might function as part of the national whole, building a better world for the whole community. Only one novelist, Bessie Head, seems even to approach the pioneering vision of

Sembene Ousmane. In *Maru* the heroine's situation is made the occasion for an analysis of social issues affecting the nation as a whole. She is seen not merely as an individual but as a key to the future development of Batswana society. Here, therefore, we might hope to find a positive presentation of women's integration in the development process.

Margaret Cadmore, the heroine of *Maru*, is doubly handicapped. First, she is female and thus, in the traditional view of her society, "a lower form of life."[14] When the principal of the school at which she obtains her first job wishes to dismiss her he is confident that the matter can be easily settled: "She can be shoved out. It's easy. She's a woman" (41). The reason for which he wishes to dismiss her constitutes her second social disqualification. She is a Masarwa — a member of the ethnic group whose name itself, whether in the Setswana "Masarwa" or the English "Bushman," seems to Head to carry a pejorative sense — "a low, filthy nation" (12). *Maru* relates Margaret's triumph over her double disqualification. Beginning, like Cinderella, in circumstances of deprivation and oppression, she achieves a marriage with Prince Charming in the form of a hereditary Batswana chief. In so doing she fulfils the destiny desired for her by her adoptive English missionary mother, who prophesied in her childhood: "One day you will help your people" (17). This help comes in the form of the marriage which provides inspiration and encouragement to the Masarwa people:

> When people of the Masarwa tribe heard about Maru's marriage to one of their own, a door silently opened on the small airless room in which their souls had been shut for so long a time. The wind of freedom, which was blowing throughout the world for all people, turned and flowed into the room. (126)

Here, therefore, is a novel in which a woman's passage from segregation to integration is seen as exemplary for the development of the society as a whole. Head explicitly presents Margaret's case as an instance of the possibility of necessary change at the national level, and Margaret herself as the agent of the change.

Unfortunately, however, the character and personality with which Margaret is endowed by her creator are not equal to the role which she is required to play. At the beginning of the novel the prognostics are good. Margaret demonstrates force and determination in insisting on her identity. Whereas she could easily conceal her Masarwa origin, she speaks out boldly for her people. Her friend

[14]. Bessie Head, *The Collector of Treasures* (London: Heinemann, 1977) p. 99.

Dikeledi begs her to suppress the truth: "Don't mention this to anyone else . . . If you keep silent about the matter, people will simply assume you are a Coloured" (24). But Margaret refuses to keep silent. She proclaims her origins with pride, and when a child in her class calls her "Bushy" she feels angry enough to kill the child on the spot (She does not, of course, do so). At this stage we are told that Margaret's quiet, passive appearance is *only* an appearance, and that behind it lies concealed another, exceedingly powerful personality: "She was a shadow behind which lived another personality, of great vigour and vitality" (71). The image of the shadow returns later in the novel, immediately before the crisis of her marriage with the chief. This time she is referred to as "the hidden and more powerful woman who dwelt behind the insignificant shadow" (112). The implication, perhaps, is that all women are made to seem insignificant shadows in society, and all women have a hidden potential. But in the body of the text, only Margaret's insignificant shadow is made apparent. After her first brave stand in declaring her racial identity she remains a passive figure throughout the novel. Two men, both of royal blood, fall in love with her, causing violent upheavals in themselves and in their society, but she herself seems scarcely aware of what is going on. The chief decides to marry her, but she remains ignorant of his interest until the very moment he arrives in a van to carry her off. She gets meekly into the van when told to do so, and apparently marries him in the same spirit of passive acceptance, even though she is in love with another man. This extreme passivity makes it seem to the reader that, far from having a powerful personality, Margaret in fact has no personality at all. For this reason it becomes hard to see her either as the heroic champion of her people or as a convincing example of women's power to change society.

Furthermore, when Margaret gets into the van and drives away from the village, it is not merely for a honeymoon. She and her new husband leave the village definitively, to take up residence far away, in an isolated area, down "a little brown, dusty footpath turned away from the roaring busy highways of life" (7). There it seems that Margaret, her husband and his three faithful retainers form a little community of their own. It is as if Prince Charming and Cinderella can only make a life together in isolation from their society. Margaret, the Masarwa, is not integrated into the Batswana community; she is removed from it. This, like her passive personality, operates to weaken the impact of the book's positive social message. All the materials for an exemplary account of the escape from segregation to integration are present, but the combination of the heroine's

almost non-existent character with the couple's retreat from society make this novel only another instance of the African novelists' failure to present their female characters as not only empowered, but accepted as such in their communities.

African literature, according to many of its practitioners, is to be distinguished from European literature by its fundamentally communal values. In Steve Biko's words: "All African songs are group songs."[15] In all the novels cited here, the group song is strangely silent. The heroines are seen as individuals, never as units in a social whole. They are seen as important agents of change, but not as implementing change in the context and for the benefit of the group. The possible reasons for this are various. In the case of male writers, even the most enlightened such as Ousmane, the ability to imagine a functioning society in which women are truly empowered may, quite unconsciously, be lacking. Penda, therefore, can be a leader only on condition that she meets an early death. Ngugi wa Thiong'o is generous in his acknowledgement of women's dynamism, but creates in Wanja a stereotypical female who is unable to transcend personal emotion in the interests of social justice. For the female authors, it may be that the bitterness engendered by the years of exclusion has induced a tendency to present women who struggle and succeed *alone*, often in a spirit of revenge against the society which has oppressed them. Thus Amaka's generation of wealth for herself by robbing her society is not reproved. The last example, that of Bessie Head, is harder to explain. Perhaps, in spite of her commitment both to development issues and to the central role of women in development, an involuntary pessimism has crept in. In an ideal world a woman could change the direction of society. In the real world she remains, like Margaret Cadmore, weak. For whatever reasons, the fact remains that none of the novelists cited here has succeeded in matching the triumphant empowerment of their female characters with a triumphant integration of their new power in the communal movement to development. In this sense African fiction is still waiting for the women who will build the new world.

[15]. Steve Biko, "Some African Cultural Concepts", in *I Write What I Like* (London: Heinemann, 1982), p. 43.