

Black Women Writers as Dynamic Agents of Change: Empowering Women from Africa to America

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Abstract

Black women have a long history and tradition of activism that can be traced to pre-colonial Africa. Women of African descent who are writers have challenged the status quo in the cultural, political, and spiritual realms of their communities by using their craft to present women who defy traditional roles and resist strictures of oppression. Using a cross-cultural analysis, I will establish how the Senegalese writer, Mariama Ba (*So Long a Letter*); the African American writer, Alice Walker, (*The Color Purple*) and the Zimbabwean writer, J. Nozipo Maraire, (*A Letter to My Daughter*), all give voice to women who had long been silenced and devalued—women who, according to Zora Neale Hurston, have the status of a mule.

A principal question guides the paper's examination of activism and leadership: How can we use these rich, dynamic literary portraits and knowledge of Black women to model qualities necessary for activism and leadership to empower women to foster social change in contemporary African and African American communities, as well as in other communities ?

Introduction

Black women have a long history of activism that can be traced to pre-colonial Africa. Those women who are writers have challenged the status quo in the cultural, political, and spiritual realms of their communities by using their craft to present women who defy traditional roles and resist strictures of oppression. Using a cross-cultural analysis, I will establish how the Senegalese writer, Mariama Ba (*So Long a Letter*); the African American writer, Alice Walker, (*The Color Purple*) and the Zimbabwean writer, J. Nozipo Maraire, (*Zenzele: A Letter to My Daughter*), all give voice to women who had long been silenced and devalued—women who, according to Zora Neale Hurston, have the status of a mule. ¹

A principal question will guide the paper's examination of activism and leadership: How can we use these rich, dynamic literary portraits and knowledge of Black women to model qualities necessary for activism and leadership to empower

¹ Hurston, Zora Neale, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, (New York: Harper and Row, 1937/1990), 14.

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A sense of community exists among African and African American writers: Zimbabwean writer Tsitsi Dangarembga says that the black American female writers offer more relevancy for her than does white Western feminism.² Generally, African women embrace African American women writers and vice versa: South African writer Bessie Head had established friendships with several African American writers, including Alice Walker, Nikki Giovanni, and Toni Morrison, all of whom admired her writing. Whether writers or from Africa or American, they have common interests and goals. According to Jayne Cortez, poet and president of Organization of Women Writers of Africa, “Black women writers from around the globe have been struggling against racism, exploitation, gender oppression, and other human rights violations.”³ She continues, “The psychological and physiological consequences of globalization have been a major part of the subject matter of the contemporary African writer. In relation to Africa and African culture, the international slave trade and colonialism forced significant contact with globalization in its early manifestations. What Black women writers want is to participate in global decisions concerning survival and the future of humanity. They need access to the progress of globalization.”⁴

² Veit-Wild, Flora, “ ‘Women Write about the Things That Move Them:’ A Conversation with Tsitsi Dangarembga,” *Moving Beyond Boundaries: Black Women’s Diasporas*, Vol. 2. Ed. Carol Boyce Davies (New York: NYU Press, 1995), 30.

³ Cortez, Jayne, Remarks given at Yari Yari Pamberi Conference, New York University, October 12-16, 2004.

⁴ Cortez, 2004.

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African women seem to embrace Walker's womanist tradition and have created fictional characters reflecting this tradition. However, in looking specifically at *womanism* as defined by Walker, some African women argue that Walker's concept of womanism applies mostly to African Americans, and does not adequately fit African women. According to Chikwenye Ogunyemi, African American womanism overlooks African peculiarities. Areas which are relevant for Africans but which Blacks in America cannot deal with include extreme poverty, in-law problems, older women oppressing younger women, women oppressing their co-wives, or men oppressing their wives.⁵

Walker offers a four-pronged definition of *womanist*:

1—*womanist*—from “womanish.” Usually referring to outrageous, audacious, or willful behavior.

2—Womanist is to feminist as purple is to lavender

3—Loves music. . . Love the Spirit. . . Loves struggle.. .

4—woman who loves other women sexually and/or nonsexually .

Committed to survival and wholeness of entire people—male and female.⁶

Drawing from her rural Georgia background, where people would label a girl “womanish,” if she acted mature beyond her chronological age, writer Alice Walker captures the spirit of the womanist whose frivolity allows her to have an affinity for music, the spirit, and struggle, all characteristics that fictional characters created by the

⁵ Arndt, Susan, “African Gender Trouble and African Womanism: An Interview with Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Wangari Muthoni,” *Signs* 25, no.3, (2000), 714-715.

⁶ Walker, Alice, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

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Black women characters featured in this paper possess in some form or fashion. Her definition is robust enough to account for the complexity of the Black feminist represented by a deep shade of purple, when compared to the white feminist associated with the lighter shade of lavender. Elements of her definition will be examined in light of their applicability to components of leadership and activism conveyed in the works of the Black women writers whose ideas are evaluated in this paper.

In the activist tradition of writers in the independent, post-colonial Zimbabwe in Southern Africa, J. Nozipo Maraire, born in pre-independent Rhodesia in 1966, produced *Zenzele: A Letter to My Daughter*, a work which gives women empowering roles as bearers and keepers of cultural traditions and values. As the title indicates, the book is an extended letter from Amai Zenzele, a dying mother, to her daughter, Zenzele, who is about to leave Zimbabwe to undertake medical study in the United States. As the author's first and only novel, the largely autobiographical work is patterned on the life of Maraire, who ultimately attended medical school at Columbia and later Yale to become a neurosurgeon. Amai Zenzele defies the maternal stereotype of passive mother. She takes action by nurturing her daughter and arming her with the cultural tools to fortify her identity when she is away from her home country. Similarly, Amai Zenzele provides the same kinds of virtuous lessons when she imparts to her daughter her wisdom consisting of a healthy respect for the cultural values and traditions of her people in Zimbabwe. Her mother best sums up the worldview that she wants her daughter to have when she states:

“How could I allow you to grow up reading Greek classics, Homer's *Iliad*? the voyages of Agamemnon, and watch you devour *The Merchant*

of Venice and Romeo and Juliet yet be ignorant of the lyrical, the romantic, and the tragic that have shaped us as Africans?⁷

Her mother continues to explain the reasons that they take their annual sojourns to their village is so that she can understand and know the cultural traditions of her people.

Maraire's work continues the activist tradition begun by predecessors like South African writer Bessie Head by directly highlighting the roles of resistance that women assumed as freedom fighters during the period in which Rhodesia made the transition to Zimbabwe.

For, *Zenzele* gives an accurate account of the courage of the women who actively engaged in the fight for freedom. As active participants, the women dressed in fatigues fought alongside the men and were often indistinguishable from them. Using the language and images of battle and fierce animals, Amai Zenzele, as narrator, paints a picture of these daring women:

On their backs, they carried not runny-nosed babies but the hope of a different generation in the form of runs of ammunition, maps, codes, and supplies to fuel the battle that ultimately was to lead up to independence. They were as foreign to our traditional image of women as Eskimos. They were a product of the armed struggle. These women too fashioned their own identity. They were feared and admired, for in battle it was rumored the women could be the fiercest of all. The Rhodesian troops called them the 'bobcats' because the Shona women were as fierce as lions.⁸

⁷ Maraire, J. Nozipe, *Zenzele: A Letter for My Daughter*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1996), 8.

⁸ Maraire, 168.

Through the character Tinawo, Maraire has created a woman who used the tactics of subversion and duality long used as survival mechanisms in black communities. Employed as a domestic and nanny to a white household, Tinawo, pretending to be an imbecilic, illiterate, servant, spies for the liberation forces by snooping in her (baas) (boss's) official papers and listening to some of the conversations that he has with military officials. In actuality, her boss has a very low opinion of her, believing her to be incapable of something as sophisticated as spying. In a conversation with one of his British peers, completely fooled by Tinawo's appearances, he renders his low expectations of her, "The girl has been in my employ for over one year. . .In the entire twelve months, she has not displayed one whit of intelligence. She cannot read. And God knows she can barely write out the grocery list." ⁹ Tinawo certainly knows what it means to "wear the mask that grins and lie", ¹⁰ to which Dunbar's popular poem attests.

The sisterhood dimension of the womanist framework can be applied to an analysis of *Zenzele*. A further examination of womanism reveals a revised definition by Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi which is similar to Walker's: "Black womanism is a philosophy that celebrates black roots, the ideas of black life...Its ideal is for black unity where every black person has a modicum of power and so can be a 'brother' or a 'sister' or a 'father' or a 'mother' to the other." ¹¹ This sisterly relationship between Tinawo and her childhood friend Linda, similar to that of Sisi Tambu and Nyasha was

⁹ Maraire, 148-149.

¹⁰ Dunbar, Paul Laurence, "We Wear the Mask," *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, 2nd ed., eds. Henry Louis Gates and Nellie McKay (New York: W. W. Norton, 2004), 918.

¹¹ Ogunyemi, Chikwenye Okonjo, "Womanism: The Dynamics of the Contemporary Black Female Novel in English," *Signs* 11, no. 1 (1985), 68-69.

essential to the success of their roles as freedom fighters. In describing their friendship, Ama Zenzele, tells her daughter that Linda and Tinawo had always been “very close” and “virtually inseparable.”¹²

Maraire globalizes the struggle for freedom by creating a character, Sister Africa, “an African American who travels to various African countries searching for her Nigerian father. Her story of Sister Africa, whom she described as having the gift of storytelling, becomes a fascinating story within the overall story. “Sister Africa” eventually finds her father, known affectionately as “Baba Africa,” who educates the younger generations through his oral dissertations. Ama Zenzele recalls how he uses one occasion to speak on Pan-Africanism, a concept espousing unity among the scattered peoples of the Diaspora using cultural analogies of farming and nature:

‘If you take a seed,’ he said one day, and scatter it across the lands, some will end up in marshes, some in rich fertile lands with flowing streams, others in sand, and others among the mountains and rocks. If the seed is tough, it will adapt and survive in all conditions; if it is weak, it will perish. The same seed in one country may yield a baobab but in another an oak. Our race is a potent seed. Whether you are from Ghana or Guyana, you are born of the same seed and you will be of the same fruit. We must recognize our fruition in London, in Paris, in Dakar, in Harare, and in Maputo. Our roots are deep and wide. We must extend our hearts and minds, like bridges, over the swamps of racial injustice to link us together.’¹³

¹² Maraire, 135-136.

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As in *Zenzele*, both *The Color Purple*, and *So Long a Letter* focus on women who are mothers. Both books are a woman's narrative where a woman writes to another woman as a way of emancipating herself. After assuming the role of stepmother at a very young age, Celie, *The Color Purple's* primary character, grows from a shy young woman to one who has the confidence to stand up for herself, eventually becoming one of those women whose tongue hurls words of self-defense. When Albert, her husband insults her in the rural Georgia vernacular, "You black, you pore, you ugly, you a woman. Goddam, You ain't nothin' at all."¹⁴

By the end of the story, she is able to stand up to her husband's insults, to retort, "I may be black, pore, ugly, but I'm here."¹⁵ Ramatoulaye, protagonist in *So Long a Letter*, has had to juggle the demands of mothering and teaching, while suffering the abuse of a patriarchal system. All of these women/mothers emancipate themselves through a literate tradition: they write themselves into emancipation—mental, spiritual, and physical emancipation—through letters as in *The Color Purple* and in *So Long a Letter*.

Much of Walker's *Color Purple* prominently displays women who have dared to engage in a struggle for their own self-respect and dignity, a struggle often achieved collectively through the bonding and sisterhood of women. Celie experiences a spiritual coming of age, an emancipation of the self through this bonding. A dimension of Alice Walker's theory of womanism which emphasizes women's asexual love for each other, for example, informs Walker's use of sisterly bonding. The intimate friendship between Celie and Nettie, as well, helped to sustain Celie through the period of abuse by her

¹³ Maraire, 104.

¹⁴ Walker, 176

¹⁵ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1982), 176.

husband. It was a sisterhood that was so deep that it persevered through the long period of absence of Celie's not receiving her sister's letters in spite of the rift that Celie's husband had created to destroy the closeness of the two sisters. Walker's womanism has implications for building community and love among women by advocating sexual love between women. The love between Celie and the blues singer Shug reveals sensualities that played a pivotal role in awakening Celie and moving her towards a greater understanding of herself.

Walker introduces the global perspective by having Nettie work as a missionary in Africa. As a result, Nettie becomes grounded in Afrocentric thought and she imparts to Celie a pride in her heritage and love of self when she asks Celie:

Did you know that the Egyptians who built the pyramids and enslaved the Israelites were colored? That Egypt is in Africa? That the Ethiopia we read about in the Bible meant all of Africa? ¹⁶

In *So Long a Letter*, Ramatoulaye, an Islamic woman, pours out her heart to her best friend Aissatou to launch an indictment against the fetters of polygyny. As the title indicates, and Rama reiterates near the conclusion as she addresses her childhood friend. . . "once again I have to write you so long a letter" ¹⁷ The two women build solidarity for one another through the intimacy recounted in their letters to each other. Ramatoulaye's letter details her husband Modou's abandonment of her for a much younger woman, her daughter's peer. Ba launches social indictment of women's inequality and unfair treatment under the system of polygyny. Able to resist becoming one of multiple partners in a polygynous marriage, Aissatou, unlike Rama, divorces her

¹⁶ Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*, (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1985), 138.

¹⁷ Mariama Ba, *So Long a Letter*, (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Press, 1989), 89.

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husband, moves into her own home, and finds work in a Senegalese embassy in America. Aissatou's education and middle-class status allow her to become independent and make choices with her life that do not bind her to a man. Through her outcries in the letter to Aissatou, Rama is able to present a negative portrayal of lustful middle-aged men marrying young teenaged girls. Her husband Modou, is described with a receding hairline. Once she publicly discredits him through the mirasse, a cultural practice that dictates that his most intimate secrets be exposed, she begins the journey towards emancipation.

Ba's activism against women's restrictions in such a patriarchal society are clear, but Rama faces criticism for not using her education and class status to promote better conditions for women and their families in the community.¹⁸ She does not, for example, raise her voice to advocate laws for pregnant teens to continue their education or to speak about the need for public playgrounds that might have prevented an auto accident had her son not been playing in the streets.¹⁹

Literary characters, like Ramatoulaye and Aissatou, Celie and Shug, and Amai Zenzele and her daughter form deep, lasting spiritual bonds. Black writers have sought to establish images of African Americans practicing a spirituality rooted in African cultural beliefs. As W.E.B. Dubois has argued in his groundbreaking *The Souls of Black Folk*, the spiritual consciousness of people of African descent emanates from within their souls.²⁰ It is a spiritual consciousness that can be awakened in traditional religious faith and worship, as well as in less traditional settings. Gloria Wade Gayles reminds us we can

¹⁸ Kemp, Yakini B. "Romantic Love," *Arms Akimbo*. Eds. Janice Liddell and Yakini B. Kemp, (Gainesville, Florida: University of Florida Press, 1999), 158.

¹⁹ Kemp, 158.

²⁰ Dubois, W.E.B, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: Pocket Books, 1903/2005).

experience “the divine within us “wherever, however, and with whomever we so desire, each time anew and each time in celebration of the divine that is in us and in the entire universe.”²¹ Such a consciousness, grounded in African cultural traditions, has been cast in fictional literature as one that revises the image of the white patriarchal image of God and embraces spiritual revival. These revisionist, energizing spiritual practices help to move others towards a greater awareness of self.

The literature created by writers of African descent has helped to establish how these perspectives can arm people of African descent with the fortitude to fight against racism and sexism. These perspectives can be examined as springboards for effecting changes in the spiritual well-being of others. In the case of Celie, after her lover Shug Avery instills in her the desire to find God for herself, she rejects the notion of God as a white old man commonly portrayed in Western society. She reenvisioned God as being within her. This redefinition begins her journey towards becoming a woman who finally musters the courage to stand up to an abusive husband.

Zenzele also seeks to redefine God as one in her own image. By reconceptualizing God as one who looks like herself, she is able to connect and commune with her ancestors from a spiritual standpoint. After Ramatoulaye publicly discredits her husband through the religious mirasse, she purges herself of some of the resentment she had held against him and is able to begin the journey towards self-renewal.

Fiction often mirrors reality; thus we have witnessed brutality and remnants of patriarchy still alive in both Africa and America. In Uganda, Vice-President Specioza

²¹ Wade-Gayles, Gloria, ed., *My Soul is a Witness: African American Women's Spirituality*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995), 4.

Kazibwe recently revealed publicly that her husband beat her in spite of her prestigious position, so they have separated. Even though many working class and poor Uganda women criticized Ms. Kazibwe for her public outcry, she still spoke up. Many of these women who are part of the lower echelons of society feel that they do not have the luxury of being able to speak out because of their dependence on their husband's income. In suburban Washington, D.C., a woman was set ablaze by her estranged husband. Since that brutal event, this woman who had been constantly harassed by her husband has become an outspoken activist against domestic violence. These horrible examples of physical abuse and torture indicate the necessity for women, be they in Africa or America, to speak up for their human rights by decrying social injustice.

What Can We Learn About Leadership/Activism from Black Writers?

To reiterate a thought discussed elsewhere in this paper, I maintain that these writers committed to social change have addressed issues through the fictional characters in their novels and stories. An introspective examination of the prominent themes discussed and nature of the varied characters has led me to design a model of leadership that uses the following elements:

1. Womanism— emphasizes collaboration/networking/community building; often women talking among themselves is the first step toward identifying a problem and later leading to its being resolved. Organizations like Femrite illustrate real-life examples of women writers in Uganda offering a network of support for their creative efforts.

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2. Cultural Awareness—assists with self-identity; strengthens and empowers individuals. Just as Zenzele and Celie become self-assured through learning more about their cultural and racial heritage, this component is integral to leadership.
3. Mothering/Nurturing—emphasizes sensitivity to others; giving wise counsel.

Many activists are mothers whose concerns about family naturally extend into the community.

Amai Zenzele, Shug, and Nettie are excellent examples of mothers or mother figures who are give wise counsel and assist others with gaining confidence and self-assurance.

4. Religion/ Spirituality —helps one to assert meaning and purpose of life and embrace wholesome values after a period of self-discovery; helps one to stay grounded and to fight in a peaceful, loving way

Both Celie's and Zenzele's spiritual consciousness confront traditional interpretations of religion and spirituality.

Like the writers who created these characters we can exercise leadership by raising our voices through literature. In the same way that Sonia Sanchez has called our attention to an awareness of AIDS, or Ama Ata Aidoo of marital rape and women's oppression, Women seem to have a natural ability to fight for social justice and they continue to do so. In some African countries, for example, the problem of distributing and selling books making them affordable has been tackled through the formation of

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women's cooperative organizations unifying Ugandan women through organizations like FEMRITE. In East Africa, the Kenya Oral Literature Association began a project, "The Literary Road to Empowerment," whose aim is to affect children's socialization by presenting them with literature offering images that dispel traditional images of women as subservient. In the US, international conferences like Yari Yari Pamberi, founded by Jayne Cortez and Ama Ata Aidoo advance the goals of Black women writers from across the globe. Like these writers engaged in condemning racial, social, and gender oppression, all, whether they call themselves womanists, an African womanists, or feminists or Black feminists, should embrace the legacy of black activism and use it as a tool for advancing equality for women around the globe.

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