

“Thrusting the Private into the Public Sphere”: North African Women’s Writing Identities in the Epistolary Form

Ghazala Begum Essop

Summary

This article engages North African Women’s writing their unique identities in the epistolary form as depicted in the anthology, *Women Writing Africa: The Northern Region*. The epistolary or letter form is a unique genre. On one hand, the form of a letter is personal, and lays claim to private experiences whose content is the confidential lives of those who write them. And yet, on the other hand, the contents of an epistolary form can be thrust into the public domain where the lives on which it narrates is read by many people for the interest it can generate when the form assumes the figure of a metaphoric allegory. In the anthology, there are six letters written by women, touching on themes of slavery, sisterhood, marginality and the quest for political freedom in a patriarchal-dominated North African community. It is curious to observe that North African women who represented their experiences in the form of the letters did so against the repression of this form from the predominance of realism, song and political treatise. This article argues that the editors of *Women Writing Africa: The Northern Region* can be accused of bias in their selection that privileges literary forms ordinarily associated with men’s preference for classical realism. Despite this literary imbalance, the epistolary form effects some form of resistance to ideological and literary enforcements. The epistolary form also attempts to manage contradictory identities revealed on the spectrum of differences in how women shape their identities. Thus, the epistolary form functions in an ambiguous way; it affirms as well as interrogates patriarchy and also critiques the writings on women by women who write for men or like men.

Opsomming

Hierdie artikel handel oor vroueskrywers in Noord-Afrika wat in briefvorm aan hulle unieke identiteite gestalte gee, soos gevind in die bloemlesing *Women Writing Africa: The Northern Region*. Die briefvorm is ’n unieke genre. Enersyds is die briefvorm persoonlik; dit maak aanspraak op private ervarings, en skrywers se verborge lewens is die inhoud van hierdie ervarings. Tog kan die inhoud van ’n briefvorm andersyds in die openbare domein ontbloot word. Dáár word die lewens waarvan vertel word deur baie mense gelees omdat belangstelling geprikkel word as die vorm die gedaante van ’n metaforiese allegorie aanneem. Die bloemlesing bestaan uit ses

briewe wat deur vroue geskryf is en temas aanroer soos slawerny, susterskap, marginaliteit en die stryd om politieke vryheid in 'n patriargale samelewing in Noord-Afrika. Dit is interessant om waar te neem dat die vroue uit Noord-Afrika wat hulle ervarings in die vorm van briewe aanbied, dit doen teen die onderdrukking van die vorm vanuit die oorheersing van realisme, die lied en politieke verhandelings. Die artikel voer aan dat die samestellers van *Women Writing Africa: The Northern Region* beskuldig kan word van vooroordeel by hul seleksie, en dat hulle voorrang gee aan literêre vorme wat gewoonlik geassosieer word met 'n manlike voorkeur vir klassieke realisme. Ten spyte van hierdie literêre wanbalans bewerkstellig die briefvorm 'n vorm van weerstand teen ideologiese en literêre dwang. Teenstrydige identiteite word ontbloot op die spektrum van verskille in hoe vroue aan hulle identiteite vorm gee, en die briefvorm poog ook om dié teenstrydige identiteite te bestuur. Die briefvorm funksioneer dus dubbelsinnig: dit bevestig én bevaagteken patriargie, en lewer kommentaar op die skryfwerk van vroue deur vroue wat vir mans of soos mans skryf.

Introduction

Women's writings in Africa – even those that appear harmless – have recently been re-appreciated for their hidden scripts of resistance. It is argued, as womanist critic Anna Chitando (2012) has observed, that the fictions of gender have moved away from studies that emphasise women and women writers as passive. Rather, the danger of fiction from women arises from the fact that female writers can handle themes of sexuality, freedom and liberation in ways that imagine alternative and positive communities of womanhood. Previous generations of feminist critics such as Toril Moi (1985) have also revealed the intertwined nature of sexual and textual politics in women's writings. But Moi (1985) had argued against a tendency in feminist scholarship to either depict women's writings as always resisting patriarchy or always showing women's writing as blighted at all times by the overbearing spectre of patriarchy. Today, women's writings in Africa from the northern region respond to Gayatri Spivak's question as to whether or not the subaltern can speak. Women from the northern region compose their work affirming women's urgency in controlling significant aspects of their lives despite difficult environments in which men command power.

The editors, Fatima Sadiqi, Amira Nowaira, Azza El Kholy and Moha Ennaji quickly assert in their edited anthology that although women as subalterns can speak, they do so in different tones. Some women repeat in their writings the traditions of stereotyping women begun by men, while other women write to subvert these traditions. In their edited book, Fatima Sadiqi et al manifest the tremendous amount of pressure brought to bear on women as presented through the narratives of short stories, songs and the epistolary forms. Khatija Bibi Khan (2012) agrees in her insightful essay on women writing in North Africa that the question of changing identities is not a straightforward narrative. The critic emphasises the ambiguities in some of

the narratives by women and suggests that these are reflective of the power of traditions on women’s imaginations.

However, there is no critic who has attempted to show how the experiences of North African women rendered through the genre of the letter tend to complicate narratives that appear as if they are merely celebrating or downgrading women’s creativity. What has not been attempted is to explore the effect of using a particular form of genre in representing women’s experiences. Hayden White advises us to complement critical works that deal with mechanical categories such as class, and urges critics to instead approach women’s narratives from what White calls the “content of form”. In White’s understanding of “content of idea”, the formal composition of a work of art can lead us to arrive at meanings which we would not have anticipated. White says the verbal fictions of the epistolary form may appear authentic or presented as the raw experience of those who compose them, but in actual fact, the literary form of epistolary is “... invented as found” and should not presuppose “a radical opposition of [personal] history to fiction or of fact to fancy” (1978: 82).

In other words, the epistolary form may contain verifiable facts of the authors’ lives, but these facts are rendered fictively, which means in an imaginative way. Discussing the idea of literary contamination in post-modern fiction, White emphasises further the fact that what the “literature of fact” (White: 121) such as the form of the epistolary manifests, is an inherent semantic instability that emanates from an admixture of genres within it, which denies that any one form lays claim to the absolute truth. These insights from the critics reviewed above can be used to interrogate the content of form in the letters that appear in the anthology, *Women Writing Africa: The Northern Region*.

Women’s Mutating Identities in “*Letter About Female Slaves*”

The “*Letter about Female Slaves*” was written by Lalla Fatima, a Moroccan queen in 1764, and the letter originally appeared in Arabic before it was translated by Moha Ennaji into the English language. In the letter, Lalla Fatima, a wife to Sultan Sidi Mohamed Ben Abdellah, writes to a European princess to “release two Muslim female slaves imprisoned in Spain in exchange for the release of Christian female slaves held captive in Moroccan prisons” (Sadiqi 2009: 100). In the translated words by Moha Ennaji, Lalla Fatima is said to have pleaded with the European princess in the following words:

To Her Royal Highness Princess Louisa De Asturias. My sincere greetings to you. I wish you a long, happy life. Given your love for us, we have sent you in the hands of the Consul Atomas Aprim, a box of pearls, and if we still had our Christian female captives have been released, some ransomed and some

sold. You will receive with this letter also a pair of gold bracelets. They are from the gold that comes to us from trade and these are a gift from us to you. We would like to request the release of one or two Muslim female captives. The release will benefit both countries. With my great respect and consideration for you.

(p. 101)

In this extract, there is an impassioned plea by Fatima to Princess Louisa Asturias to assist each other in tackling the issue of female slavery. Slavery, it is stated in the letter, degrades women from the lower classes. There is also an inference that when women who are poor are enslaved on the watch of powerful women, it is in fact a form of dehumanisation of all women, hence the concern by upper class women to free other women. In this understanding, the problem of slavery undermines the humanity of all classes of women. The capacity of upper class women to intervene and agitate against slavery of Muslim and Christian poor women reveals that women have a sense of urgency and that they can work to foster a sense of sisterhood irrespective of class identity.

According to Moha Ennaji who translated the letter, the “hidden power of women” (100) is one of the sources of feminist political movements in North Africa. The private lives of two powerful women are in this letter thrust into the public sphere so that instead of the letter being a confidential document between the two women, the contents of the epistolary speaks to the common concerns for freedom of women, whether Arab or Christian, rich or poor. Cross references to Muslim and Christian religions seem to suggest that these religions could be freed from gender bigotry if they were controlled by women. Furthermore, the letter also mentions names of people who actually existed, thereby indicating the fact that the epistolary form derives its authority to speak from the fact that its narrative is a combination of different genres that include actual events in the lives of its protagonists, even when these events are rendered through imagination whose capacity to manipulate facts cannot be overstated.

In fact, although the general thrust of the letter is to agitate for the exchange of slaves, there is no guarantee that Fatima and Princess Louisa really intended to give up a life of privilege that would have clashed with patriarchy’s interests in maintaining inequality between men and women and the ultimate control of women. This irony at the heart of the letter suggests that women’s discourses of resistance can be entrapped if women do not question the basis of women’s oppression. The ambiguity of the identities of the women captured in the extract is accentuated by the fact that readers of the letter in its English version receive it as a translation. Mavhu (2006) discusses the difficulties of drawing a clear line between cultural translatability and linguistic translatability. It can be argued differently that the semantic instabilities brought to the letter by translation can allow critics to

suggest multiple and sometimes contradictory meanings that can be attached to women’s identities.

Frankly speaking then, the challenges posed in translated works are that the very acts of translating are forms of artistic creativity in which the fictional imagination of the translator can alter, manipulate and even emphasise some aspects of the letter at the expense of others. When this happens, the epistolary form is forced to suppress certain forms of experiences considered inappropriate by the translator. However, because translations are imaginative, they can enrich the letter and this aspect is revealed in the letter, entitled “*Struggle for a Throne*” written in Arabic by Shehrazad of Morocco in 1792.

In the letter, “*Struggle for a Throne*”, Princess Shehrazad realises that male traditions limit the power of women to assume control of the politics in the male dominated kingdom. However, in the letter, the woman, Shehrazad, “relied upon her powerful nephews for support against other family factions” who wanted to deprive Shehrazad’s son of being the new king. The letter that the mother writes to her son is executed in a “private tone, [but] the letter is a [significant] historical document allowing a view of the involvement of princesses in political matters of the palace” (Sadiqi et al 101). In this letter, women are determined to abandon enforced marginality, and the women do so by manipulating men in political contestations for power. When women realise that patriarchy wields power and authority, women’s urgency becomes more calculated as they employ influence, which is an indirect way by powerless women to exercise their rights and accrue new forms of authority.

Schimdt distinguishes power from influence which women use to advance their quest for freedom when he says, “Influence ... represents the strategies of those without formal power to limit the power of others and the ways in which that power impinges upon their lives” (Schimdt 1992: 20). One of the ways in which North African women redefine the rules by which their societies are governed is revealed in the strategic alliances they get into. In “*Letter to a Woman Friend*” (87) written by Om Makina of Egypt, there is the consciousness that women are disabled from realising their goals because of poverty. The theme of lack of material resources is central to women’s sense of self in a patriarchal society which men use to “define and enforce the rules by which society is governed” (1992: 20). In order to combat marginalisation, women write to one other, thus effectively using the epistolary form to imagine new identities.

Performing Private Identities on the Public Political Domain

In another epistolary, “*Letter from Exile*”, women emphasise the fact that they contributed to the “struggle against colonial domination”. Furthermore,

it is revealed in Saphia Zagloul's letter that Egyptian women forged strategic and political bonds in which they exchanged ideas on the "struggle for women's liberation" (125). Egyptian women found themselves thrust into public political activities in Egyptian nationalism. In this letter, women have taken over the political discourse that in Egypt was the preserve of men. The letter also emphasises that women are oppressed by their men. This admission suggests the possibility of feminist struggles in which women attempt to counter colonial domination as well as oppression from their own patriarchy. But the significance of the letter is also that its narrative anticipates fractures within the rank and file of women. In other words, although the tone in Saphia Zagloul's letter narrates personal and private lives, North African women shift their roles. The changing roles of Egyptian women from stereotypes, such as the idea that women are passive, is signalled when the author of the letter asserts that her "correspondence is not censored" (126). The other compatriot is being urged to write directly and without fear.

Unlike in political treatises where authors project polemical arguments, women of North Africa composed their letters on politics but did so in ways that were informative and also critical, as the letters remind us of African patriarchy's complicity in undermining women's hopes and aspirations. For example, Lalla Khnata Bint Bakkar's "Two Political Letters" (98-100) deal with domestic politics and international diplomacy. In the first letter, the author used the presence of her son as heir apparent to rule the capital of Meknes in Morocco in 1729. Bakkar's letter also reveals that there were struggles between her and her sons who did not want her to assume political power. However, the significance of this letter is that in it, Bakkar demonstrates that she was politically suave by avoiding a possible fratricidal war.

In the second letter Bakkar's political strength is highlighted. In the letter, Bakkar writes to her compatriots and states that her political office would defend her people if they were attacked by enemies identified as the people of Algeria.

In "*Letter to the Prime Minister*", another female author, Huda Shaarawi, addresses the Prime Minister of Egypt to grant, protect and ensure that there is equality of sexes and that women's rights should be guaranteed under Egyptian law. Shaarawi is brave enough to discuss the thorny issue of women's rights in a cultural context where some Islamic traditions define the role that women should take in a patriarchal society. She pleads with the prime minister in a tone that manifests her concern for the welfare of the lives of Egyptian women, whether rich or poor. Shaarawi's tone reflects respect for Egyptian patriarchy, but it is through that tone that she is able to raise issues that are not normally raised by women. For example, the courteous address can be described as deliberately using language in ways

“THRUSTING THE PRIVATE INTO THE PUBLIC SPHERE”: ...

that would persuade the prime minister, who has the capacity to refuse to reform law and extend women’s rights:

Your Excellency is no doubt fully aware that, at the present time and in view of the importance of the UN Charter, which calls for equality between the sexes, the Egyptian cause will benefit immensely. Not only will Egypt be applauded for upholding the Charter’s principles of justice, equality, and respect for human rights with no discrimination on the basis of sex, language, or religion, but it will also demonstrate its implementation of these same rights to include women, emphasizing their rights as well as responsibilities.

(p. 166)

From this extract, the language of addressing patriarchy is proprietary, but it camouflages how Shaarawi intends to thrust into the public sphere questions related to women’s rights. Shaarawi takes the prime minister into her confidence by suggesting that he is a progressive man. The theme of Shaarawi’s address remains her concern to push the welfare of women’s lives for debate into the public domain. In another part of the epistolary, Shaarawi shrewdly links the issue of equality that should exist between men and women. Furthermore, Shaarawi projects Egypt as a modern state which is a point that justifies extending civil and political rights to women. She says further that

The Egyptian Feminist Union is confident that the government will give this suggestion the attention it rightly deserves, based on the firm belief that women should shoulder their share of responsibilities in an equal manner with all its citizens who enjoy the same political rights in a democratic country.

(p. 166)

Three issues are raised in this extract. First, women are described as “citizens” and by virtue of that, by belonging to a democratic country, the women are entitled to participate in the running of the country. Second, it is intimated that for women to effectively struggle for greater “political rights”, the women have constituted themselves into the Egyptian Feminist Union. For Shaarawi to describe women’s movement for greater civic and political equality as feminist, is a way for the author to thrust or push private quests for freedom into the public domain. This would then make women’s issues a national issue. Third, Shaarawi manipulates the prime minister’s ego by describing Egypt as a “democratic country” in a context in which Shaarawi is actually demanding a reform of laws that are perceived to be a hindrance to women’s progress. This view is supported by Nevine Rateb and Nadia El Kholy who translated this letter, when the two critics say that Egyptian women’s urgency in seeking to change their lives for the better is revealed in how the women question obscurantist traditions. The two critics add that

Shaarawi radically fought against the Muslim practice of choosing husbands for women, since Shaarawi herself was “betrothed to her older cousin as a second wife” (165). The fact that Shaarawi was to abandon this unhappy marriage reveals her free will and desire to shape her life in the ways she believed would ensure freedom.

The Politics of Marginalising the Epistolary Form

Through the epistolary form, Arab women could stage their private identities which the women also extended into the public sphere by agitating for political rights. But it can be argued that the editors of *Women Writing Africa: The Northern Region* are to some extent biased against including more letters in the anthology. What the editors have tended to concentrate on are the short stories and popular songs. It is possible to argue that the short stories and songs are classical genres commonly used by men to plot the narrative of the nation. The marginalisation of the epistolary form has, however, not undermined the form’s capacity to carry the freight of serious themes related to the private identities of women. What is also interesting to observe is that women can imagine themselves as shapers of history. The women who wrote letters revealed that, in real life, they may not wield the power to change the matrix of inequalities that work against their aspirations for freedom. The women were able to voice their concerns in the form of letters. The very fact that these few letters found their way into the anthology elevates women’s struggles to an intellectual level. In short, the marginalisation of the epistolary form in the book is mainly in terms of numbers and not the quality of debates that the letters raised.

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to explore how North African women used the epistolary form to negotiate their identities in a hostile context patronised by patriarchal values. It was demonstrated that through the form of letters, the women spoke about their private lives. It was also revealed that the private experiences of the women commanded new meanings and identities when they are interpreted in the wider public domain. There was a calculated process by which North African women introduced “heavy” themes related to their quest for expanded civic and political rights. This, the women were able to do by using the epistolary form, which on the surface appears to be recording the individual privations and aspirations for freedom. The article then argued that the women’s hopes are in fact national goals and it is this aspect which makes the use of the epistolary form unique. It is a form that fights a guerrilla warfare where what is normally taken as secretive,

“THRUSTING THE PRIVATE INTO THE PUBLIC SPHERE”: ...

confidential and private found its way into the public domain for public debate. The article, however, raised concerns that the editors were too judicious and “mean” because they included too few letters in the book. In reality, women do feel comfortable with the genre of the epistolary as is demonstrated in the work, *The Colour Purple*, by Alice Walker, *Zenzele: Letter to my Daughter* by Maraire, and *So long a letter* by Mariama Ba. It has finally been argued that although the editors of the book did a good job in compiling a book through which women’s voices for freedom can be heard, it seems that the editors still followed male guidelines in creating the anthology.

References

- Chitando, Anna
2012 *Fictions of Gender & The Dangers of Fiction in Zimbabwean Women’s Writings on HIV and AIDS*. Harare: Africa Institute for Culture, Peace, Dialogue and Tolerance Studies.
- Khan, B.K.
2012 Beyond the Literary Veil: Women Writing Africa: The Northern Region. *International Journal of African Renaissance* 7(1): 22-33.
- Mavhu, W.M.
2006 Writer-Cum-Translator: From a Grain of Wheat to Tsanga Yembeu. In: Vambe, M.T. & Chirere, M. (eds) *Charles Mungoshi: A critical Reader*. Harare: Prestige Books, pp. 214-222.
- Moi, Toril
1985 *Sexual/Textual Politics*. London & New York, Methuen.
- Sadiqi, Fatima, Amira Nowaira, Azza El & Kholy Ennaji (eds) Publication details?
2009 *Women Writing Africa: The Northern Region*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press.
- Schimdt, Elizabeth
1992 *Peasants, Traders, and Wives: Shona Women in the History of Zimbabwe*. Harare: Baobab Books.
- Spivak, GC.
1985 Can the Subaltern Speak? In: Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin (eds) *The Post-Colonial Reader*. London & New York: Publisher, pp. 24-28.
- White, Hayden
n.d. *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Ghazala Begum Essop
University of South Africa
essopgb@unisa.ac.za