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*First Things First*  
*Problems of a Feminist Approach*  
*to African Literature*

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IN THE AUTUMN of 1981 I went to a conference in Mainz. The theme of the conference was 'The Role of Women in Africa'; it was a traditional academic conference and proceeded in an orderly fashion with papers on various aspects of the subject and not too much discussion until the last day of the conference when a group of young German feminists had been invited to participate. They dismissed the professor who up until then had chaired the session (he was a man), installed a very articulate student as chairwoman, and proceeded to turn the meeting into a series of personal statements and comments in the tradition of feminist movement meetings. They discussed Verena Stefan's book *Shedding* with its radical feminist solution, and they debated their relationship to their mothers, in terms of whether they should raise their mothers' consciousness and teach them to object to their fathers or whether perhaps it was best to leave them alone. The African women listened for a while, and then they told their German sisters how inexplicably close they felt to their mothers/daughters, and how neither group would dream of making a decision of importance without first consulting the other group. This was not a dialogue! It was two very different voices shouting in the wilderness, and it pointed out to me very clearly that universal sisterhood is not a given biological condition as much as perhaps a goal to work towards, and that in that process it is important to isolate the problems which are specific to Africa or perhaps the Third World in general, and also perhaps to accept a different hierarchy of importance in which the mother/daughter relationship would be somewhat downgraded.

One obvious and very important area of difference is this: whereas Western feminists discuss the relative importance of feminist versus class emancipation, the African discussion is between feminist emancipation

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versus the fight against neo-colonialism, particularly in its cultural aspect. In other words, which is the more important, which comes first, the fight for female equality or the fight against Western cultural imperialism? When I say that this is what the discussion is about, I hasten to add that there is very little explicit discussion about the subject, but – as I hope to show – the opinion which is implicit in the choice of subject of the first generation of modern African writers has had a profound influence on attitudes to women and the possibility of a feminist school of writing.

Whilst there is not a lot, there is some explicit discussion about the subject. The Malawian poet Felix Mnthali states one view very clearly in a poem called 'Letter to a Feminist Friend':<sup>1</sup>

I will not pretend  
to see the light  
in the rhythm of your paragraphs:  
illuminated pages  
need not contain  
any copy-right  
on history

My world has been raped  
looted  
and squeezed  
by Europe and America  
and I have been scattered  
over three continents  
to please Europe and America

AND NOW  
the women of Europe and America  
after drinking and carousing  
on my sweat  
rise up to castigate  
and castrate  
their menfolk  
from the cushions of a world  
I have built!

Why should they be allowed  
to come between us?  
You and I were slaves together  
uprooted and humiliated together  
Rapes and lynchings –

the lash of the overseer  
and the lust of the slave-owner

A FEMINIST APPROACH TO AFRICAN LITERATURE

do your friends 'in the movement'  
understand these things?

...

No, no, my sister,  
my love,

first things first!  
Too many gangsters  
still stalk this continent  
too many pirates  
too many looters  
far too many  
still stalk this land –

...

When Africa  
at home and across the seas  
is truly free  
there will be time for me  
and time for you  
to share the cooking  
and change the nappies –  
till then,  
first things first!

... An important impetus behind the wave of African writing which started in the '60s was the desire to show both the outside world and African youth that the African past was orderly, dignified and complex and altogether a worthy heritage. This was obviously opting for fighting cultural imperialism, and in the course of that the women's issue was not only ignored – a fate which would have allowed it to surface when the time was ripe – it was conscripted in the service of dignifying the past and restoring African self-confidence. The African past was not made the object of a critical scrutiny the way the past tends to be in societies with a more harmonious development, it was made the object of a quest, and the picture of women's place and role in these societies had to support this quest and was consequently lent more dignity and described in more positive terms than reality warranted. Achebe's much praised objectivity with regard to the merits and flaws of traditional Ibo society becomes less than praiseworthy seen in this light: his traditional women are happy, harmonious members of the community, even when they are repeatedly beaten and barred from any say in the communal decision-making process and constantly reviled in sayings and proverbs. It would appear that in traditional wisdom behaving like a woman is to behave like an inferior being.

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My sense of humour has always stopped short at the pleasant little joke about Okonkwo being punished, not for beating his wife, but for beating her during the week of peace (Achebe 1958). The obvious inequality of the sexes seems to be the subject of mild amusement for Achebe.

If Achebe is obviously quite contented with the unequal state of affairs, Okot p'Bitek takes this tendency a step further and elevates his female protagonist, Lawino, into the very principle of traditional ways. . . . [But] in refusing to admire Lawino's romanticised version of her obviously sexist society one tears away the carpet from under the feet of the fighter against cultural imperialism. Lawino has become a holy cow, and slaughtering her and her various sisters is inevitably a betrayal, because they are inextricably bound up with the fight for African self-confidence in the face of Western cultural imperialism. . . .

It is no coincidence that this paper started as a discussion of images of women in literature written by men and ended by discussing a female writer and her portrayal of women's situation in present-day Africa. It is only just that women should have the last say in the discussion about their own situation, as, undoubtedly, we shall. This, however, is not meant to further the over-simplified view that a woman's view is always bound to be more valid than a man's in these discussions. The 'first things first' discussion as it appears in the writing of Ngugi and Buchi Emecheta is a good example of the complexity of this situation. Ngugi's ideological starting point seems to me ideal. 'No cultural liberation without women's liberation.' This . . . is a more difficult and therefore more courageous path to take in the African situation than in the Western one, because it has to borrow some concepts – and a vocabulary – from a culture from which at the same time it is trying to disassociate itself and at the same time it has to modify its admiration for some aspects of a culture it is claiming validity for. . . . [But] Buchi Emecheta . . . can recreate the situation and difficulties of women with authenticity and give a valuable insight into their thoughts and feelings. Her prime concern is not so much with cultural liberation, nor with social change. To her the object seems to be to give women access to power in the society as it exists, to beat men at their own game. She lays claim to no ideology, not even a feminist one. She simply ignores the African dilemma, whereas Ngugi shoulders it and tries to come to terms with it. This could look like the welcome beginning of 'schools' of writing, and to my mind nothing could be more fruitful than a vigorous debate in literature about the role and future of women.

NOTE

- 1 Felix Mnthali, 'Letter to a Feminist Friend'. The poem will appear in a volume entitled *Beyond the Echoes*. [This book does not appear in the current bibliographies we have been able to check. We can only assume the volume announced has not yet appeared. Eds.]