

*Between Yesterday and Tomorrow: Writings
by Namibian Women.* Elizabeth IKhasas
(ed.). Windhoek: Womens' Leadership Centre,
2005; pp xxxii + 212.

Sarala Krishnamurthy
Polytechnic of Namibia

One of the seminal essays of contemporary feminist critic Gayatri Chakrabarthi Spivak, entitled "Can the subaltern speak?" (1988) explores the dichotomous relationship between the critic and her subject and posits that most feminist intellectuals work under the mistaken assumption that they can serve as a transparent medium through which the voices of the oppressed can be represented. Most feminists believe that being empowered and educated, they can speak on behalf of their uneducated sisters and in doing so, reveal the limits of their own approach. While Spivak is entirely sympathetic to the aims of scholars and supportive of their policies, she points out that to retrieve the unruly voice of the 'subaltern subject' from the discourse is to become complicitous with the very model of centred subjectivity which is both western and essentialist. In a third world context, this intellectual enterprise becomes further complicated because of the issues of gender and because subaltern insurgency always prioritises men. She states, "If in the content of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more in shadow" (p 82-3).

In the light of the position stated above *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow: Writings by Namibian Women* is a significant expression of the dis-enfranchised, illiterate subaltern women of Namibia told in many parts in their own voices. The book is the result of a UNICEF funded project with the sole purpose of promoting gender equality and empowering women, and a clear mandate to re-shape roles through a restructuring of traditional beliefs, customs and modes of cultural practice. For doing so, the Minister of Gender Equality and Child Welfare, Ms Marlene Mungunda, states, "we need combined efforts and cooperation from all social players who are seeking positive transformation" (p x1). Nearly 150 women from all over Namibia attended Writers' Training Workshops which were organised to encourage Namibian women to claim a feminist writing identity. The workshops provided a platform for the women to share their ideas and to brainstorm topics that they could explore in their writings. Some of the participants opined that their lives were the libraries from which they could draw their experiences and that it was necessary for them as women to become selfish in order to write.

Between Yesterday and Tomorrow: Writings by Namibian Women is a compilation of poetry and short stories by Namibian women who express their pain and anguish about the hardship, misery and tyranny that they have to contend with in their quotidian lives, the sheer monotony of everyday existence and the despair at being a woman. The humiliation, violence and abuse that women endure have to be read, reflected upon and should lead to an introspection and discussion around their position and status in society. As the Deputy Minister of Education, Ms. Becky Ndjoze-Ojo, points out "Every story and poem is a unique tale of women's

struggles, sufferings, dreams and triumphs. Some are dramatic, some are funny, some are romantic and some are melancholic. But they all come from the heart..." (xii). Describing the challenges that women have to face when they attempt to write a participant Anicia Peters says,

"Me, helpless woman, beaten by man
My only crime, being a woman
His only crime, head of household." (p 73)

The recurrent theme in this book is the violation of women's dignity and integrity. And at the same time, the psychological undertow that tugs at the human heart are stories of courage, humanity and the glimmerings of hope in the guise of a sisterhood that is formed in belonging to a project as one under discussion.

The book has been divided into nine sections with themes that are fluid and flow across the entire anthology. The prominent themes are cultural practices, rape and abuse of women and girls, HIV/AIDS, women facing difficult choices, women loving women, celebrating womanhood and writing as a liberating practice. Elizabeth /Khasas wails:

"After school he lured her to the ruins
They found her with a broken neck
School uniform torn off her body
To restore the tradition of the Himba people". (p 14).

Where an exiled young Himba girl eager to obtain education is denied her right to live.

In the face of expressive culture practices, Justine /Kharuchas gathers courage to proclaim loudly and clearly,

"We have rights
Inborn rights
Democratic rights
Women's rights
The right to speak
The right to be protected
The rights to vote
The right to say NO! NO!" (p.84)

The despair of loving another woman makes Linda Baumann cry out,

"Though I contributed to the well-being and stability
of my country
Yet I am
not valued
not seen as good
All they do
is label me
tag me." (p 159)

The most poignant narrative delineates the brutal rape of a nine year old girl by her own father. While on the one hand the story describes what happened to a pretty,

innocent dimpled child, on the hand it also delineates the courage of the mother who refuses to accept such a barbarous, inhuman and ruthless act, and takes control of her life and daughter's life by sending the father to prison in the face of social ostracism. She is cognisant that as a single mother she has to look after herself and her daughter.

There are several stories in the book which have to be read not so much for their literary merit, but more for their depiction of women's lives in Namibia. Even though all stories are unique to the Namibian nation, they are stories that would appeal to a universal sisterhood.

Not all poems and stories in the anthology are sombre in tone. In "Liberated", Lydia Heelu says

"I have been liberated
From the vile remarks of those hungry
For power and superiorly ...
In true feminine Namibian spirit
With my prerogative flowing like a long white gown
I am free to release the emotions that flow from my heart
As an individual
As a woman I'm reborn a better spirit
I have been liberated." (p 209)

That a relationship between a man and woman can be a positive and an enriching one is articulated in a brilliant poem by Ndjambeka Amagulu Nambago, where she says

"Spell yourself out on me
So I may absorb you
Inside out ...

Let my flesh canvas overflow
With your antiquities, dreams, soul
Spirits and desires
Your being!

So I too can initiate
And together a novel
We can compose." (p 203)

The stories that are included in the anthology do not reveal the same literary standard as the poems. They are more in the form of oral recordings of uneducated women who are articulating their thoughts and speaking out loud. If one looks for failings in the book, it is simply the fact of new voices who are groping towards finding an expression. It is not to be expected that illiterate women will speak in the same tongue as their more learned and educated sisters. In the final count, *Between Yesterday and Tomorrow: Writings by Namibian Women* is a testimony of the courage of Namibian women who express their agony and suffering in their own words.

Work Cited

Spivak, Gayatri Chakravorty, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", reprinted with abridgements in Willaims and Chrisman (Eds), *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory*, (Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), pp. 66-111.

Copyright of Nawa: Journal of Language & Communication is the property of Department of Communication, Polytechnic of Namibia and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.