

TONY SIMOES DA SILVA

Myths, Traditions and Mothers of the Nation: Some thoughts on Efua Sutherland's Writing

Focusing in some detail on three of her plays, this paper addresses the work of Efua Theodora Sutherland, arguably one of Ghana's foremost literary figures, and one of Africa's most influential dramatists. Specifically, the paper proposes that in spite of a considerable body of critical work devoted to her writing, she remains surprisingly little known outside the specialist fields of African literature, and indeed even theatre. I will then seek to relate this assertion to her status as a woman writer in Africa, and to the challenges her conflation of traditional African cultural forms and Western dramaturgy create. Sutherland incorporates Greek theatre (*Edufa* overtly reworks Euripides' *Alcestis*) with African oral story telling, myths, folktales (*The Marriage of Anasewa* draws on *Anasegoro*, a Ghanaian dramatic form) and the printed word (the use of the bookshop in *Foriwa*) as the parts that give rise to a new culture, in a new Ghana. According to Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, through her writing, with its overt use of forms and traditions of yesteryear, Sutherland "comments on the present, showing that human nature has not changed; she is, however, determined to change the inhuman situation in Ghana and, by extension, the African world."¹ James Gibbs, in what remains possibly the most thorough scholarly note on her work and its autobiographical nature, has pointed out that from an early age Sutherland was exposed to the "Athenian

recent collection of essays, *FonTomFrom: Contemporary Ghanaian, Literature, Theatre and Film*, offers an interesting case study. The collection devotes a number of essays to Sutherland's writing, and to an examination of her place as a writer in Africa, but the scope of those approaches remains surprisingly restrained. Anyidoho's remark, in the introduction to the collection, that her work has now been the focus of "due critical attention,"⁵ certainly seems to overstate the point. In fact, what the essays suggest is that the main issue with Sutherland is perhaps not so much a lack of critical interest in Sutherland's work, as the restricted analytical approaches her writing tends to attract. In addition to Anyidoho's words noted above, James Gibbs (2000), Chikwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi (1992), Anne V. Adams (2000) and John K. Djisenu (2000)⁶ too have in recent years contributed to a re-evaluation of Sutherland's *oeuvre* as a whole. Furthermore, Sutherland's mark on the work of other Ghanaian writers such as Ama Ata Aidoo, Joe C. De Graft, and, indeed, Kofi Anyidoho himself, to mention but a few, now is widely acknowledged, not least by those authors themselves.

Clearly, then, it is wise not to overdo this dearth of critical attention on Sutherland's writing and work, not least because she is not alone here. To suggest that scholarly research on African women writers pales in comparison to the attention devoted to that of their male counterparts is not too far-fetched a proposition, especially when we consider the sheer weight of critical writing on a few authors, such as Achebe, Soyinka and Coetzee, for instance. Indeed, even more recent writers such as Buchi Emecheta, Ama Ata Aidoo, Nadine Gordimer and Bessie Head, who all have benefited from the much stronger reputation African writing has since gained, attract only a small fraction of the criticism devoted to male writers of the same period, and of similar stature. Florence Stratton's *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*,⁷ an influential study of African women's writing, more or less ignores Sutherland, despite an overt accent on gender in literature in Africa.

of Sutherland's work tend to be male, a club I too now join. Thus, while I am conscious of the reductively essentialist risks inherent in my suggestion, it is significant that Anne V. Adams comes closest to producing one of the most original interpretations of Sutherland's work and of its historical and cultural contexts.

While I disagree with the way in which her reading of Sutherland's work

to generalise that both critics and writers adopt when dealing with African writing. Drawing on both these texts, Brown proposes that, “On the whole, Efua Sutherland’s work both raises questions about the woman as victim and suggests possibilities of new relationships in her society.”¹² Brown develops this view with a brief analysis of two other writers, the Nigerian Flora Nwapa and Sutherland’s fellow Ghanaian, Ama Ata Aidoo. Specifically he suggests that what distinguishes Sutherland from the other two writers is a concern with what might be described as “an individualistic subjectivity.” In other words, her heroines are lacking in devotion to their communities. As I believe this paper shows, this is a view that I think the plays disabuse.

It is arguable that for Sutherland the artist is not actually an outsider to the society in which s/he operates but rather inextricable from it. A committed political and social activist, particularly in the field of mass education, her work reflected her profound dedication to the (re)making of contemporary Ghanaian culture. She explored in her plays also what are central issues for any postcolonial society—that is, both the task of recuperating the past and the need to look forward to a future that simultaneously rejects and reiterates the influences of the colonial encounter—but she did so without the rose-tinted perspective that characterised her contemporary male writers. This is clearly evident in the tightly structured *Foriwa*, a text that I think sets out much of Sutherland’s political and aesthetic project. *Foriwa* shows that while culture, tradition and ritual are inextricable from each other, the latter two matter only insofar as they retain the ability to provide a people with meaningful and reasonable parameters by which to live in community. Labaran’s character, combining a fusion of local and foreign knowledge, is in many ways an even closer reflection of Sutherland’s own experience than the Queen Mother. His commitment to change and progress is then a dimension of Sutherland, herself a Ghanaian woman educated abroad who chose to return to share her training and expertise with the community responsible for shaping her consciousness. *Foriwa*

explores a deepening of consciousness, as it were, insofar as Foriwa now begins to realise the importance of holding on to the past—to tradition and ritual—only to the extent that it, and they, have something to say about the present, and the future.

One of the most provocative levels of the play, and one that I believe has not been properly explored, is thus the critical reflection it casts on tradition. For her, culture is a “living thing” in the sense that in her plays she re/presents the lived experiences of the people as the source of their own interaction with the world. It is not static, and thus it cannot be excavated, albeit through the work of imagination, in the manner advocated by what might be termed an earlier “phase” of postcolonial African writers. As the Queen Mother remarks in *Foriwa* (1967), “custom was the fruit they picked from the living branches of life.”¹³ Sutherland’s stance resonates in this play, but also in *Edufa* and *The Marriage of Anansewa* with the view of nation and culture explored by both Frantz Fanon in “Notes on a National Culture” (1961), and by Amílcar Cabral (1969).¹⁴ Furthermore, it conveys their endorsement of a culture that combines the best of a multitude of cultural myths and traditions. Indeed, when Gay Willentz describes Sutherland’s work as “working towards the resolution of cultural conflicts by utilizing orature and literature as vehicles and for the revitalising *rural* communities,”¹⁵ I suspect

writers such as the Mozambican Paulina Chiziane and the Zimbabwean Yvonne Vera

cultural—traditional—constructs. Though Foriwa's words contain a rather pointed irony, the fact that she, too, ultimately succumbs to Labaran's charms may somehow appear to undermine the clarity of her views. That Labaran is both an outsider and an agent of change within what is depicted as a rather static, indeed, sterile community, however, means that Foriwa's decision must be seen as a considered "taking sides" with the future. According to Ogunyemi, the relationship represents a "desired fusion of different parts of Ghana—Hausa and Akan, North and South—for the building of the nation."²⁵ Much as I agree with his interpretation, it is also a rather conventional way of situating postcolonial writing in a nation-building context that very closely resembles Jameson's sweeping, if provocative, generalisation that "all third-world texts are necessarily ... allegorical... they are to be read as what I call *national allegories*...."²⁶ Foriwa, it is worth recalling, has previously moved away from the village, and now lives in the city.

her words prefigure a tradition that will replace *other man-made* traditions with a more genuinely inclusive postcolonial Ghanaian tradition. As Ogunyemi has remarked,²⁹ it is perhaps indicative of the subversive potential of her work that Sutherland often took quite a long time putting her ideas to paper. As pointed out earlier, both Gibbs and Anyidoho note that her plays were frequently produced for the stage long before their publication, a delay that I would argue to be suggestive of the “work-in-progress” quality that is characteristic of her literary production. In *The Marriage of Anansewa*, a short note explains that it was “published after productions of the play in Akan and in English by three different companies in Ghana....”³⁰ More than anyone else, Sutherland herself would seem to have had a clear perception of the inherently fluid nature of culture and tradition, and of the artist’s role in their creation. As an artist, she saw her creative potential simply as one of a range of elements necessary to the formulation of a Ghanaian culture.

Sutherland’s adoption of *Anansegoro*, a Ghanaian dramatic form developed most clearly in *The Marriage of Anansewa*, belongs therefore to this all-inclusive dimension of her work, one in which the artist borrows at random from a number of sources, reshaping and transforming those elements which s/he puts to work in his/her own practice. Gibbs quotes from a letter in which Sutherland refers to her decision, during her time in England, “to keep her eyes and ears ‘wide open’ and to ask many questions.”³¹ Indeed, it is interesting to see the trajectory the plays undertake, as it were, moving increasingly towards a more overt association with local cultural forms, as a reflection of this “intention.” Simplistic as it will seem, it is possible to suggest that in a sense the writer grows increasingly confident in her own ability to tune in to the local. The constant play of mirrors Sutherland’s works offer between the old and the new, the closed nature of so many traditions and rituals, and the multiple possibilities for new beginnings, becomes thus perhaps the most significant sign of Sutherland’s commitment

to Ghana, to a present that is solidly rooted in the past but consciously and actively looking forward.

Notes

1

²⁸ Sutherland, *Foriwa*, Act 1, Scene 1, 7.

²⁹ Ogunyemi, 285.

³⁰ Sutherland, *The Marriage of Anansewa*, x.

³¹ Gibbs, 835.