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NEGOTIATING THE SPACE OF THE IN-BETWEEN
Between Cultures, Between Gender

Mieke KOLK

In December 2007 the fourth INTERCULTURAL THEATRE CONFERENCE ‘EAST MEETS WEST’ took place in Khartoum, Sudan. Some 30 scholars from Africa, Europe and the USA sat together to discuss the gender-issue as one of the most important social and cultural themes in the world in general and with growing attention also in the Arabic and African countries.

Under the title: Performing Gender in Arabic/African Theatre a series of lectures were presented. The focus was of course on the representation of male and female roles on stage, reflecting or criticizing these gender-roles in culture and society. But also the position of female artists in the mostly male-dominated domain of theatre-practice was discussed. The voices of women and their vision about daily life and future changes should be heard, breaking the silence.

Struggling against social power-constructions both male and female artists are searching for a new freedom of body and mind, where image and self-image can come together and identity is no longer a fixed phenomenon but a pluralistic concept, fluid and continually shifting in a changing cultural landscape.

Crucial in this new idea of identity construction is the concept of performativity, the idea that identity is created not only by facts of nature, social context or inner psychological truth, but time and again by our actions. It are these actions, these forms of agency, that are searched for and reflected in drama and theatre: in subversive forms of femininity and masculinity and in the crossing of boundaries of what can be made visible in a cultural community.

Theatre is a public institution, a theatre-performance a public event. On stage the theatre-makers offer their vision on the cultural and social conditions of a society and negotiate, so to say, with their audience (changing) norms and values of this society.

Therefore a theatre-performance is both an aesthetic, artistic phenomenon and a social and political event.
The articles presented in this publication on Arabic/African theatre nearly all present the struggle about male/female positions in the private and public space.

Women are for whatever reason banned to the private space of the home and to motherhood as their proper place. Women are also often banned from the stage as a public forum, either directly as an actress, a writer or a director, or indirectly in roles where they cannot escape their traditional representations. But nearly every author discusses and questions the male power-relations and explores strategies to develop an effective model of female agency, both in reality and in fiction.

Performativity and performance are thus both social and artistic concepts that function in dance, theatre and drama. They will be central in the arrangement of themes and articles in the book.

1. Starting with female performance, we concentrate first on ‘performing traditions’ where women are taking the stage in ancient and modern rites: ancient like priestesses in the Nuba Mountains in Southern Sudan and modern as Wedding Singers in a long marriage tradition in the Sudanese capital Khartoum.

There are two exciting studies about powerful women and women-roles visible in still existing daily practices. Osman Badawi describes the roles of female performers in the archaic ritual practices of the Nuba-people in South Kordofan as priestesses in different rituals, and the important position of women in the Nuban myths of origin from ancient times.

Despite the fact, he writes, that the indigenous Nuba people have for decades mingled and co-existed with cultures from North and South and are themselves mostly either Muslims or Christians, the Nuba managed to preserve their indigenous ritualistic practices unswerving. And that means that a woman can, for instance, be the oracle-priest, the Kujuriya, in which position as a spirit-medium she performs and “identifies with the ancestral spirit, adopts its character, speaks in its tongue and becomes an actor in a very serious play”.

During her stay in Khartoum, Dutch anthropologist Natasja van ‘t Westende at the end of the 1990s, did an extensive study of the female wedding-singers as performers. Singing at weddings, these women, fulfilling an important role in society, also have to deal with a so-called ‘loose’ reputation, being accused of singing a repertoire of ‘sensual and shameful’ songs in public. Wanting to combine their position as artists, working women (that is that shameful act of earning money),
motherhood and a home, they defend themselves by proving to be ‘generous’ and ‘serving the family’.

As these women are mostly married, their husbands tend to support the job they perform, also out of economic necessity. Although the Islamic discourse in the Nile Valley since the early nineties does not approve of this public performance of music and songs, the political elite is inclined to accept it because of the more private female character of this part of the marriage ceremonies. “The ideas maybe changed but not the behaviour”, comments the author, “a wedding without the songs and dances is no wedding at all.”

The accusation of causing “fitna”, in this context ‘sexual chaos’, is a threat for all performing women in the Sub-Sahara region. Where actresses are considered as prostitutes, like in Europe up till the 20th century, their behaviour must stress the image of the ideal woman.

2. Moving between reality and fiction, we should also consider the forms of applied theatre, community theatre, theatre for peace etc. where theatre-techniques and performance strategies are put into use in sessions of groups of people, who are subjected to political change, modernization processes, migration… In these spaces of transition, traditional male and female roles are put to task, creating a deep crisis in especially the male identities when women have to take over their responsibilities. Often both shocked and traumatized, the women - always considered inferior to the male - now have to take over his role as provider.

How deep these patterns are invested becomes clear when migration, war and dislocation are met. Jessica Kaahwa writes about a workshop she organized in the Kyangkwali Refugee Settlement in Uganda:

“In everyday life, relationships between male and female are gendered, creating distinguishing body-language and physical movements. In a performance with refugees all these gestures tend to celebrate or express critique, revealing the very essence of an individual especially those grieving of loss of family, friends, homes, possessions and livelihoods, personal identity, self-esteem, cultural and ancestral roots. This loss and grief confronted by the new oppressive reality of the refugee leads to the emotional experiences of a cultural shock and, especially for the men, an awareness of disempowerment feeling “castrated” and helpless.”

They feel that they are not adequately supporting their families or that their wives are playing more active roles in running the family then they do. The wives,
on the other hand have to switch their social roles and also perform the roles of their husband.

Both Jessica Kaahwa and Nora Amin, the latter organizing a workshop in the SIHA network in the Blue Nile-region in the South of Sudan, are very much aware of working with traumatized people/women still under the effect of war and the consequences. “Usually”, Amin writes, “the participant cannot detach herself from her own experience in order to represent it. She remains at the phase where the experience needs to find its way out of its internal life into the memory of the external life of performance, communication and sharing”.

In fiction this crisis around gender-identity is surprisingly reflected in the Cameroon plays of Bole Butake, who in search of an audience turned to forms of community theatre. Butake gives a lively portrayal of what can be called the ‘mutual zombification of dominant and dominated males, robbing each other of their power’, leaving it to the women to solve the crisis in the community by their own means. Christopher Odhiambo describes meticulous this loss of male identity in four successive drama’s of the West-African writer.

Although, he remarks, the central conflict in Butake’s drama is usually not gendered, the women are drawn into the conflicts as a reaction to reinstate a sense of cosmic balance that has been destabilized as a result of male power plays.

3. The silence of the female artists has nearly everywhere comparable roots: lack of education, religious rules and early marriage: the ideal woman is still a mother taking care of her home, her husband and her children.

The women who can get an education, also as an artist, are often forced or obliged to keep their talents in the private sphere. Not permitted to perform, not permitted to enter the public space. One is surprised by the lists of women writers that are presented in the articles about Egyptian (Nehad Selaiha), Cameroon (Naomi Nkealah) and Nigerian female drama-authors (Babatunde Allen), how few of them kept to writing or are known in- and outside their home-lands.

For Egypt, the reason for a relatively small production of plays, is explained like this: “the freedom of the body is deeply linked with the freedom of the mind. The historical confinement of the female body to the home has been the main cause of women’s intellectual backwardness: denied education, social mobility and access to public life, how can women hope to develop their minds or become artists and scientists. Theater is also a communal art and a public forum. Few
women are trained to take such a place, few women, in Arabic-Islamic countries, are allowed to visit the theatre.” Another reason for their silence is the social position of the power of the male author in the theatrical discourse, very much inclined to reject the work of female authors.

In a later publication Selaiha writes about a new movement in the Egyptian theatre: *The Independents*, that not only makes space for new forms of more experimental theatre but also creates opportunities for female theatre-makers to raise their voices and tell their personal stories, independent from male directors and managers. Outside the more traditional forms of theatre based on a text, clearly there are many other ways to communicate on stage.

Kristin Johnsen-Neshati explores for both the USA and Egypt the problematic position of the female dramaturg. As a phenomenon created in continental Europe, the position is challenged in theatre-practice, also in Egypt. Regardless of gender, the production –dramaturg operates from a “feminized” position, accepted as glorified stage assistants, but not in full partnership with the directors and the playwrights. A way out seems to be, again, to take the initiative for a new production, either solo as creator of the idea, or in a collective authorship, as a group of Arab and Arab-American women artists did in their performance of *The Panel* in 2006 in New York.

4. **Negotiating identity, image and representation.**

The need for the voices of women in the theatrical discourse is the need to break with traditional female stereotypes, in reality and in fiction.

Recent African literature has witnessed the emergence of women writers like Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), Mariama Ba (Senegal), Rebeka Njau (Kenya), Nawal el-Sadaawi (Egypt) Sindiwe Magona (S-Africa) and many others who have made the unveiling of women’s realities the central focus of their writing. Deconstructing male stereotypes of the female gender is part of this effort, writes Naomi Nkealah.

Her Nigerian colleague Babatunde Allen puts it bluntly: “Across distance and boundaries in history and society, women have been placed on pedestals as goddesses, but imprisoned with domestic injustice (custom has been nothing but a tyrant hidden in every home). They have been romanticized in literature and lyrics, but commercialized in life (…) they have been owned, used and worked as horses, even today….”.
Although stereotypes are often practiced in drama and enable the audience an easy access to the characters, the ideal type of a passive, pitiable and hopeless woman as a victim of the male world does not inspire identification and energy for change.

“I would recommend”, writes the Nehemia Chivandika from Zimbabwe, “the construction of compelling, challenging and fascinating male and female characters, who are constantly struggling against complex social forces of death, deprivation, disease and indeed all manifestations of gender domination.” But this is not what most male writers do. Despite the change imparted on her by modernization, the woman is still largely marginalized.

In her article Naomi Nkealah quotes Nalova Lyonga, who argues that female characters in African literature were often portrayed for male ends: as a symbol the to male on the brink of cultural alienation and emasculation (Senghor); as a “paragon” of African traditions (Achebe, P’Bitek, Amadi) as an appendage to a male visionary whose role is, however, blotted out once she has served her function of producing “ the strong breed” (Soyinka) and not least significant, as a flat whore (Ekwensi). Comparing the Anglophone Cameroon drama of Bole Butake and that of Bate Besong, Nkealah points to their challenging of an established pattern of female representation by creating exceptionally strong female characters. Besong even calls his major female character “Woman” and shows her as an educator of the downtrodden masses, a revolutionary leader, and a combatant of foreign exploitation. Both writers reveal a new vision in which women become the initiators of change: both describe different strategies for the women to negotiate power in the gender-biased societies. In Butake’s plays the women use their bodies as a site of resistance against male complacency. Besong’s Woman uses her knowledge of the evils of the ruling government to form a political movement against it.

Surprisingly, female author and director Anna Ndebele from Zimbabwe adopts the common male negative images and metaphors of female sexuality in her play about Aids, a strategy that Chivandikwa signals as a weakness in Zimbabwean theatre: the abuse or negative use of serotypes. In her play Zvatapera Todini, the young girl Sharon is constructed as a sex object, a prostitute that, stereotyped, brings aids: she wears a very short skirt, which exposes her thighs, her breasts are barely covered …Next to her a group of stock, pitiable passive and hopeless women characters do severely limit the transgressive impact of performance and narrative that are meant to question gender domination and exploitation.
Chivandikwa also researches a play *Africano-Americano* that deals with a mixed marriage: an African girl and an American husband. While living there, the woman is abused, oppressed and shunned by her husband and decides to go back. Before he kills her, she stands up as a great fighter, physically and ideologically. In a fascinating way the author then researches and interprets the reaction of three different audiences on the play: for a mostly young female audience, a more adult male audience in Zimbabwe, and the European reactions during a tour.

Mixed marriage relations are in a way also an important theme in the work of South African drama-writer Antony Akerman who lived for 17 years in migration in Europe, although his couples are white. They become separated just by being from Africa- or not being from Africa. Mieke Kolk compares two of his plays about exile: *A Man out of the Country* and *Dark Outsider* with the famous Sudanese novel of Tayeb Salih: *Season of Migration to the North*. Having left Africa the main male characters in their work, develop highly problematic relations with the women. Both African writers, write about the process of the loss of male identity and the fundamental insecurity to live, while African soil does not support their ‘maleness’ anymore. The female characters are in essence a foreign country, just by being not from Africa, born-betrayers so to say.

5. **The boundaries of the visible**

In Islamic culture the body, especially of the female, is considered a vessel holding an untamed sexuality that invites sin and corruption. Women are said to possess a supernatural, sexual energy capable of corrupting the morals of religious men and, as an implicit conclusion, the society as a whole. Social interaction between men and women is governed by strict rules of modesty.

Hubertus Mayr researching the function of the veil in Iranian dance, puts the veil as an instrument that serves gender-segregation, it is part of an ideology that subordinates women to men. But he also mentions Leila Ahmed who stresses the function of the veil as an *icon* for the legitimacy of all Islamic customs, in a narrative of resistance to Western domination and part of a protest to postcolonial attacks to that customs.

In Iran, the history of the veil is a story about a myriad of different personal and political interpretations: “an emblem now of progress, then of backwardness, a badge now of nationalism, then of domination, a symbol of purity, then of corruption”. Its ambiguous function works here two ways: the enforcement of hijab served as a catalyst to increasingly visibility and participation of women in public
life and politics by making public space morally correct in the eyes of the traditionalists. In the same way the restrictions on the performance arts and bodily representation seem to challenge a new creativity and to form “an ideal breeding ground for unique performance practices that attempt to cross the discursive limits of culturally defined boundaries between East and West”.

How ambiguous the function of the veil as a sign has become, I experienced during the different theatre festivals I visited last year in Cairo, Tehran and Khartoum. The Egyptian festival showed veiled and unveiled women, moving and dancing according to the homeland cultures. The Egyptian street showed more and more veiled women, also the younger ones. In Tehran on the Fadjr festival every actress was carefully veiled on stage. However the female public and the street showed another image, especially the younger girls with colourful scarves dancing on and from their heads. In Sudan I was taken by surprise: the young actresses on stage without the veil, only the elderly women seemed to stick to it. On the street nearly every women wore the elegant toob somewhere ending on their head.

**Migrating**

Paula van Zijl, curator of an art-exhibition of Moroccan artists in migration living in the Netherlands, mentions in her story a couple of interesting positions the female artists migrating to Europe defends:

“My work is not about the gender-question. I am not an Moroccan artist, I left when I was 8, since then I stayed in France, Denmark and Holland.

In my work the issue was about displaced people in general, (...) how to deal with identification when one cannot refer to one exclusive home country any more? It is not about identity – this remains a personal issue for any individual- but about identification: where do I come from, what is my nationality?

Maartje Nevejan, director of *Couscous and Cola*, a television series about growing up teenagers of an Eastern/African background in Holland that went all over the world, develops an intriguing theory about the overwhelming hate of these teenagers of the West. She signalizes the simultaneity of the process for the young children of leaving Africa, their motherland and often their mother, to enter the Western world that is also the world of the then unknown father and his disciplining strategies, that puts them again into the position of little children. Nevejan also
mentions the violent gesture of the West in negating the magic and spiritual world of these young teenagers, educated in religious traditions and norms and values of their community.

In the same way as the artists in the Moroccan project mentioned above, they ask themselves where they belong, entering the space of the in-between of two worlds.

Nevejan pleads also for a world that does not accept perspectives like the *West and the Rest, the Men and Woman*.

I suppose we all know that such positions are not acceptable any more.

Lectures spoken at the conference in Arabic will be, hopefully, published online (www.ArtsAfrica.org) in the coming months, in Arabic.

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