

Zuhura Seng'enge: Transnational Performance Poetry Demanding Social Justice

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Abstract

This research paper aims at studying the way Zuhura Seng'enge writes and performs poetry expressing values for human freedom and liberation. Zuhura's performance poetry from Tanzania draws on transnational resources, including digital media. She uses performance poetry to create a world that is more just and equal for all of humanity. The paper argues that such a kind of writing has been structured in the manner of the great precedent of Maya Angelou. Zuhura is one the upcoming young poets of the globalized and transnational society writing and performing poetry to entertain and connect with people.

Keywords: Zuhura Seng'enge, transnational, performance poetry, social justice, equality, Zuhura Seng'enge, African Lioness, Maya Angelou

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *TedxEuston Talk* in 2012 defined a feminist as "a person who believes in the social, political, and economic equality of the sexes." She further says, "For me feminism is about justice. I am a feminist because I want to live in a world that is more just." The contemporary women writers with African origins have begun to express themselves freely in the intellectual and social space their early writers have created for them. Maya Angelou's "Still I Rise" has opened up possibilities for the African women a new hope for survival and life. She expresses power and self-assurance without succumbing to anger and hopelessness. History may judge, offering an assessment of the rights or wrongs of what happened in the past and may "write" her "down" twisting truth with bitter lies and pull her in dirt, but Maya Angelou says: "still, like dust, I'll rise." The subverting of the meaning of the word 'dust' is very meaningful. Dust is on the dirty ground, but it has the capacity to rise "Just like moons and like suns, / With the certainty of tides, / Just like hopes springing high," and therefore she says: "Still I'll rise." The rhythm of Maya Angelou beats like an African drum when she says:

Did you want to see me broken?
Bowed head and lowered eyes?
Shoulders falling down like teardrops,
Weakened by my soulful cries?

The images of 'dust,' 'tear drop,' both signify discrimination and pain and from this historical consciousness of memory she wants to rise and be like any other woman. The society too has a historical understanding of the African woman's existence as both the oppressor and the oppressed are caught in a historical frame of mind and have acquired certain traditions of thinking. The memory of the past is a big challenge for a woman of African origins. The poem becomes a literary mechanism of the Foucauldian concept of speaking truth to power. The words of the society are like arrows or guns attempting to kill her spirit. The eyes of society are like daggers or knives cutting her soul apart. Social discrimination that is biologically or socially constructed and hatefulness has killed her confidence but still she rises like air. She evokes all - natural phenomena of sun, moon, tide, dust and air to denote the continuation of life and human constructions of identity cannot hold down a human being down.

You may shoot me with your words,
You may cut me with your eyes,
You may kill me with your hatefulness,
But still, like air, I'll rise.

The poem moves from the conception of racialized, gendered social hierarchies to an egalitarian perception of race and gender. Common characteristics, considered to be unalterable as they are determined by external factors or heredity, define the gendered racial construction of the African woman. European histories have utilized the African manpower and have created slavery which has doubly marginalized the African woman. Maya Angelou does not want to take it but rises against this view of history and wants to rewrite it. The Enlightenment ideas of universal freedom and conceptions of democracy are in her words when she says: "Out of the huts of history's shame / I rise / Up from a past that's rooted in pain / I rise." After the evoking of universal images of nature, she now moves on and calls herself as a "black ocean, leaping and wide." She is "Welling and swelling" and bears "in the tide." An ocean tide refers to the cyclic rise and fall of seawater. Tides are caused by variations in gravitational attraction between the Earth and the moon and the Sun in geometric relationship with locations on the Earth's surface. There is a complete reference to the operations of this planet in this poem. Like the sun, moon and air she rises and like an ocean she absorbs the tide calmly. It also hints at the monogenesis theory that affirms the Christian origin story which believes in the common racial identity of mankind.

The poem moves ahead leaving behind trails and travails of the slavish past with its direct and indirect discriminations.

Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.
I rise
I rise
I rise.

Members of oppressed groups like the African women fail to experience adequate recognition and are depicted by others or the societal norms and values in a negative way. Such people will find it harder to embrace themselves and their projects as valuable. Maya Angelou breaks out of this framework and reassures herself that she will move ahead in life and begins to consider herself as a superior human being with the ability to come out of her discriminated position with grace.

Angelou fights for social justice and self-reliance. Angelou's "sizable body of poetry is irrelevant to her autobiographical themes" (Lupton 48). In the poem "Human Family" she says that she notes the obvious differences in the human family. "Some of us are serious, some thrive on comedy. Some declare their lives are lived as true profundity, and others claim they really live the real reality." The variety of the skin tones of human beings can confuse, bemuse, delight as they are multiple. They are brown and pink and beige and purple, tan and blue and white. She says further: "I've sailed upon the seven seas and stopped in every land," and has seen the wonders of the world not yet one common man. She has known "ten thousand women called Jane and Mary Jane," but has not seen any two who really were the same. "Mirror twins are different although their features jibe." It is a transnational experience as contemporary women "love and lose in China," "weep on England's moors," "laugh and moan in Guinea," "thrive on Spanish shores," "seek success in Finland" and are "born and die in Maine." The differences are "minor", but the similarities are "major." "We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike," says Maya Angelou.

This paper tries to argue how the young women writers of African origin have taken their cue from writers like Maya Angelou and want to relook at history and their past trauma and often danced in her stage roles. It takes the case of Zuhura Seng'enge as an illustration.

Zuhura Seng'enge is a fresh graduate from the University of Dar es Salaam currently volunteering with Culture and Development East Africa (CDEA). She has been very inspired by literature (especially poetry) since her childhood. She wrote her first poem in primary school at age 12, and since then, poetry has always been her way of expressing herself and inspiring others. As a poet Zuhura has participated in "The Woman Scream International Poetry Festival" (2014 and 2015), "The Swahili Carnival" (2014) and "Dar Poetry Festival" (2015). Her goal is to inspire young people to use art as a tool for change and development in their lives. On social media, she calls herself "Zuhura the African Lioness," a multilayered cultural identity. Similarly, Zuhura's cultural perspective is multidirectional: she looks at the world from an African perspective, but she also engages with Africa from a global perspective. Her poem "Do not fear the past" discusses the need to move on in life. It is radical and argues that the stories of the past may not always be true. She says: "Do not hold on to lies / That you were fed when you were young. / Learn the history of your people / Find the truth / to free your soul from evil." Even if the past is "ugly / ... it is ours," she argues.

Learn the Qur-an
Learn the bible
Find the meaning of life and religion.
Do not fear the past.
It is painful
but it is real
Blood was spilt and people died
but love and unity had survived.

Blood was split and people have died, but still one has to rise from the dungeon of pain and move ahead seems to be the theme of this poem too. Institutionalized order of rights that secures genuinely mutual recognition might be on the way as love of people and universal brotherhood have survived. Humanity has created religions with their codes of ethical principles and a day might come when equality might be restored, and the humans will evolve to reach a state where minds do not have borders. A kind of Hegelian universality may result after the sufferings of racial and gender-based violence. Interpersonal relationships will endure, and human beings will face the world differently. The poem is profoundly inspiring and positive in the style of Maya Angelou and she creates a world of peace and harmony.

Remi Adekoya, the Polish-Nigerian journalist and former editor of *Warsaw Journal* analyses why the western media focuses on the slums of Africa and not on the positive stories. He claims the western media continues to propagate negative stereotypes of Africa as a nest of poverty and problems. Africans, especially those living abroad, fret about the perception of their continent and its inhabitants because their future often depends on the opinions of those in whose

country they reside. He says that he knows how “British passport holders in the UK who keep secret their Nigerian roots at work because of the negative perceptions created by the country’s notorious e-scammers;” Africans in Europe are “underestimated in their workplaces” as people assume their formative years in a “backward environment” like Africa, they can’t be competent enough to take up important positions. Therefore he says, “a Nigerian, Kenyan or Zambian university graduate working in Europe will likely have to overperform in their job” and “each major news item presenting Africa in a negative light is viewed by these folk (Africans living abroad) as something that will make their working lives that bit harder” (Adekoya).

Zuhura seems to be responding to these socio-economic portrayals. There are many African origin intellectuals choose not to talk about their identity in western countries Adekoya writes in *The Guardian*. Zuhura addresses fellow beings thus:

Learn the tongue of your ancestors
Reconnect with the roots of your blood
Find the knowledge
That was stolen
Find the life that was robbed from us.
Do not fear the past.
Embrace it
Let it teach you the wisdom of your race
Take its lessons and live by them
Own the identity that was erased.

She says: “Do not fear the past, / Do not hate it. / Do not fear the past, / Learn about it. / Let it teach you / Let it nurture you / Let it remind you, of who you are.” The launch of Zuhura’s first poetry collection, *Warrior Unleashed*, was at the Soma Book Café in Dar es Salaam on 15 July 2016. The program stretched over three hours, alternating between Zuhura’s poetry performances as well as music, dance, rapping and poetry readings by other young artists. “The audience was predominantly Tanzanian, with a few mzungu (white person), including myself, a Swedish anthropologist doing fieldwork on women writers in Tanzania,” says Uimonen (130).

Zuhura Seng’enge concludes her performances with these lines from her poem “Warrior Unleashed,” says Uimonen. Her words act as local resistance to the external world of official power and oppression as she articulates the words with theatrical emphasis. She moves closer to the audience and her steps are in rhythm with the instrumental music. She repeats the last line with careful enunciation dramatically. She nods her head towards the audience. It seems to be a gesture of participation and group dynamics:

African lions
African lionesses
African warriors
African children
African brothers
African sisters

It is time to rise
Let them see you rise
Let them see you rise (Uimonen 129)

The aesthetics of Zuhura's performance poetry mixes various genres of literature, orature, music and theatre. Poetic articulation is extremely important in performance poetry as the artist's voice is augmented through music and collapses distinctions between literature and theatre. It relies on language as well as acting involving local/vernacular and global/cosmopolitan aesthetics in a multifaceted manner.

Uimonen says that "Zuhura started exploring performance poetry in 2014, while in her second year at the University of Dar es Salaam." She took part in the "La Poetista Event" and she "memorized" a poem and "the organisers were very helpful, coaching her along and encouraging her to "be the poem." Zuhura practiced at home, in front of the mirror and her sister. When she went back for a second rehearsal, she was told that she was "a natural." Later she performed at "the Goethe Institute to a mostly non-Tanzanian, expatriate audience." She performed also "at Open Mic events in Dar, to mostly Tanzanian audiences." Uimonen writes that "nowadays she only does readings at poetry readings; otherwise she performs her poetry with live or recorded music" (Uimonen 132).

Performance poetry is a very contemporary art form and is rooted in a vernacular literary tradition, which Zuhura aims to revitalize. Zuhura, like Shabaan Roberts, celebrates the national heritage of Tanzania. Shabaan Roberts wrote in Kiswahili; Zuhura writes mainly in English. In the *Warrior Unleashed* collection, only three poems are in Kiswahili: "Uzuriwako" (your beauty), "Ndotokubwa" (big dream) and "Home Sweet Home," which has a title in English. Most of the poems are in English, and one is bilingual. The bilingual poem "What Binds Us" is a tribute to the nation, emphasizing the national unity of Tanzanians as "one people." Zuhura herself has grown up with three languages, her tribal language Kisambaa, Kiswahili and English. Zuhura prefers to write in English, which is also the language that she mostly reads in (Uimonen 132).

Zuhura's multilayered cultural perspective becomes even more poignant in poems that are explicitly focused on Africanness, shifting between the local and the global, the vernacular and the cosmopolitan. "Beautiful Land" praises the "great things in Africa" the "beautiful things," to counter how "when you talk about Africa, the first thing that comes to a person's mind is the suffering, the pain, the bad things, the blah blah, the ugly things," as Zuhura explained to the audience before performing the poem, thus addressing negative stereotypes so common in external portrayals of Africa. Uimonen comments on the performance after witnessing it for research purposes: "When introducing the poem "Me and My Brown Skin," Zuhura remarked "So, if you are African, if you are not African, if you have a brown skin, if you don't have a brown skin, as long as you love your skin, this is for you." Zuhura began saying, "I asked God for a blessing and he blessed me with a brown skin," accompanied to music – the jazz. The poem is on the song "Brown Skin" by India Ari that deals with skin bleaching. Zuhura locates the African identity in a globalised society (Uimonen 135).

In the poem "Me and My Brown Skin" Zuhura says: "I asked God if it was a sin / To be born with a black skin / To have a protection from the burning rays of the sun called Melanin / Because everyday I see / Sisters buying products to become brown free;" in "the 21st century woman than loyalty/ Everyday I see / A stranger honored more in my own country than me / I asked God if it was a test / To be born so different from the rest / To have more scars buried in my chest / While my quest / For justice has barely begun." People have begun to "hail the white man who made spoons and pans / Forgetting that the steel was forged by their own hands. / I asked God if it was a mistake / To be born in such a state / Of rejection from other races / A misfit." She goes on: "I asked God if it was maybe a gift / To be born so exceptionally unique / To be singled out in a continent that was not known to exist / With millions of treasures to handle as we see fit." What became known as history after the westerners entered the dark continent, as it was called and made the Africans toil. The questions continue in the style of Alice Walker's *Colour Purple*: "I asked God a lot of questions / and I know that it is wrong." She needs "direction / A sign of hope / I need salvation / To be pointed to the light /Because I want to be right." She wonders what is wrong: "For beauty and respect seems to be something we lack / I wonder why, / Is it because we're born black?" We cannot miss her rhythmic lines that makes her performance very musical.

Performance poetry has given the platform for Zuhura to entertain people and give the message of social justice. Her questions are disturbing as she continues to analyse the reasons for the borders in human minds regarding skin colour. She uses the global language of English, though located in Tanzania and her videos of performative poetry in the YOU TUBE are slowly picking up viewers.

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