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Issues Confronting Postcolonial Societies in the Select Poems of Esther Nirina and Lila Ratsifandriamanana

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ABSTRACT

After the independence of Madagascar from France in 1960, the new generation of Malagasy women writers wrote with a social commitment. They drew a dreary picture of their newly independent country: politics marked by corruption and abuse of power; socio-economic conditions marked by acute misery and injustice; and, the near impossibility of reconciling traditional values with the needs of emerging modern societies. These women writers, whose works were primarily in French, did not deny the importance of traditional values and Malagasy language and literature. Thus a new spirit of duality emerged among these women writers giving them their rightful place in the Malagasy society. This paper attempts to study some of the poems of Esther Nirina and Lila Ratsifandriamanana as reflections of issues confronting Postcolonial societies.

Keywords : Postcolonial, Malagasy, Poetry, Esther Nirina, Lila Ratsifandriamanana.

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The New Generation of Francophone Writers

In 1960, Madagascar declared its independence from France, the colonial power. The sixty-four years of colonization had produced a Malagasy elite, who knew well that prestige had always been spelled in French, but, at the same time, did not deny the importance of traditional values and culture. While French was encouraged as an administrative and scholastic language, Malagasy remained in the intimate sphere of the family and as a language of creation, especially among the Poets. Thus emerged a new spirit of duality, wherein Malagasy culture and language acquired their rightful place and identity.

The new generation of Francophone writers mastered the colonizer's language without renouncing their native moral, social, esthetic and spiritual values. They drew a dreary picture of the newly independent states: politics marked by corruption and abuse of power; socio-economic conditions marked by acute misery and injustice; and, the near impossibility of reconciling traditional values with the needs of emerging modern societies.



Esther Nirina

Courtesy: <http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/ile.en.ile/paroles/nirina.html>

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Women Writers and Their Favourite Themes

Women writers like Esther Nirina and Lila Ratsifandriamanana present the same drama wherein the individual is trapped between the demands of the modern city and the tradition of an earlier age. They chose poetry over other literary genres for this genre is ideal for stressing with brevity a specific problem or theme. The favourite themes of these writers were the quest for an authentic Malagasy soul, the vicissitudes of love, woman, nature, virtues of work etc.

This paper focuses on some of the poems of Esther Nirina and Lila Ratsifandriamanana as reflections of issues confronting postcolonial societies in the Indian Ocean region.

Esther Nirina

Esther Nirina was born in 1932. After a long stay in France, where she was a Librarian in Orleans, she returned in 1990, to live in Madagascar. She was already an important figure on the Malagasy Literary scene. She was a member of L' Academie Malgache. She presided over the Society of the Writers of the Indian Ocean (SEROI). She has published several volumes of poetry: *Silencieuse Respiration* (1975); *Simple Voyelle* (1980), for which she received the ADELFF Grand Prix Littérature de Madagascar; *Lente Spirale* (1990); *Multiple Solitude* (1997); and her most acclaimed collection of poetry *Rien que Lune* (1998).

A Philosophical Turn

In Esther Nirina's hands, poetry takes a philosophical turn. After many years of self-imposed exile, back in Madagascar, she integrates nostalgic memories of the ancestral land and Malagasy childhood with a quest for sensitivity and values:

Breath probes
As far as the bones of my spine
I make it into the flute
Of my conscience
But

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For some
This barely audible voice
Has no place
In their orchestra
You alone
Oh silence!
Arrange the voice that
Speaks my mother's tongue
Inside your register

(Multiple solitude, quoted in Voices from Madagascar 252)

The Style

Nirina's sober style, like the traditional "Hainteny" lends itself to a multiplicity of meanings.

Father, you who are present here
Lead me not into the temptation
of no longer believing that He came
also
for my people.

(Simple Voyelle, quoted in Voices from Madagascar 244)

In the poem, "He" refers to the leaders of the new nation. She does not hesitate to denounce the powerful ones nor does she forget to throw light on the degrading living conditions of the Malagasy people. Hope faded and the excitement of freedom quickly turned to ashes when the new government took charge. The unstable governance, the economic decline and the widespread abuse of human rights after Independence forced Nirina to take up a dejected tone in her poems.

When I see
Woman
Add up the wounds
Distending inside her

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Body filled with clotted blood

.....

I have nothing but a wisp of

Barely caught oxygen left

.....

When I see child

Struggle before

An obstructed exit

.....

Do I still dare

Speak of love?

(Nirina, *Lente Spirale*, quoted in *Voices from Madagascar* 250)

Esther Nirina quenched her poetic thirst with the publication of “Mivolana-an-tsoratra”, her first collection of poetry in her own Malagasy language, which turned out to be her last. She died on 19 June 2004.

Lila Ratsifandriamanana, Politician-Novelist



Lila Hanitra Ratsifandriamanana

Courtesy: <http://www.fdu.edu/newspubs/magazine/09sf/lila.html>

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Another writer from Madagascar is Lila Ratsifandriamanana, a Malagasy politician and diplomat. Born in 1959, she was the Minister of Scientific Research from 1997 to 1998 and Minister of Foreign Affairs from 1998 to 2002. She became the Ambassador to Senegal in 2002, Permanent Representative of the African Union, Permanent Observer Mission of the African Union to the UNO. Lila Ratsifandriamanana, with a humble start as a teacher of natural sciences in Antananarivo, has published novels, plays and poetry in Malagasy under the pen name of Lila and has written poems and short stories in French.

Describing the Despair, the Bitterness and the Disillusionment

She has won great acclaim as a Francophone writer. Despite being a politician and a diplomat, she honestly registers in her poems the despair, the bitterness and the disillusionment that followed the euphoria of independence as her nation could not live up to the dreams of its citizens. She bluntly denounces the untenable conditions of post-independence Madagascar. Her poems express her grievance over the fate of her beloved country.

Could a country like mine
Hope for
A brighter tomorrow?
A country where Hunger
Is king
Where Misery is queen!
A country where the law
Is mystery after Mystery ...
.....
A country where the wrong
Sometimes has its reasons
Where life is torment
Yet a country like mine
Is indeed a treasure

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In the Indian Ocean.

(Ratsifandriamanana, “This country of mine”, quoted in *Voices from Madagascar* 276, 278)

The last three lines of the above poem titled “This country of mine”, sums up the true Malagasy spirit of the contemporary Malagasy women writers. The women writers faithfully depict, on the one hand, the Malagasy life and society emphasizing the cruel urban landscape and its daily realities; on the other, they highlight the challenges faced by their new nation in stepping into the modern world while preserving the positive, nurturing forces of the native tradition, wherein its soul lies.

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