

## Conversation

**Feminist Africa speaks about writing and reading as political engagement to Elinor Sisulu, Zimbabwean feminist writer whose biography, Walter and Albertina Sisulu: In Our Lifetime, was published in December 2002. The author has received the Noma Prize for the best African book in 2003.**

**Feminist Africa:** You are now well known for your biography, *In Our Lifetime* [1]. Yet your writing has been very varied. Can you tell us about the different kinds of writing you've done?

**Elinor Sisulu:** My first published writing involved academic studies of women's work in Zimbabwe, and I wrote several research reports and articles. I also co-wrote with Margaret Mwalo a booklet on women in Zimbabwe, dealing with women's socio-economic and political status since the pre-colonial era. Margaret and I had completed a major study on Zimbabwean women's participation in income-generating projects.

When I moved to South Africa in 1991, I decided to switch from academic writing to writing for a wider audience, and did short courses in creative writing, script-writing, journalism and editing. My editing skills were further honed by a stint in 1992 as assistant editor for SPEAK, a magazine with a predominantly black female working-class readership. In 1993, I started work on the biography of Walter and Albertina Sisulu, which I completed in November 2002. During this time I continued to write magazine articles, especially profiles of women. Just after the first democratic elections in South Africa, I wrote a children's story that was published by Little, Brown and Co. in the US as a picture book entitled *The Day Gogo Went to Vote*. I was amazed by the success of the book in the US, where it was listed among the hundred best children's books in 1997 by the American Library Association and the Smithsonian Institute.

Since the completion of the Sisulu biography, I've written articles and a major conference report, but haven't had the energy to embark on another sustained writing project. I have children's stories floating around in my head; hopefully it won't be too long before I can commit them to paper.

**FA:** If you were to identify formative influences on your writing - political ideas, literary traditions, particular writers - what would the most noteworthy of these be? And how have they been important for you?

**ES:** I have been influenced by African nationalism and work about the continent. As a young history student, I was particularly influenced by the writings of Kwame Nkrumah and Amilcar Cabral. On the literature side, I was awestruck by African literary giants Chinua Achebe, Nuruddin Farah and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, though I would not be able to say whether they influenced my writing. My interest in writing about the lives of African women was aroused by Farah's *A Crooked Rib* and Mariama Ba's gem of a novel *Une Si Long Lettre*. Sembene's *God's Bits of Wood* is another novel that has remained in my mind. Like many people educated in an English colonial system, the influence of the English classics is never far away. Recently I have been absorbed by Asian literature, especially epic stories about women's lives - my all-time favourite being Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy*.

African-American literature and political writing played a great part in the development of my consciousness as a black person. Names are too numerous to mention here, but I can still recall my excitement at my first encounters with the work of Zora Neale Hurston.

In 1990 I made a conscious decision to switch from academic work to more popular forms of writing. Looking back now I realise that the switch was prompted by a feminist perspective

developed while I was studying for my MA in Development Studies at the Institute of Social Studies at the Hague in the Netherlands. As a participant in the Women and Development programme, I was fascinated by the relationship between the personal and the political and the way in which our lives are shaped by a largely false public/private dichotomy.

Researching and writing about women's work made me conscious of the gendered nature of the dichotomy between paid work in the public realm and the underpaid and undervalued work in the private realm. I saw this dichotomy extending to the creation and production of knowledge: on the one hand, the knowledge that is validated through intellectual discourse, preserved by the written word and measured through the acquisition of academic distinctions; on the other hand, the unwritten and undervalued knowledge within our families and communities, passed on through oral traditions in an increasingly haphazard way. It was this concern with the untold stories that lie outside the bounds of official historical discourse that prompted my interest in family history.

I always had difficulty in confining myself to any disciplinary boundary. The greatest attraction of feminist theory was that it transcended disciplinary boundaries and allowed for an examination of people's lives from a historical, social and psychological perspective. It validated the oral storytelling traditions of my own society, and allowed me to acknowledge that these traditions have had a powerful influence on my intellectual development. I examined a few family stories and anecdotes from my parents and Shona folk tales from my aunt. I acknowledged the influence of my maternal grandfather, who instilled in me a love of reading from early childhood by filling my life with books.

**FA:** Your concern with what you describe as the "untold stories that lie outside of official discourse" seems to get to the heart of what writing as activism is all about. You've already spoken about some, but which are the other "untold stories" that need to be told?

**ES:** Once I had my own children, I became increasingly conscious of and concerned about the declining importance of storytelling traditions in our communities. For our children, oral storytelling traditions are increasingly replaced by the electronic voices of television and computers. I grew up reading English children's book writers - mostly Enid Blyton, Richmal Crompton and later Charles Dickens. My head was filled with visions of white Christmases, goblins and pixies. When I did come across Africa in my childhood reading, it had nothing to do with my own reality - it was the Africa of missionary explorers and exotic jungles. I remember Rudyard Kipling's poem about "the great grey-green greasy Limpopo" and it took a trip to the Beit Bridge border post to show me that the Limpopo was anything but grey-green and greasy! I never saw my own reality reflected in the printed word; the absence of this was counterbalanced by the storytelling traditions in my own family and community.

I became concerned that, although - thanks to an explosion of multi-cultural children's literature in the 1980s - my children had more access to books about black people than I ever did, there was still a dearth of contemporary stories set in their own environment. I then decided to write the kind of books that I would have liked to read as a child.

**FA:** Do you experience your different writing activities as contradictory? Or do you see them reinforcing each other?

**ES:** Generally, one kind of writing activity reinforces the other. Though I have found that writing like an academic has sometimes been a hindrance rather than a help. Academics are the most indulged species of writers, who have the luxury of unlimited length and often write for captive audiences - like students who have to read their books if they want to complete their assignments or pass their examinations. Like some academics, I was sometimes more concerned with sounding erudite than with communicating with readers, until a journalism course taught me the necessity of catching the reader's attention in the first paragraph.

At *SPEAK*, I had to learn to produce and to edit articles that were short, sharp, to-the-point and accessible to an adult readership for whom English was a second or even a third language. It was a major challenge to deal with complex and sensitive issues in a simple way, while at the same time not patronising the reader. The ability to write clearly and economically that I learned at *SPEAK* stood me in good stead when I turned my hand to writing for children. A good children's book may appear simple, but it has to be extremely well crafted if it is to hold any appeal for its readers. Children are the most brutal and honest critics who do not tolerate errors and inconsistencies.

I have found that the discipline required to write is the same for all genres; regularly engaging in some kind of writing exercise, even writing letters, is important.

**FA:** You worked for *SPEAK* as an accessible South African magazine focusing on women's rights and gender relationships under apartheid. Do you think there is a role for a similar publication in the present context?

**ES:** Yes. *SPEAK* had a very wide readership and targeted many working-class and rural women who could not afford it. What was interesting was that many readers of *SPEAK* were young men, for example, from colleges or prisons. These were men often confronted with conflict, men who were thinking about their relationships with women, for example. The magazine really addressed issues ordinary people were grappling with on a day-to-day basis. *SPEAK* was part of a thriving alternative media. But what has happened today is that many of those who worked within this media have entered the mainstream. The only way that magazines in the alternative tradition could have survived was for government to fund them as alternative social justice projects. A socially responsible media that serves communities needs to be substantially subsidised.

**FA:** What do you see as the main challenges that have faced you as an African woman writer?

**ES:** My main constraint was financial. When I embarked on writing a biography that would require sustained research and writing over a long period of time, I completely underestimated the cost of such an exercise. Working on the Sisulu biography meant a huge sacrifice in terms of money I could have been earning if I had been in a full-time job. Though my research was made possible by a couple of book grants, I constantly ran short of funds and had to do freelance work in order to earn my keep. I would never have completed the task if my husband, Max, had not subsidised the project. The whole experience made me realise how difficult it is for African women to write.

The other major challenge I faced was the difficulty of balancing writing with family responsibilities. When I started the Sisulu biography, my sons were seven and five years old respectively. When I had my third son in 1986, a friend commented that the new baby would delay the publication of my book by at least two years. I brushed aside her comment, dismissing it as overly pessimistic. But with the wisdom of hindsight I realise that she was actually conservative in her estimation. The demands of motherhood, the unequal division of labour in the household, the pressures of being part of an extended family - all these militate against a writing career. I also believe that many African women have been affected by the ravages of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and I am no exception. The strain of dealing with the sick and dying, and the emotional burden of continual bereavement have a damaging effect on one's productivity. The social demands on women in our communities are enormous.

I do know that there are women who have experienced problems with publishing their work. Different kinds of writing by African women are received in very different ways, and writers of

fiction often have major problems. Fortunately, I have never had a problem getting my work published. I've been lucky in undertaking projects which publishers want, or for which there are publishing platforms. My problem has been to meet writing obligations and increase my productivity as a writer.

**FA:** As a Zimbabwean by birth, you've written incisively on the current political and economic situation in that country, especially as it affects women. What role do you see your writing playing?

**ES:** I believe it is important to use my privileged position as a writer to expose the gross violations experienced by working-class people in Zimbabwe, especially the use of rape and other forms of sexual violence and abuse against women. In the past three years I have read many reports detailing the sustained and systematic assault on people who are deemed to be opposition party supporters. There are many reports of rape, enough to confirm that rape is one of the tools used to terrorise the populace. However, all that I had read, heard and even seen on video could not prepare me for the recent experience of talking directly to women who had been gang-raped and beaten by Zimbabwe government soldiers and government-sponsored militia. And in all the reports of dialogue between the main political parties, none of this is taken into consideration.

There is a silence among the governments of this region about what is going on in Zimbabwe. This does not surprise me. After all, people in glass houses are best advised not to throw stones. What I find shocking is the silence of Zimbabwean feminists who remain apologists of the government and turn a blind eye to the impunity with which women are raped and violated. I am currently committed to using my writing to combat the deafening silence about the abuse of Zimbabwean women.

**FA:** You're passionate about the need to develop a book culture in South Africa, and you've been very involved in the work of the Centre for the Book in Cape Town. Tell us about this.

**ES:** The Centre for the Book has provided a central point for different elements in the book chain: publishers, libraries, readers, so there is enormous potential for such centres to help define a national literary tradition. For example, the Canadian Centre for the Book achieved a lot in developing a distinct Canadian culture, especially in relation to children's literature. When we think about the "global village" in relation to culture, we are really thinking about an American village. There is a need for people to develop independent identities that acknowledge their realities, and the connections of these identities to a literary identity is crucial. If I had started reading the kinds of children's books my children have access to, I think I'd have developed much faster as a writer. There's a whole route of self-definition and development of identity that comes through reading.

I also believe that reading is fundamental to all kinds of knowledge acquisition and personal and political growth. The investment in reading as part of the educational chain is extremely important, but it's hard to convince policymakers about this need.

**FA:** As a writer of children's literature, what are your impressions of the literature for children in Africa today?

**ES:** On this continent we should have a flourishing multi-lingual children's literature based on the oral storytelling traditions of African societies. Unfortunately, this is not the case, and the reasons for this are many and complex. Despite the great need for an indigenous children's literature, the children's book market is small because of the poverty and material deprivation of the great majority of African peoples. It is only the privileged middle class that can afford to buy books.

Ideally, the state should be the main purchaser of books through the education system, but children's books have been the first casualty of structural adjustment policies that have cut expenditure on education. From what I can gather, the publishing of children's literature, especially in African languages, is not a viable proposition in most of the continent. There are a few promising projects such as the First Words in Print Project run by the Centre for the Book in Cape Town. There have also been concerted efforts to publish and increase the availability of indigenous children's books in other parts of the continent, but these will always remain isolated and ad hoc efforts as long as there is no serious investment in children's literature.

One of the main reasons that we do not have a flourishing indigenous children's literature based on our oral storytelling traditions is that our education system does not consume our intellectual product. Our education systems are narrow and textbook-driven, and children's books are seen as "supplementary" reading. Most teachers focus on teaching children the mechanical act of reading and writing, and not on the creative use of these skills. Our children are educated to be consumers, rather than creators.

Having had a children's book published in both the US and South Africa has been a valuable learning experience. I have been especially impressed by the way children's books are used in the education system in the US. Picture books are used as a tool to teach children how to read. Well-written, beautifully illustrated children's books serve as bait to entice very young children to read and to inculcate a lifelong love for reading. Picture books are also used to introduce abstract concepts that children will confront later on in the course of their education. They are used as tools to introduce children to basic concepts of literature, science and social interaction. I have been surprised and gratified by the number of American teachers who have told me how they use my book in their lessons. *The Day Gogo Went to Vote* has been used to introduce concepts of voting and governance to young children, to widen children's knowledge of history and current affairs, and to encourage their awareness of the importance of family relationships. My publishers have had requests to use the book in the production of videotapes to train tutors in fundamental reading strategies and to train elementary children how to read.

In the US, the last twenty years has seen a huge increase in demand for books about people from other cultures in response to efforts by the education system to address the needs of a multicultural society. Adaptations of African folktales by American writers like Verna Aardema and John Steptoe have found a ready market in the US. Sadly, any child in the US today would have more access to good picture books from across all over Africa than would an African child in South Africa. There is a substantive body of South African children's literature, but it is not widely distributed and available, and it is difficult to see how this would change without a change in the focus of our education system.

**FA:** There's been some debate about whether children should be exposed to "politically correct" writing, or to writing that's simply imaginatively powerful. What are your views in relation to these positions?

**ES:** This is a tricky one. What a writer should be concerned with first and foremost is the story. In the process of telling the story, if racial or gender stereotypes are broken, well and good. I don't like the term "role model" because I do not think anyone should consciously model themselves on another person. Influences are subtle and varied, and I think that there is a danger in a writer deliberately creating so-called role models. Writers who go out of their way to be politically correct run the danger of ending up with contrived characters that would not appeal to children. I believe that when one is writing creatively, one's politics are often unconscious. At the same time, there are some highly entertaining children's stories that

overtake gender and racial stereotypes. I suppose one could describe these stories as "politically correct", but they are so vibrant, wonderful and wacky that one does not think of them in those terms.

**FA:** You've published a biography, when African women are so often the subjects of others' scholarly biographical studies. Have you been conscious of unsettling the usual production of knowledge in writing your biography? And could you comment on this pattern?

**ES:** I've been impatient with struggle biographies that treat the personal life of subjects in a cursory fashion. Births, marriages, divorces and personal bereavements are often dispensed with in a couple of paragraphs. I made a conscious decision to give equal weight to the personal and political, trying to show the daily grind of life, household and childcare arrangements, the way parents related to their children, and the ways in which a family tried to overcome the trauma of decades of separation. In this I was influenced by Clair Tomalin's excellent biography of Jane Austen that showed me how a biographer can put the reader into the shoes of the subject, thus providing a sense of the subject's everyday life.

**FA:** What led to your writing the biography?

**ES:** Politically, there was a need to explore how and why people had played an important role at a crucial political moment. As a feminist, I also felt that the crucial connection between the private and the public could be made by talking about politics through the stories of individual people. The element of oral storytelling, especially the process of passing family stories on to succeeding generations, was also important for me. This is especially important when we think about the way the HIV/AIDS epidemic can lead to two generations within one family disappearing just like that.

Generally, HIV/AIDS is creating very many new meanings for writing, reading, storytelling and intellectual work. As a young student, I remember being highly amused at the idea of an academic seminar on bereavement. I felt that Africans had the familial resources to deal with bereavement without formalising it in an academic way. Today, constant bereavement is at the centre of our lives, and our resources are so stretched I would never scoff at a seminar on bereavement now. This is something I want to reflect in my writing. I now think about the mood and subject-matter of Albert Camus' *The Plague* very differently from how I thought about this novel when I read it in school.

**FA:** It's often claimed that women inevitably write differently from men because they are positioned differently in the world and therefore see the world through different lenses. Would you say this is true of your biography - especially when we consider how biography written by men usually privileges public life and "momentous" events?

**ES:** I suppose one could say that. Apart from Clair Tomalin, I have been influenced by three biographies by women - Sara Lawrence Lightfoot's *Balm in Gilead*, Yelena Khanga's *Soul to Soul* and Sissela Bok's *Alva Myrdal: A Daughter's Memoir* had a lot of resonance for me because they were stories of multi-generational black families, which gave me a sense of how to approach a family history. Sissela Bok's book showed the sacrifices and difficulties of a pioneering feminist torn between motherhood, love and marriage to a great man and a demanding public life of her own. These three books, essentially daughters writing about mothers, provided valuable lessons on how biographers can intertwine the personal and political, the public and the private.

**FA:** As the daughter-in-law of Walter and Albertina Sisulu, what were some of the advantages and challenges of writing about their lives?

**ES:** The advantage was that I had complete access, everyday interaction, insight into the very personal and private moments, and was not bound by formal interviews; people can be very diplomatic in formal interviews. I found that when I sat down with my mother-in-law for a formal interview, it was very constrained. Much of what I eventually wrote about her was based on everyday interaction, and I think I managed to portray a much more rounded and complex character than I would have been able to do if I had been an outsider.

The disadvantages concerned ethical questions as a biographer. Because I had such close access, I sometimes had to think very carefully about what I wrote and what was confidential, off-the-record, the kinds of things that were said to me as a family member, and not as biographer. I would check these things with my parents-in-law, but it could be constraining at times.

Emotionally, there were parts of the book that were very difficult to write, since I would directly experience the shock of what those I was close to had had to go through. I remember when I was doing research at the Ministry of Justice, one of the bureaucrats there told me over tea that he'd worked there since the sixties. I felt an enormous surge of anger thinking about how he had probably been someone who'd processed those orders justifying the detention and banning of members of my family. Being closer as a researcher and writer to your subject means that you also have to deal very directly with powerful emotions that are raised.

**FA:** Your biography has been a huge project. Do you have any plans for another large project in the near future?

**ES:** No, I don't. I would like to enjoy a period of respite and write something entirely different and new, perhaps start a new genre of African feminist erotica! I hate pornography because it is so misogynistic, and believe there is a difference between pornography and erotica. I've read a fascinating American collection called *Black Erotica*, which has characters, real people, real women and real pleasures. I know that there are traditions of erotica in the different languages, in oral culture, in praise poetry in Africa, and yet they are not visible in our literature.

#### **Footnote**

[1] Sisulu, E. 2002. Walter and Albertina Sisulu: *In Our Lifetime*. Cape Town: David Philip.

---

*Educated in Zimbabwe, Senegal and the Netherlands, Elinor Sisulu combines training in history, English literature, development studies and feminist theory. She has published studies of women's work in Zimbabwe and has worked as a freelance writer and editor since moving to South Africa in 1990. In 1994 she published an award winning children's book *The Day Gogo Went to Vote*. She is a member of the South African Children's Book Forum and has been instrumental in the establishment of a Children's Literature Network in South Africa.*