

Song, Myth, Epic Poem

The Amputated Memory

By Werewere Liking, translated by Marjolijn de Jager

New York: Feminist Press, 2007, 445 pp, \$24.95, paperback

Reviewed by Heather Hewett

Amputated Memory has been dubbed by its author a *chant-roman*, or song-novel, in which she combines hallmarks of African orature, such as song, ritual, praise poetry, repetition, and direct address, with conventions of novelistic writing, such as plot, narrative, dialogue, and internal monologue. For example, very early in "Movement One," the narrator breaks into the first of many songs:

And so I want to talk not only to my clan's
women,
But to people of the future, too,
Speak of some men in my life and of you,
Father, above all...

I want to speak to you of genies and great men
of action,
Like a legend,
Born straddling two eras and two worlds,
Quartered, with all their driving forces
quelled
Fighting like lions in spite of it all.
Allow me then, men of mine, to testify for
you,
Express my gratitude to you who have at
least bequeathed me passion for what is
beautiful
And the thirst for a great opus.

Readers unused to hybrid genres may find these kinds of multivoiced juxtapositions, which at times can feel jarring and long-winded, disconcerting. Yet at its best, Liking's style enables us to view Halla's life in the context of her community, the Bassa people, and of history. The narrator, well-aware of the power of storytelling, observes, "Song, myth, epic poem. What could be more fitting to remember forevermore the daily facts, embellish and purify them, give them breadth and immortality." In *The Amputated Memory*, Liking's self-declared "great opus," she aspires to bequeath this "breadth and immortality" to the events of Halla's life.

While the story begins as an homage to the narrator's Auntie Roz, a woman who "embodies the entire circle of women through whose solidarity Africa will be reincarnated and restructured," it quickly expands outward to encompass the lives of the narrator and her family, most of all, her beloved but brutal father. Indeed, her complicated relationship with her father is the driving force behind the first half of the narrative. Handsome and charismatic, an urbane visionary who ruthlessly grasps power through the sheer force of his own personality (a figure known in Bassa

cosmology as a *Lôs*), he and his mythic rise and fall symbolize, among other things, the African Big Man. Halla's own coming-of-age and initiation into womanhood is largely defined by her father's betrayals: she adores him, he rapes her; she leaves her mother to live with him, he tries to marry her off instead of sending her to school. In his character, Liking provides a complex portrait, both sympathetic and damning, of the patriarchal violence that silences African women.

Yet Halla is a survivor, and like the women around her—in particular, her Aunt Roz, her mother Naja, and her Grandmother Madja—she endures. For Halla, remembering the sexual abuse she has forgotten enables her to participate in the greater project of discovering her community's past. As she declares,

I needed to break the silence myself, to wrench from my personal memory some harrowing secrets. I needed to shake loose the silences about experiences that should have been told, seeing them as facts of life if not test cases, and at least force my own people to say, "Never again!"

Halla's forgetting represents the way in which her culture's memory, too, has been ravaged by colonialism and corrupt rulers, and her testimony speaks to the need to reclaim all that has been lost. "Who will speak of Africa's silences?" asks the narrator. "Who will know where the work of true excavation must be done?"

Halla's vivid, painful memories of her father present one of the central dilemmas of the novel: remembering is critical for healing, yet forgetting can be equally essential. It can grant oblivion, which, the narrator muses, may be "a secret of survival." After all, remembering can be difficult and violent. As the title of the novel suggests, the survivor's memory is "amputated." She ends up not with the original limb but with a stump: mangled, disorienting, forever dangling and incomplete.

Lately it seems *de rigueur* to compare any work of contemporary African literature to Chinua Achebe's 1958 masterpiece, *Things Fall Apart*. Publishing houses and critics alike have made this comparison when examining recent work by Chris Abani, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Nuruddin Farah, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Granted, sometimes the comparison is apt, as with Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* (which begins with the sentence, "Things started to fall apart..."); and no one can deny that Achebe's novel has been highly influential, not only on critical understandings of African literature but also on many Africans' writerly aspirations. Following suit,

The *Amputated Memory* is the fifth novel by Werewere Liking, a Cameroon-born writer, dramatist, singer, performer, and founder of a pan-African multi-arts cooperative in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire. An ecstatic, eclectic, and rambling tale, Liking's novel, originally published as *La mémoire amputée* by Nouvelles Editions Ivoiriennes, won the 2005 Noma Award for Publishing in Africa. Thanks to the Feminist Press and the work of translator Marjolijn de Jager, this edition enables English-speaking readers to experience Liking's ambitious and visionary, though flawed and uneven, work.

Liking's saga recounts the coming-of-age of a young girl named Halla Njokè, who bears many autobiographical traces of the author's own life. Halla narrates her experiences as she looks back, as an 80 year old, over a peripatetic and unconventional life that encompassed living in a village and the fictional urban center of Wouri, careers as a singer and journalist, and the ups and downs of motherhood and romantic love. In so doing, Halla bears witness to the history of an entire nation, an unnamed West African country that is a lot like Cameroon. The historical events and cultural movements that take place during Halla's life—anticolonial resistance, village massacres, postcolonial corruption, and the nightclubs, *yéyé* style, and modernity of 1960s urban life—imbue the novel with an epic quality, giving readers a feel for the periods before and after independence, which were marked by both euphoric idealism and crushing disappointment. Sordid scenes, including one of a prostitute forced to perform bestial acts for money, testify to the personal loss and spiritual poverty wrought by colonialism, corruption, and consumerism. Liking, who once called for the creation of a "lunatic language" for self-expression in "an age of lunacy," ably chronicles the depths of craziness as well as the strength and resilience of ordinary African women and men who refuse to give up.

Much of Liking's work, particularly her theater, attempts to heal these postcolonial blues through art. And, like Liking's previous novels, *The*

the publicity material from the Feminist Press claims that *The Amputated Memory* is a “modern-day” *Things Fall Apart*. I don’t buy the comparison. Certainly Liking’s novel has ambitious reach, and it shares some of the same concerns as Achebe’s, such as colonialism and cultural survival. But simply because a novel explores an unwritten moment in African history and happens to be written by someone born on the continent, does not mean that it revises or revisits *Things Fall Apart*.

Rather, the comparison that comes to mind is to Ben Okri’s Booker Prize-winning *The Famished Road* (1991). While quite different stylistically, both novels share a mythic vision and a prescient child-narrator. Okri’s protagonist, Azaro, a spirit-child with special powers, wanders an unnamed African country that is populated with cruel humans and evil spirits. Like Azaro, Halla possesses supernatural qualities; other characters constantly suggest that she is a genie, a priestess, or perhaps a female *Lô*s—qualities brought

into relief by the foil of her father. Also like Azaro, Halla cleverly outwits her adult nemesis (her father) in a series of picaresque episodes. Indeed, Halla’s preternatural gifts, and the cultivation of them by her grandfather, enable her to cross the boundaries of her gender and embrace her unconventional destiny.

Yet unlike Okri, Liking does not fully develop the supernatural dimensions of her protagonist. In the first part of the novel, other characters constantly allude to Halla’s special powers, but this side of her eventually fades away. Much to my disappointment, *The Amputated Memory* devolves into a diffuse tale; frequent interior monologues slow down the pace; epistolary excerpts meant to flesh out the story feel amateurish; and as Halla develops as an artist, what began as an epic saga reads more and more like a *roman à clef* about the author’s life. The eroding of my confidence in the storyteller at the helm turned an exhilarating ride into a maddening one.

Liking’s grand goal—creating a literary purgative meant to heal Africa—results in an expansive, eclectic, and innovative novel. Yet these qualities also prove to be the novel’s undoing. While *The Amputated Memory* confirms the power of Liking’s artistic vision, it is ultimately unable to reconcile the competing demands of uncensored creation and formal unity. If the ambition of the author’s reach exceeds her grasp, the audacity of her attempt should inspire all those who have not lost faith in revolutionary art. 

Heather Hewett last wrote on African literature in *Women’s Review of Books* in her July 2004 review of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*. She is an assistant professor of English and Women’s Studies at the State University of New York at New Paltz, where she coordinates the Women’s Studies program.

POETRY

Mother-Daughter Portrait

“A woman is her mother, that’s the main thing.”
—Anne Sexton

After the anthology of stories and poems by women who were girls when their mothers died was published,

complete with black-and-white photographs of each writer as a child, pictured with the mother who would

so soon be gone, people kept saying how much I looked like you. It was something I’d wanted to hear my whole

life, as I’d stared into mirrors, trying to see beneath their silvery surface and through the ghost-body I seemed

to inhabit into who was really there, and what an “I” was anyway without a mother to guide her. And while I’m glad

my friends see our resemblance, noting the upward tilt of our mouths, the tiny lines rayed out around our eyes

when we smile, and even the shape of our eyes themselves (though Jenny has your smoky grey), their exclamations

make me uneasy. Instead, I apologize for how you look as I never did when you were alive, saying, “She was already

dying when that picture was taken; you should have seen her when she was young.” Or noting things that can’t be seen

in the picture, both your breasts gone, your dark blonde hair threaded with grey. How the blue dress you’re wearing

is the one you’ll be buried in, looking so much older than your forty-two years. But people keep insisting on how

alike we are. And I keep pushing that likeness away, as even now, I sometimes push comfort away when it’s offered,

the way I hugged your sawdust-stuffed Scottie dog after you died, a little more of it spilling out each day,

no one there to mend the tear, the shape things make disappearing what I know best, after all. Even as I walk

through this bright world, winter sun shining on my hennaed hair,

ten years older than you will ever be, looking so much like you

that when my aunt takes my face between her silky palms, searching for the you in me, it hurts. And there is

that moment when I pull away, as every daughter must, leaving behind whatever your sister almost sees and quietly

walking off, stepping over the stile into the wild meadow—the one where you never walked, the one you never

even knew existed—that has, all along, been growing into the picture of who I became without you.

Alison Townsend is the author of three books of poetry, *And Still the Music*, *The Blue Dress* and *What the Body Knows*. Her newest collection, *Persephone in America*, won the 2008 Crab Orchard Open Poetry Competition and is forthcoming in 2009 from Southern Illinois University Press. She teaches English, Creative Writing and Women’s Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and lives with her husband on four acres of prairie and oak savanna in the farm country outside Madison

A Winter’s Tale

All semester, the young woman whose mother has been sent home with terminal ovarian cancer comes faithfully to my 3:45 section of Freshman English.

She never says much, but sits quietly in the circle, both there and not-there, her cinnamon-freckled face scrubbed blank with fatigue and sadness, as we plow through the hero and heroine’s journey, the elements of fiction, a five-page essay due every other week. She laughs just once, the day no one’s read the text and I make them act out the version of the story where Persephone chooses to leave—Josh, a gruff-voiced, black Hades

from Milwaukee, Scott and Brent his snorting steeds, Kelsey and Heidi pretend-flowers, withering under Demeter’s wrath, as Kara cries, “Save me, Mother, save me!” and is carried away down the hall. Only after class does she tell me how things stand—her mom moved from wheelchair to bed and off medication, hospice workers poised like a band of strange angels. It’s the beginning of winter, light sucked a little farther each day into the womb of earth’s darkness, the same time of year my own mother died. As Beth and I walk up the stairs to my office, the ghost of my girl-self follows behind, braids tangled, knee socks slipping down, her violin case banging against her knees. I’ve told Beth a one-sentence version of my story so she’ll know I understand hers, said she doesn’t

even need to attend class, just turn in the papers. Still she comes, bearing her grief in her arms like an invisible baby only she and I can see, saying, “The routine helps me stay on track.” I remember how it felt to walk through the world that way, insides empty, bones filled with air. I want to tell her she will survive, that her dreams of marine biology can still come true, but those aren’t the words for now. All I can do is hug her briefly, as her mother is too weak to do, brush her hair back from her face, and send her home, telling her “Skip the last paper. Your mother is your most important work now,” the girl in braids standing so close beside us I can almost feel her breathing.

—Alison Townsend

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