

BOOK REVIEW

Gender, Poverty and Social Exclusion in *Kadi the Barefoot Girl*

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Current development initiatives in Ghana focus on growth and poverty reduction. As a result, various efforts are being made to understand poverty so as to programme more effectively towards its reduction for growth. In reading Santuah Niagia's book, *Kadi, the Barefoot Girl*, I could not help appreciating its contribution to the understanding of poverty in rural communities and its impact on real lives, especially that of females. Using the story of a "simple" rural girl, whom he calls Kadi, Niagia, takes his audience through a practical navigation of the real world of poverty where resource deprivation and social exclusion loom large.

In addition to organizing the text into very intriguing thematic areas, under which the story of Kadi unfolds, Niagia also uses pictures and local vocabulary to communicate the story. These add color and flesh to enrich the story. Rather than adopt reductionist English equivalents, Niagia stays with the ordinary language use of some concepts and provides explanations in the form of a glossary toward the end of the text. This allows all manner of readers to access the language and story. His particular narrative style of anticipation, dialogue, comparison, repetition and interrogation provides presentation variety and humor that should minimize boredom and sustain interests.

Focusing on rural living and female experiences within a northern Ghana context, Niagia, narrates a story that is believable, familiar and exciting. The narrative is believable in the extent to which it is honest. It is familiar due to its practicality, which enables persons of rural origins to identify with it. It is exciting in the way that the narrative is familiar and practical as well as believable and honest. After reading that novel, I could not help but conclude that Niagia tells the rural story and shares the female experience of it fatefully and truthfully.

By taking his audience into the life and world of Kadi; the protagonist, Niagia reinforces arguments on internal inequalities even within deprivation. He demonstrates

the extent to which sex and gender make a difference in the lives of boys and girls as well as males and females. More importantly, he reinforces the fact that one's social positioning determines access to resources and determines levels of social participation and/or exclusion. Yet, Niagia does not lock his analysis and/or actors in positions of victimhood. He finds and locates agency as a critical tool for negotiation, change and transformation. Kadi, the barefoot girl, who attended the school in the market place where stools and stones were dragged under the baobab tree in the market place all day long to escape the heat of the sun was a victim of her rural origins and female sex but also a victor who exercised agency to not only change her conditions but also transform her status and community.

Kadi's story should inspire the many girls, but also deprived youth and people in rural and urban areas, who live under multiple forms of discrimination and exclusions to seek change. Kadi is depicted as a very critical and intelligent girl who knows what she wants, yet her female sex restricts the realization of her visions until she exercises personal agency to change her situation. Kadi refuses to be locked in gendered exclusions as she initiates work toward and succeeds in transforming her situation. This should provide hope for those in or out of school girls and youth, especially of northern origins, who do not seem to appreciate the power of education. More especially, it should convince cultural and/or modernization skeptics of the non-contradiction between tradition and change or even culture and science.

Specifically, five important social facts are worth reiterating in Niagia's novel. These include: the gendered nature of culture, the challenges of rural living, rural/urban tensions, power dynamics and social relationships.

On the gendered nature of indigenous culture, Niagia shows how the gender division of labor and role expectations translates into and define choice and access to deepen deprivations and exclusions. The familiar story of female location in the domestic and home spheres is presented in ways that expose inherent limitations such as inability to go to school, forms of socialization, parental preferences, moral/ethical challenges and physical abuse. The huge gender gap in school enrolment in the only school in Kukula, Kadi's community, is a stark reality. The social protection and moral high grounds set for girls become sites for social exclusion. Yet, Niagia persists in using dialogue, comparisons and critical interrogation at various levels to defuse these traditional bases for gendered exclusions in the form of the effective combination of school and home work by Kadi's friend Maanu, Kadi's analytical abilities as well as educational and professional success, Nu's depiction as the African superwoman and Kadi's return to Kukula amid pomp and glory.

Niagia also paints a picture of rural living with all of its deprivations in the form of the low access to basic resources and services such as water, education, health and nutrition. The resulting poor quality of life and/or conditions of living reflect on the high vulnerability to poverty in the form of subsistent living, persistent hunger and social exclusion. Yet, Niagia moves the discourse from deprivation and exclusionism

to capture strengths such as interdependence, improvisation, hard work, care and indigenous knowledge. The availability and widespread use of ethno-medicine reduces risks and provides treatment for various ailments while the carving of stools and use of stones and baobab tree in the market place for school lends support to indigenous creativity and ingenuity.

While concentrating on telling the rural and female story to the full, Niagia also provides glimpses into urban and male life in a way that highlights the centre-periphery and superordinate/subordinate relationships, respectively. The rural economy becomes a source for deriving taxes in spite of its continued state of deprivation. Also, it captures various levels of border crossings through the periodic visits of urban experts and the movement of Kadi to the urban center for higher education. The positioning of the chief, herbalist, headman and brother provide context for situating the gender story.

A very intriguing power dynamic is also unraveled in the story, which is traceable to the relationship between Kadi and her brothers, Nu and Faradaga; Kadi's parents, teacher and pupils, chief and citizens as well as technocrats and community members. In many places, the subordinate-subordinate relationship is played out but also efforts are made to reflect mutually reinforcing relationships that allow for comparing, sharing and borrowing.

Finally, Niagia captures the complexities of social relationships within the rural setting. He examines the import of such relationships for generating support as women walk together to draw water, as Kadi's brother helps her to prepare to start school, as Kadi prepares to go to the town school and university and as she persuades her parents and relies on her mother for support to enable her go to school. The personal relationship between Kadi and Liribia is the least revealing yet the continued ties between the two and the social basis of it speaks to its complex nature.

Above all, the novel, *Kadi, the Barefoot Girl* is convincing in demystifying perceived contradictions between the ways of the ancestors and the ways of science: magico-herbal practices of Liribia and Kadi's orthodox medicine, Kadi's but also Maanu's ability to combine home work with school education, between rural and urban living and between traditionalism and modernity. Kadi's story perpetuates but also challenges gendered meanings and notions of royalty and elitism. Border crossings in the form of the transporting of the beliefs and traditions of the people of Kukula, a rural community, to big cities and urban centers as Kadi is prepared by her mum and admirer; Liribia, to leave Kukula, the community of her origins, as well as the periodic entry into Kukula of health, revenue and agricultural agents from the city.

Niagia's highly commendable book is not without questions. I am unable to tell whether the narrative is real or fictional as I read statements such as "at the time of documenting..." Also, there are contextual questions regarding the use of calabash for trapping termites rather than earthenware pots, use of bamboo stem fencing in

northern Ghana and playing of hockey in the rural community. There is also unnecessary insistence in trapping Kadi in her barefoot state, the school under the baobab tree where stools and stones are dragged and Kukula in the state of perpetual deprivation. Change in Kukula through the various encounters with outsiders (technocrats) and insiders (Kadi) is not reflected until the end. This tends to freeze progress especially as the growth of the school, Kadi and Kukula remain largely in situ.

In conclusion, it is important to note that the novel, *Kadi, the Barefoot Girl*, tells a story of many stories; of various characters, practitioners, locations, sexes, experiences, and generations; of the usual and unusual, of stasis and dynamics, of simplicity and complexity, of determinism and constructionism, of the status quo and change and of fixity and fluidity. It captures a peoples history, their culture and progress as well as provides a social commentary on poverty, inequality and development.

I am convinced that the novel, *Kadi, the Barefoot Girl* will find many uses. It can serve as an interesting reader for schools in their language classes. Schools in northern Ghana should see it as an opportunity to include local experiences as we read Kadi alongside Ama. Also, for the cultural voyeur and avant garde, Kadi should take you to the world of surrealism and popular culture. For cultural romantics, like me, who relish and reminisce in indigenous living, this is the novel for keeps. For gender equality and women's rights activists, it provides an opportunity for telling the story in very interesting and believable ways. In this novel, people of diverse orientation can make cuts!