

# THE REPRESENTATIVE

Ellen Kuzwayo

**Call Me Woman** Preface by Nadine Gordimer, Foreword by Bessie Head. Pp 266 plus 16pp photographs. Ravan R13.50

This work is not for yourselves – kill that spirit of 'self' and do not live above your people, but live with them. If you can rise, bring someone with you.

In this spirit of selflessness, Ellen Kuzwayo has written her autobiography. The words she quotes were uttered some 50 years ago by Charlotte Maxeke in her Presidential Address to the National Council of African Women, and it is their outlook, their optimistic focus on communal well-being, which Ellen Kuzwayo has determined, despite the debilitating consequences of oppression, to celebrate in telling her story. There is considerable tension between such selflessness and the potential ego-centricity of autobiography, a tension which raises some of the most interesting questions about this book. To reconcile her selfless purposes and her concentration on her own story, Ellen Kuzwayo asks her reader to see her as a representative figure.

The courage, generosity and support of my people have over the years helped me to carry a load that under ordinary conditions I would not have found easy to bear. I am amazed when I observe the power, strength and self-confidence that are born of involvement in work on behalf of one's own hard-pressed people.

The self-evident importance of such representative autobiography for people who have been denied their heritage is born out by the number of life-studies, sometimes in fictional form, which are being published by black writers today. But it is still relatively rare to find black women producing such work – until this publication, only Noni Jabavu had written autobiography. In her writing too, the focus is decidedly not on self.

Granting Ellen Kuzwayo representative status is not to ignore that she is a remarkable woman, nor is it to imply that she does not know that hers is a remarkable story. The first notable, comparatively unique feature of her life which she identifies is that she was born into a family which had had freehold possession of a large farm at Thaba Patchoa, near Ladybrand, for several generations. When the area was declared a 'black spot' in 1974, the family were stripped of 60 000 acres of land which they had farmed for over a century. But the narrative's focus is not solely on the terrible inequity of such acts; what is even more important to Ellen Kuzwayo is that through her family's once settled conditions she knows what it is

to possess her history. She knows too that her grasp of communal origins and of potential direction is rare for a black person in this country where a megalomaniac dream has given the power to destroy centuries of vital tradition to mere bureaucrats. The psychic effect of such dislocations on several generations of people is something South Africa is just beginning to have to recognise.

While she traces her descent (her maternal grandfather, Jeremiah Makoloi Makgothi, was politically active with men such as Sol T Plaatje, and assisted in the translation of the New Testament into his own language, Serolong) and while she depicts the customs of her people, Ellen Kuzwayo also describes her education. She attended St Paul's School, Thaba'Nchu; St Francis' College, Mariannhill; Adams College, Durban; Lovedale College, Alice; and finally, as part of her mid-career change from teaching to social work, Jan Hofmeyr School of Social Work, Johannesburg. The number of schools she had to attend and the distances she had to travel indicate the courage and faith she and her family invested in education, but, even if they wish or can afford it, the opportunity to gain an education they respect is not available to black children today. It is to record her own advantages compared with contemporary deprivation that Ellen Kuzwayo has gone into print:

The story of my life, my education, you see, cannot be buried quietly and safely in the past. How can I remain quiet when I see the choices open to the younger generation constantly restricted, their hopes fading into dreams, and the dreams becoming nightmares?

## AS A WOMAN

Ellen Kuzwayo's third reason for telling her story lies in her experiences as a woman. Again she presents herself and her achievements as representative of the programme of organisations such as the NCAW. She records how, at her first national meeting, the members

pledged themselves to serve their race and to liberate themselves from the shackles of humiliation, discrimination and systematic psychological suppression by their own menfolk as well as by the state through its legislation and administrative regulations.

These aspects of her story have already found public expression through the medium of film. In 1980 Ellen Kuzwayo was involved in the making of *Awake From*

*Mourning* which presented the work of several self-help groups for women in Soweto, and in 1983 in the making of *Tsiamele: A Place of Goodness*, "which tells the story of our family, the dispossession of our land and the history of the great men and women who preceded us."

Now, in her written narrative, Ellen Kuzwayo turns to a more sustained account of herself and her role as opponent of two mighty forces: white racism and her own people's customary oppression of women. In confronting this country's racist laws and practices, she can be sure that she speaks for all of her people, but in confronting the cultural traditions which have failed to equip black women for the realities of contemporary western life, she is making a potentially more divisive plea for change. In this light, her treating both issues in the same forthright but tactful way is striking. Although the personal note does not dominate this autobiography, some of her own experiences are used to illustrate what black women are up against. For instance, she records her anxieties when asked to be Chairwoman of the Maggie Magaba Trust. Despite her years as organising secretary for the YWCA, and her experience as a social worker, she, as a black woman, felt so unused to responsibility on that scale that she did not relish the job. She also records events which illustrate attitudes much more subtle and more difficult to counter, which rob women of self-hood. In 1977 Ellen Kuzwayo was detained and, in the familiar pattern of intimidatory arrests, was released without charge five months later. Shortly after her release, she was asked to be a witness for the defence at the trial of eleven students charged with terrorism and facing a possible death sentence. Her role, which she undertook very reluctantly in view of her own recent imprisonment, was "to get through to the humanity" of the judge by creating for the court an understanding of the circumstances of daily life in Soweto which drive young people to despairing protest. During cross-examination the State seems to have dwelt on the menace of Black Consciousness, seeking to discredit Ellen Kuzwayo because of her sympathy for its function. She does not dwell long on the content of her testimony, but it is clear that although giving evidence was an ordeal, she spoke authoritatively and effectively. She concludes her picture of the trial thus:

I had hardly taken my seat with the rest of those who had come to court when suddenly someone took me in his arms and crushed me . . . As I turned to see who this very brave person was, I saw a man who looked beside himself, as if under some strange influence. All he said to me was, 'You are not an ordinary woman, you pleaded like a man, only a man could speak the way you did.' Before I could respond or ask a question, he was kissing me and thanking me.. He was one of the parents of the eleven appearing in court that morning.

After a brief reference to the comparatively light sentences passed on the students, Ellen Kuzwayo moves on to other matters. Nothing more is said of her achievement; and the curious denial of her being, entailed in the thanks she got, is allowed simply to speak for itself.

### RETICENCE

Such reticence is the most striking characteristic of Ellen Kuzwayo, the narrator. She is consistently forthright in that she never avoids an issue or its effect on her, but

she can also be unexpectedly reticent, either in limiting the extent of her comments or in avoiding a detailed presentation of an event. The reason for such self-effacement when she is dealing with her public life and achievements is clear: she is to be responded to as a representative of her people. But what is challenging to a reader used to the conventions of direct immediacy which are used in the name of realism in western writing, is that considerable restraint is also exercised in the account of some crucial private events. Her personal life story contains much drama — her parents separated soon after her birth; her mother died when she was fifteen; her stepfather then married a woman, her own aunt, who subsequently forced her to leave the family home, compelling her to seek shelter in Johannesburg with a father she had never known; her marriage brought her much pain and humiliation, and disintegrated after six years, forcing her to leave home again, this time leaving two young sons behind her; some years later she saw her younger son hounded for his work in literacy programmes, arrested and eventually banished to Mafikeng; her second husband died, a comparatively young man, after only fifteen years of happy marriage; finally she herself was imprisoned for reasons that have never been revealed. But, drama notwithstanding, in recounting many of these passages in her life, Ellen Kuzwayo provides little immediate detail of what actually happened. For example, the breakdown of her first marriage, which drove her to the desperate step of abandoning two young children, is not pictured graphically. It is easy enough to infer what happened, but the narrative chooses to remain in the distancing language of summary and judgement such as "torture" or "humiliation — degradation". Partly this is explained by Ellen Kuzwayo's saying, "Even now, I find I cannot write in detail about it." But, however understandable is her reluctance to open old wounds and however impertinent the reader's wish for intimate detail might seem, when one remembers that the narrative has to prepare the reader for the abandoning of two children, then the absence of explanatory, self-justificatory detail is surprising. The initial strangeness, to a western reader, of this omission becomes even more thought-provoking when, a little later, she writes:

It is going to take a long period of time to eradicate those harrowing traumatic events I went through in Rustenburg. The fact that they did not leave me with a warped mind and unending bitterness is in itself a great blessing. The writing of this book has offered me an opportunity to relive these past experiences with a certain amount of objectivity and maturity, as I struggle to understand analytically why what happened, happened. Talking about such experiences in a way I have never done before will hopefully air them and expel them from my whole system.

As "talking" refers to what has been recounted in the pages of *Call Me Woman*, Ellen Kuzwayo obviously feels she has written with unusual frankness about the episode. For this reason is it clearly wrong to attribute her distanced account of her suffering to restraint — a reader with western expectations needs more than notions of a voluntary censorship stemming from personal pain or from a tactful desire to protect others, to understand why this writer who has said so much less than she might, feels that she has been unusually explicit. It is in its power to convince

the reader that the style of narration speaks of both an individual temperament and of a cultural tradition that Ellen Kuzwayo's writing is most memorable.

### SELF AND SOCIETY

Quite what the cultural traditions which are still deep in Ellen Kuzwayo's psyche are, is difficult for someone from a different culture to know, but an emphasis in Noni Jabavu's *The Ochre People* (recently reissued by Ravan Press) seems enlightening here. In recounting a bus journey through the Transkei, she returns to her preoccupation with the concept of 'self' and its relation to society in her culture. She attends particularly to the way this manifests itself in public speech, especially in that form of speech that is story-telling. Of a passenger who talked about himself in order to illustrate the characteristics of his tribe, she comments, "As usual the impression was not of an inordinate egocentricity but that he was using a personal experience to illustrate the variety of life's circumstances." Then, as the bus crosses the Great Kei River the subject of her narrative changes from the upholders of tradition to those who break with it. A young woman with a child in her lap is moved to tell her story. She had been jilted and in despair had left her people to go to town to find work. After some months, having a good job and having turned against marriage, she had deliberately "conceived a baby as provision for (the) future" and was taking the child to be reared in her family home. Noni Jabavu comments, "the cynicism, the anti-social aspect, the amorality of it affected everybody; not so much the personal case but its wide implications" and she reports the reflections of one woman who spoke for them all:

We mourn the passing of the days when girls behaved nobly because the *community* so behaved . . . Nobility does not presuppose queasy petty sensitivities. *That* attitude belongs to *isiLungu* — Europeanness. It is not related to the *sensibility* which belonged to *IsiNtu* — Africanness: which was what we strove after, even if indelicate, crude. The ideal of *nobility-in-living-with-people* was served by, among other things, society's demand that a man who transgressed the code about virgins be disgraced, disgraced! The matter had to do with the symbols of our self-respect.

It may be that, a generation or so later, western individualism would prevent Ellen Kuzwayo from feeling quite as this

speaker did (and Noni Jabavu indicates that her own feelings were somewhat different) but the sense of what should be said about transgression, and of how it should be said, which informs the narrative and its silences seems to have its roots in the selfless, heroic nobility of which the woman in the bus was speaking.

The reason that Ellen Kuzwayo's account of her failed marriage may seem to western readers to contain inappropriate silences (one reviewer in a local newspaper has, incomprehensibly, termed this picture "too scanty" and "mediocre") is that from within an age of post-Romantic individualism, it is difficult to comprehend a self-respect which still derives in good part from a selfhood defined in relation to the needs of the community. Noni Jabavu's woman was beginning to register the passing of an heroic, communal age and of the identity it gave people, but, in what seems at first like an inappropriate reticence, Ellen Kuzwayo shows that in her most intimate as well as in her public life, her experience of self, let alone her presentation of it, is still rooted in traditions alien to the western reader.

Besides the challenges in the telling of her private story, what is memorable in her claims to be representative is not the extent of her sufferings as a woman and as a black person, but the way in which she has surmounted them and has triumphed. As the assertive note in *Call Me Woman* indicates, Ellen Kuzwayo is a potent presence expressive of indomitable courage. Whether or not she deliberately chose her title to challenge that of Mtutuzeli Matshoba's short stories, *Call Me Not A Man*, (published by Ravan Press and recently unbanned) she comes to embody a resolute communal will to survive and to triumph which is not available to Matshoba's angst-ridden observer narrator. He records, with compelling power, the degradations of township life, focussing usually on exploitation by whites or on the helpless or wary distrust of others that is necessary for survival in Soweto. Although their experience of oppression is similar, Matshoba's view of life is profoundly different from that of Ellen Kuzwayo. Both are authentic and both are necessary. Without a Matshoba, Ellen Kuzwayo's strengths would afford too much general consolation; too much reassurances to the oppressed and too easy an escape from responsibility for the oppressors. Without a Kuzwayo, Matshoba's stories deny too absolutely the possibility, let alone the value, of an inner resilience of spirit. □

## CONSCRIPTION

Every young lad should spend two years in the army.  
That, after all, is what will make him a man.  
Let him learn to endure, to contain his emotion;  
let him learn to face death, and to deal it out too.  
Who would not wish his son to have such virtues?  
So, every girl should spend two years in a brothel.  
That, after all, will make a woman of her.  
Let her learn to endure, to contain her emotion;  
let her learn to face pain, and to deal it out too.  
Any parent of sense must rejoice in such a daughter.

by Vortex