

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Scraps of Life by Marjorie Agosin

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4qc3c4nf>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 16(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Dandridge-Perry, Cheryl

Publication Date

1988

DOI

10.5070/F7163016925

Copyright Information

Copyright 1988 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

proving she had a mind of her own she proved instead totally frigid in bed despite weekly visits to the psychiatrist" (p.58).

But Anthills of the Savannah is more than the images of sex-hungry and frigid women. It is very rich in themes. It is, above all, Achebe's most experimental novel. It may not be the best work of the author of Arrow of God. Its voice is self-conscious; it falters in places. Overcharged with patriotism, it sometimes resorts to tinkering to make characters, who should emerge naturally from the plot, bear the weight of preconceived ideas. Nevertheless, Anthills of the Savannah is an important contribution to world literature.

Chidi Ikonne

Marjorie Agosin, Scraps of Life: Chilean Arpilleras, trans., Cola Franzen. Trenton, N.J.: The Red Sea Press, c 1987. 154 pp. \$9.95 pap. \$29.95 hardcover

When thousands of men were detained in Chile after the fall of Salvador Allende in 1973, the communities from which they were taken were traumatized. Women who had been trained to work only in the home were suddenly faced with the emotional stress of a missing family member; the moral necessity of traveling tirelessly from one detention/torture center to another in search of news or evidence of the missing one; and the immediate necessity of feeding and clothing children. The local church resources were stretched thin in such communities, and when, in 1974, it became clear that the detentions and disappearances were not going to abate, the Association of Families of the Detained-Disappeared was formed. Despite the ambiguous role of the Catholic Church in national affairs in Chile, the Vicarate of Solidarity, under the Archbishop of Santiago, was determined to assist the affected communities in coping and in developing organizations of self-help. This was achieved despite severe political pressure by the military.

The *arpilleristas* of this book are mainly women from the poorer areas, who make arpilleras (needlework appliques on sackcloth) that refer to the torture, detentions and disappearances of people in Chile because these events have touched them personally. Their *arpilleras* are smuggled out of Chile and sold abroad where they serve to denounce what is happening in Chile. The *arpilleristas* earn needed money from their works, even though they suffer arrests, harassment and detention

for the subjects they depict. The making of the *arpilleras* is much more than an economic activity; it is a way of life and a new way of thinking for the women involved.

Marjorie Agosin introduces the women in terms of the changes that have overcome their lives. They were apolitical until 'acted upon' by events. She explores how women are dealing with this sudden turmoil and, finally, how they actively begin to promote change themselves. Agosin contrasts this with CEMA, the state-sponsored craft workshops for indigent women, run by Mme Pinochet, which utilizes an authoritarian model to promote patriarchal, nationalist values that support the state. In this organization the women have little power. Secrecy and control from above are the modes of operation. The state is able to lure economically desperate women into this programme through economic benefits offered to 'card-holders' of the organization.

The *arpilleras* workshops are a part of the Vicarate's programme to assist the women both psychologically and materially. From the traditional role in the domestic sphere, and unquestionably second-class status, (including rough treatment from their men), the women have been catapulted into a new role by national events. In the words of one woman: "Before, I never talked to anyone and I was used to the fact that my husband beat me and I never did anything to defend myself. But afterwards I learned to have friends and to speak up in the meetings."

This empowerment has evolved from a process requiring the women to leave home to go to workshops to learn collectively how to make the *arpilleras*. Each *arpillera* is discussed by the group. Ultimately the individual weaver decides the theme and is responsible for the translation of the idea into artifact. In this way, her inner life becomes involved in the process of definition.

The collective structure is crucial for empowerment and has been used by other women suffering similar trauma in Palestine and South Africa. In Palestine, the mass-based women's groups discuss 'the national question' at all levels. As in Chile and South Africa, this is a priority because their very survival is at stake. The workshop organizers do not pressure a woman to throw off the mere forms of servitude or male-domination built into a culture, such as a yashmak. Instead a girl or woman is encouraged to leave the home to come to a workshop to become economically viable. If she has to wear a veil there because of the sensibilities of the family males, that is secondary. The main thing is to build the women's consciousness and understanding in a supportive, group setting. This is crucial in the camps where women have little education and a dire economic future, amid much suffering. In the Palestinian situation many women and girls have become exiles in camps in other countries as well as their own motherland, much as South African women are exiled too, in 'reserves'

on their own land. The necessity for the Palestinians to remain and reproduce on their land is great, for annexation by the Occupier is proceeding vigorously, legal by the Occupier's 'kangaroo' laws, --- without their land the Palestinians will no longer be a people. Thus the contribution of conscious women is vital.

In national political crises generally, women have been less likely to leave the country as exiles. They are the 'rooted' ones who guard the land. In mass social upheavals, however, women fall in both categories--being both 'rooted' and exiled. The grass-roots organization effected by third-world women in response to this multi-level oppression is only now being noticed, particularly as women begin to network and learn about each other internationally.

Not all of the grass-roots women are poor. Among the *Arpilleristas* in Chile, some who lost their children are from middle-class backgrounds. Their politicisation occurs in large part because of the activities and fate of their children. This social and programmatic coming together of women who become nationally and politically conscious is a recurring feature in the third world. A good example of this type of organization translated into activism is the *arpilleristas*. There are other models, such as one in Palestine where women with formal education have combined with peasant women with farming and housewifery knowledge in a village cooperative in which 16-65 year-old women engaged collectively in bookkeeping, market research, product experimentation (with pickles, salad dressing, etc.) to establish a thriving, well received local business. The Israeli authorities, cognizant of the threat of peasant economic independence, refused to grant permits for three others to be established. Similarly in South Africa indomitable women have initiated numerous local projects, ranging from people's education to tie-die factories to community health and bricklaying.

South African women in the cities organize at the grass-roots level with few resources, but the most difficult organizing tasks rest in the rural areas, where unwaged, largely husbandless women cope under terrible conditions. As in Chile, the traditional male-dominated structure prevails, often providing the ONLY structure and security for women. The reactionary 'Bantustan' apparatus supplies the economic needs of the apartheid state. Tradition has thus been a mixed blessing to women.

The Chilean *arpilleristas* use tradition too. In the city they organize community parties, to "bring back the family" in a way, with folksongs and dancing. Because women are, paradoxically, often perceived as the 'guardians of tradition,' progressive organizing has had to grow out of the community itself, serving both the concrete and spiritual needs of women, but also bringing them into the national debate. It is only through empowerment of the women themselves, (through conscious-raising), who must take direction of their own organizations, that success is likely.

Agosin stresses the political themes of the *arpilleras* as being unique in Latin American needlework. They are products of the raised level of consciousness of the women and their immersion in the process of becoming, or of already being, 'outside' the law. Having rejected the legitimacy of the military state and its laws and becoming aware of the invisible structures of state power as they seek information on the disappeared, the individual woman is able to be an activist, to initiate political action to challenge the state. This is because she has been freed to examine her own humanity and the moral basis from which she will henceforth measure her existence. Not considering herself consciously a feminist, the political action she initiates is related to how she has extended her women's role into the public sphere, through expanding her definition of family into the larger community.

The redefinitions made by the *arpilleristas* are an exploration in human terms of what is the fabric of a society. One of the more bitter lessons the women learned is that friends and relatives often will not want to be 'involved' with a 'disappeared.' However, the most fundamental reassurance any human being can have is that, "if this happens to me, everyone I know will protest, will find me and help me." When this is abrogated through fear, state terrorism has truly succeeded in tearing apart the bonds of the society. The realization that this is the function and goal of state terrorism, and the measure of its success, was the first step for the *arpilleristas* in finding a voice. To keep silent is to do what the military wants them to do.

What the *arpilleristas* have found out is that resistance is not ephemeral, not only an idea. It is concrete steadfastness, a physical persistence on the land, as in the Palestinian philosophy of 'steadfastness,' and the persistence of South African 'unwanted' families at places like Crossroads.

Agosin's book is openly personal, revealing her manifest admiration for the *arpilleristas*. Her book is avowedly for them, lending them her voice and the print medium, and in the process, she develops through them her own understanding of the social processes at work in Chile. The author is frank about the limitations of her resources, particularly in dealing with the history of Chilean women in politics, and the manipulation of the women by the right wing. The sources Agosin lists in her substantial bibliography are enticing and, although Agosin does not adopt an academic style, she is very aware of the larger dimensions of the issue, stating that "The political implications of the actions of these women are so enormous that they themselves are unaware of the dimensions." This is true of the burgeoning activity of women worldwide and is one good reason why a book such as this, unveiling the small people, (the 'invisible' makers of history), is worth reading.

C. Dandridge Perry