

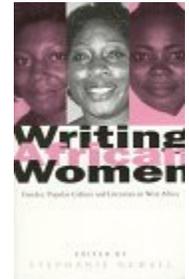
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Stephanie Newell, ed. *Writing African Women: Gender, Popular Culture and Literature in West Africa*. London and Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Zed Books, 1997. x + 204 pp. \$55.00 (cloth), ISBN 1-85649-4497; \$19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-85649-450-2.

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In her introduction, Stephanie Newell states the goal of this volume is to “open up a space for the expression of different debates, to provide a forum for a range of African critical perspectives and interpretations” (p. 2). What is special here is the attempt to make available to the wider audience a range of issues and debates best known to local audiences, i.e., primarily Nigerian and secondarily Ghanaian intellectuals, writers, and academics. Newell claims that this collection of essays will differ from the European and American critical writings that have dominated the debates over feminism, so that now it is the Western analytical frameworks that have been intentionally marginalized. She assumes the challenge earlier articulated by C.T. Mohanty in 1988 in her seminal essay, “Under Western Eyes,” to create models, to work towards social transformations, “while avoiding absorption into Western feminist discourses, which have tended to subordinate and speak on behalf of the typical ‘third world women’” (p. 2).

My assessment of *Writing African Women* is that a new, African-centered vision is not evoked, despite the marginalizing of contemporary Western feminist discourses. To be sure, one essay does begin with a familiar post-modernist attention to language, and that is Obododimma Oha’s “Culture and Gender Semantics in Flora Nwapa’s Poetry.” Here, despite Newell’s disclaimers, Oha cites Annie Leclerc’s violently androphobic diatribe, “Things made by men are not just stupid, deceitful and oppressive ... More than anything else, they are sad, sad enough to kill us with boredom and despair ... We have to invent a woman’s word” (p. 105).

However, after opening her essay with fighting words, and appropriate nods to French feminist Helene

Cixous, Oha’s essay turns more banal, as she goes on to analyze Nwapa’s privileging of cassava, the women’s crop, over the traditional male supremacist crop, yam. It is fascinating to learn how Achebe’s mild expression “yam is king” in *Things Fall Apart* resonates throughout patriarchal Ibo culture. And it is instructive to see how Nwapa challenged that dominance in her culture by rewriting the place of the lowly cassava. However, there is nothing in the analysis that evokes an ideological shift that goes beyond the sentiment of revolt. Feminist analysis here, and throughout most of the volume, consists of complaints over male dominance, of praise for the ways in which African women authors have striven to challenge that dominance, or even of redefinitions of conventional female roles as superior to those of males.

Rather than an African-centered feminism that escapes the trap of Western feminism, one has the impression that feminist preoccupations in Nigerian and Ghanaian writings and critical practices consist largely in what earlier American feminism was all about: the improvement of the economic and social situation of women who are largely subjected to male domination, the need to bring to the fore an awareness of an oppressive set of cultural practices and values, and to change the social structures responsible for this situation. The struggle against sexism wears local clothes here, but is a completely familiar figure.

Thirty years ago the term generally employed was women’s liberation. It was precisely the radical social turn assumed by American feminist practitioners on the one hand, and the brilliantly intellectual challenges to gendered thought and writing mounted by French feminists on the other hand, that threatened the foundations

of patriarchal structures, and that led to the rising tide of anti-feminist sentiments on the popular level. In part, the turn to “womanism,” led by Alice Walker, and more or less embraced by most of the writers in the volume, including especially Chinyere Grace Okafor, is seen as a repudiation of the more extreme Western version of feminism. Often totalizing the considerably diverse body of contemporary theory present in Western feminism, writers like Okafor reject it as another form of cultural imperialism. In contrast, she writes, “African feminism does not subscribe to a monolithic and exclusive empowerment of women, but to a multilateral growth that incorporates the woman, her family and her male relations” (p. 89).

At times the concern over Western feminist domination is judiciously stated, as when Oha stresses the need to understand African texts within the “specific and local West African contexts” (p. 106). Oha goes further, indicating that this challenge is multiplied for African women authors who choose to write in European languages, where the negotiations involve not only patriarchal but cultural imperialist orders implicit in the linguistic instrument itself. Her warnings appear to be sensible and sensitive: “The West African writer might therefore experience first-language ‘interference’ in her use of English: if this is the case, she has a double score to settle with masculine-ordered semiotics, not only against her local primary linguistic system, but also against her second language ... West African women [must] rework the semantic modes of both the first and second language, both of which favour the masculine order, overtly or covertly” (p. 106).

When “womanism” is taken to its limits, it promotes essentialism, and patriarchal dominance is often either denied or ignored. Utopianism and idealizations resonate with a gendered version of nativism; pre-colonial societies are idealized, so that men’s and women’s roles are seen as having complemented each other, without oppressive or dominating qualities. Women’s roles are elevated to visionary heights, as in Catherine Acholonu’s concept of “motherism,” a term employed in her work *Motherism: The Afrocentric Alternative to Feminism*. Here Acholonu finds in motherhood an elemental tie to the earth, to the spiritual center of African life and society, the organic space wherein goddesses and earth-mothers lend fertility and life to human existence. In her analysis, Newell claims that appeals to the Motherland do not silence African women, as those to Mother Africa have done in the past when employed by male writers, nonetheless she sees Acholonu’s vision as “express[ing]

an urban woman’s speculations about the lives of rural women” (p. 180). Ironically, it is in contrast to Chinweizu’s unintentionally [?] self-parodying philosophy of “masculinism” that Acholonu’s “motherism” is counterpoised by Newell. Newell effectively exposes the limitations of both extremes.

The weakest aspect of the essays consists in repeated, untheorized assertions. Women are frequently portrayed as victims, as second class, as unempowered. Most of the essays employ a strategy of that consists in exposing the social problems faced by women and in indicating what solutions are in order. The literary text qua text is of less interest, the problematic of “speaking for” others is not recognized, the implicit patriarchal aspects of logocentric formulations are totally ignored. If ever an argument were to be made for the appreciation of Western feminist discoveries, it would be in the lacunae of these essays.

Worst of all is the descent into “miserablism,” a critical equivalent to Emecheta’s early writings in which a woman’s lot is seen as being trapped in the pincers of male oppression, a condition already well-described in Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism* as appropriate to the mode of low mimetic fiction or of ironic fiction. Thus Ibiyemi Moloja treats us to such insights as the following: “From time immemorial, women the world over have been subjected to various degrees of physical, mental and spiritual domination, to social, economic and political exploitation” (p. 132); or, “The reality is that men in general have no sexual discipline” (p. 133).

For this reader, the quality of most of the analyses of African women’s writings was poor. The attempt to bring to light hitherto unknown or relatively ignored texts at times may well result in major discoveries, as has repeatedly happened throughout history. But at other times, the marginalization of a minor writer might be due to the writer’s own weakness, as is certainly the case with Mabel Dove-Danquah whom Nana Jane Opoku-Agyemang fails to revive, despite her intentions to do so. In other cases, there are essays dealing with women’s writings that were published and distributed in Nigeria, and where little knowledge of their work exists outside Nigeria: the stories of Theodora Adimora-Ezeigbo and May Ifeoma Nwoye analyzed by Chinyere Grace Okafor; Hauwa Ali’s novels analyzed by Margaret Hauwa Kassam; Flora Nwapa’s little-known poetry analyzed by Obododimma Oha. The acknowledgment of these women’s work is important, but the importance of the work itself is not convincingly established.

The most exciting part of the collection consisted of

the essays that do not focus on traditional literary genres. Jane Bryce's discussion of the woman's column "Treena Kwenta's Diary" published in the Lagos daily paper *Vanguard* is insightful and imaginative. Sani Abba Aliyu provides an interesting study of Hausa oral storytellers, although the earlier work of Priscilla Starratt has already well plumbed this field. Still, Aliyu brings to light fascinating material concerning Hausa broadcasting. Stephanie Newell's chapter on three tracts dealing with gender, the aforementioned Chinweizu text, that of Acholonu, and a third by E. Ebisike, provides great insight into the boundaries within which the discussion on feminism is taking place in Nigeria. And Adepeju Layiwola's exposition on women's role in contemporary metal-casting in Benin City brings to light new and valuable information on women's intrusion into traditional male artisanship. Mostly, however, the volume is dominated by poor literary studies. Many of the volume's contributors seek to excuse weaknesses in the writings under analysis, often under-cutting their own attempts to render strong feminist judgments. For instance, the presence of cardboard characters is rationalized on the grounds that the author wanted to reduce them to weak figures, not that the authors were themselves incompetent. When Ramatoulaye, in *So Long a Letter*, fails to demonstrate any awareness of her earlier commitment to a "new world" of relationships between men and women, and now envisages marriage in purely physical terms, Nana Wilson-Tagoe ascribes this to Ba's "ironic pointers to the confusing state of women's definition and to the women writer's need to interrogate gender, class and society" (p. 22). The ironies that she sees directed at Ram-

atoulaye might well arise from her own insistence on incorporating Ba into her own agenda, instead of recognizing the writer's own inconsistency. Similarly, when Okafor presents a story by Nwoye as lacking in character or motivation, and evokes the heroine's anonymity, it is excused on the grounds that it "is a device that universalizes the experience" (p. 84).

Even the initial claim that this volume provides particular insights grounded in local knowledge collapses in the tendency to establish an all-encompassing feminist complaint, as when Chioma Opara extends the lessons of *Our Sister Killjoy* to all women: "The reader becomes aware of world-wide oppression of women, situated in its Ghanaian context by an author writing towards an ideal of women's autonomy" (pp. 138-39). The language of feminist critique is frozen in a vocabulary of repeated, rehearsed flagellation that subsumes all critical reflection. Thus Theodora Akachi Ezeigbo writes of Nwapa's work, "Gender conflict in *Efuru* therefore arises from one woman's struggle to free herself from oppression, refusing to accept domination, marginalization and exploitation" (p. 99).

Literary analysis requires more than a programmatic laying bare of problems and proffering of solutions. There have been many ways in which feminist writings have gone beyond this level: most of those in the present volume fail to do so.

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