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Wangari wa Nyatetu-Waigwa. *The Liminal Novel: Studies in the Francophone African Novel as Bildungsroman.* New York: Peter Lang, 1996. x + 134 pp. $32.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8204-2168-1.

Reviewed by Natalie Sandomirsky (Southern Connecticut State University)
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The Liminal Novel

This book is a study of three novels which were originally written in French and first published in Paris between 1953 and 1961, when the modern francophone African novel was in its infancy and the Negritude movement was still influential. The three novels are Camara Laye's *The Black Child*,[1] the story of Camara's childhood in Guinea, of his education prior to his departure for Oaris, and of his qualms regarding his decision to remain in France; Mongo Beti's *Mission to Kala*,[2] the story of young Jean-Marie Mezda's reverses in Cameroon after he failed to graduate from the French school; and Cheikh Hamidou Kane's *Ambiguous Adventure*,[3] the story of Samba Diallo who, raised in a strict spiritual Koranic milieu and then sent to Paris to learn skills needed for the survival of his community, discovers the secular temptations of rational thought, and upon his return to Senegal is unable to reconcile the two worlds he has come in contact with, and perishes.

Wangari wa Nyatetu-Waigwa claims in her introduction that hers is a new way of looking at these novels, that by grouping them as "liminal" and examining them as such we gain new insights (p. 1). She then defines "liminal" in accordance with Victor Turner's pattern for the rite of passage as marked by three phases: separation, limen or threshold, and reincorporation.[4] In her book, then, she analyzes different themes of the novels which she considers important to prove her claim. Each chapter consists of a discussion of a different theme: the first addresses the concept of place; the second, the relationship between the individual and the community; the third, the acquisition of knowledge by the protagonists; the fourth, the failure of the main character to fill the role of the patriarch; the fifth, the protagonists' "movement between two cultural traditions"; and in the last chapter the author points out that the main characters suffer for not having mentors. In each chapter she presents all three novels from the particular point of view selected.

My assessment is that, while most of the elements studied separately in each chapter are valid, examining the novels as "liminal" fails to shed new light on them, and that the structure the author chose results in a fragmentary presentation. It actually detracts from her real contribution which is a sensitive, careful, intelligent, well documented, and well written textual analysis of the novels. Perhaps the fact that this book was originally a doctoral dissertation, subject to the inherent academic pressure to discover something new, explains the goal and the structure chosen. It actually seems as if the author herself had some misgivings: while her introduction is detailed and heavily documented, her conclusion is ever so brief and only loosely returns to the claims made in the introduction.

For this reader, there is one further problem. The novels can indeed, as the author states, be considered Bildungsromane–a genre popular among early francophone African writers who went in search of their roots in an effort to define their own as well as their peoples' identity.[5] However, the appropriateness of juxtaposing these particular novels is questionable. *Mission to Kala* differs in its ironic overtone and in content from the other two. The original French title of Beti's novel *Mission terminee* [finished, completed] puts in doubt liminality and implies, as Abiola Irele has pointed out, an at least partially successful journey of self-discovery.[6] Moreover, while it can be considered as a Bildungsroman, Beti's novel is largely a portrayal of the effects of the oppressive colonial regime on traditional African society.[7] Actually this novel belongs to a category differnt from the one which encompasses the other two. Kenneth W. Harrow was right when he classified Laye's and Kane's novels as "litterature de temoignage," i.e. as literature which represents reality whether it leads to success or to tragic failure (p. 258), and Beti's novel as part of the literature of revolt, that is, as "a portrayal of the realization of one's oppressed state in which the hero's conscious efforts to complete the passage within an unjust

society is blocked" (p. 258).[8] I don't see Beti's novel as liminal in the sense in which the other two may be. It is possible that wa Nyatetu-Waigwa too felt uneasy about her choice, since her analysis of this novel occupies fewer pages and is markedly less detailed than that of Laye's and Kane's novels.

Notwithstanding these basic reservations, I would recommend listing wa Nyatetu-Waigwa's book in a bibliography for students whose course syllabus includes the novels she has analyzed. It offers a much more detailed analysis of the texts than other recent critical writings do.[9] American students in particular would benefit from the author's acumen when it comes to text interpretation and to close analysis of specific linguistic and stylistic structures. It would be an eye opener for them to learn what the use of a particular pronoun or verb tense can reveal. Wa Nyatetu-Waigwa's writing is very clear; her text analysis skills, obviously honed by French "explication de texte" training, also make her book useful to teachers who are not specialists in literature and may wish to include these readings in an "Introduction to Africa" or an advanced French language course on the high school or college level. Furthermore, the book is helpful because it has a sound bibliography. One word of caution: the author assumes familiarity with the novels. At no point does she offer a synopsis; nor does she situate the novels historically.

In summary, assuming as I do that the novels studied in this book are still of general interest and are of sufficient literary merit to remain important, the author, while not achieving her aim, has written a book useful to readers of *The Black Child* and of *Ambiguous Adventure* in particular.

Notes

[1]. Translated by James Kirkup, Ernest Jones, and Elaine Gottlieb. New York: The Noonday Press, 1954.

[2]. Translated by Peter Green. London: Heinemann, 1964.

[3]. Translated by Katherine Woods. London: Heinemann, 1972.

[4]. *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual.* Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1967; reference in wa Nyatetu-Waigwa, p. 1.

[5]. Oyono, Ferdinand. *Une vie de boy.* Paris: Julliard, 1956; Dadie, Bernard. *Climbie.* Paris: Seghers, 1956; Eza Boto. *Ville cruelle.* Paris: Presence Africaine, 1954; Loba, Ake. *Kokoumbo, l'etudiant noir* Paris: Flammarion, 1969; Sadji, to name just a few.

[6]. *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 190, p. 155 ff.

[7]. Biakolo, Anthony. "The Novels of Mongo Beti, S.O. Asein and A.O. Ashaolu." *Studies in the African Novel.* Ibadan: University Press, n.d., pp. 72-85.

[8]. *Threshold of Change in African Literature.* Portsmouth N.H.: Heinemann, 1994. pp. 258-259.

[9]. A few examples: Gikandi, Simon. *Reading the African Novel.* Nairobi: Heinemann, 1987; Mickelsen, David "The Bildungsroman in Africa: The Case of *Mission terminee*" in *French Review 3 (1986), pp. 418-427; Mortimer, Mildred.* Journey Through the French African Novel. *Portsmouth: Heinemann, 1990; Yoder, Carroll.* White Shadows: A Dialectical View of the French African Novel_. Boulder, Col.: Lynne Rienner, 1992. Also see notes 6 and 8.

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