H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan Stringer. *The Senegalese Novel by Women: Through Their Own Eyes.* New York: Peter Lang, 1996. x + 172 pp. $54.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8204-2664-8.

Reviewed by Natalie Sandomirsky (Southern Connecticut State University)
Published on H-AfrLitCine (November, 1998)

The Senegalese Novel By Women

Intending to analyze the content (p. 18) of novels by Senegalese female writers from a gender perspective (p. 17), Susan Stringer states in her Introduction that she wants to ascertain whether their writing presents common traits differentiating it from that by male contemporaries[1] and whether female novelists see themselves as "illuminators of the female condition" (pp. 17-18). The latter, according to her, is "the fundamental question to be asked about women's literature at this stage of development" (p. 17).

She proceeds by first pointing out some cardinal similarities between Senegalese male and female writers: both began by writing autobiographies, both reject art for art's sake and opt for social commitment, and they share a basic theme, namely the clash between modernity and tradition. She finds that they do differ, however, because in novels by women "the cultural conflict is almost always related to the female condition, even if other aspects of the problematic are also treated" (p. 144). Moreover, while in men's writings women "generally play a secondary role" (p. 144), "lack psychological depth…do not emerge as individuals, but remain confined and defined by their role as mother, wife, or single woman" (p. 150), in women's writing they predominate. "Female characters always play a primary role, even where the main character is male, there is a case to be made for a female being the dynamic force in the plot…the function of women is more significant than that of men" (p. 144). Stringer concludes: "This common element exists despite the differing attitudes of women towards their role as writers" (p. 144). Hence she considers that female writers do constitute a separate group, even if she cannot prove that they all see themselves as "illuminators of the female condition."

The book contains a fairly detailed study of the works by Nafissatou Diallo, Mariama Ba, and Aminata Sow Fall, and a rapid glance at the writings of seven other female Senegalese novelists.[2] Prior to beginning these analyses, Stringer gives background on several relevant questions: why francophone women started publishing later than their male compatriots[3] and also about a decade later than anglophone women writers; whether their novels are mainly autobiographical; and whom they hope to reach with their writing in view of the low literacy rate in their country.[4]

The first writer to whom Stringer devotes a chapter is Nafissatou Diallo.[5] She indicates that her works all center on highly motivated, self-reliant female characters, and that the protagonists of her historical novels are women portrayed "in their own right and not merely in a relationship with a man" (p. 26). She concludes that in Diallo's writing "there is a conscious feminism apparent in the choice of a [female] protagonist embodying specific virtues to be admired and perhaps imitated" (p. 46).

It is true that, as Jacques Chevrier has pointed out, Diallo is original in embodying the epic chant in women,[6] but all Diallo's "heroines are in part projections of herself" (p. 47). I believe that this modest author would be surprised to hear herself classified as a feminist; that she wrote about what was close to her heart–the past, family, and justice; and that one could argue that her protagonists are women simply because they speak for her.

Women are, however, definitely a major concern of the novelist whose writing Stringer analyzes next: Mariama Ba.[7] She accurately presents Ba's feminism which extols female solidarity, monogamous marriage based on mutual love and respect, the sanctity of family and the god of Islam, while at the same time fighting what she sees as the societal hypocrisy which, hiding behind tradition and religion, deprives women of dignity and freedom. Ba is the one writer examined of whom Stringer can incontrovertibly prove that she saw herself as "an illuminator of the female condition." "It is the duty of African women not just to write, but to use writing

as an arm [weapon] to destroy the age-old oppression of their sex," Ba said (p. 50).[8]

Feminism becomes again harder to pinpoint in the following chapter devoted to Aminata Sow Fall.[9] Stringer recognizes that Sow Fall "stresses in numerous interviews that she is not a feminist novelist" (p. 77), and then delineates the main themes treated by the novelist, such as the cultural conflict between tradition and modernization, the greed and hypocrisy which dominate urban life, the moral and spiritual superiority of the village, and the interdependence of all members of society. Yet, Stringer believes Sow Fall to be preeminently interested in the quality of women's lives. She notes that "the oppressed female character is common in Sow Fall's novels," that women are portrayed as having "only duties, not rights," and that Sow Fall shows polygamy in an unfavorable light (pp. 94-95, 97). She also finds that Sow Fall emphasizes female characters: "although Sow Fall's protagonists are men, they are fundamentally weak and highly dependent on women" (p. 90); "parallel to…central male figures, there is in each novel a female character who, because of her influence on the course of events, her relationship to the main theme and her power over the apparent protagonist, could be defined as the hidden protagonist" (p. 99).

Stringer has not persuaded me that Sow Fall's emphasis is on women primarily, rather than on her society as a whole. I think she is on more solid ground when she in passing suggests a similarity between Sow Fall's concerns and those of Ousmane Sembene (p. 77). Moreover, the structure of this chapter is somewhat confusing because Stringer examines each of six novels by Sow Fall consecutively, in each of the four sections of the chapter. I think that this technique is distracting and detracts from the case she attempts to make.

A brief analysis of the writing by seven other Senegalese women novelists follows.[10] Stringer sees a "remarkable commonality of themes" in the way in which they all "bear witness to a society in turbulent transition," and "striking similarities" between the seven: "all…[with one exception] give special attention to the lives of women A brief analysis of the writing by seven other Senegalese women novelists follows.[10] Stringer sees a "remarkable commonality of themes" in the way in which they all "bear witness to a society in turbulent transition," and "striking similarities" between the seven: "all…[with one exception] give special attention to the lives of women." Men "are often less developed characters" (pp. 115, 123, 128). She infers that the works by these women are not radically different from those by Diallo, Ba, and Sow Fall in that they too "have chosen to center their writing on their own gender" (p. 140).

To conclude, it is my opinion that Stringer is right to attach great importance to the very fact that women in francophone Africa have started publishing and to think that by so doing they bring to the forefront issues which affect their own gender, and which still badly need to be addressed all over Africa.[11]

Her approach is most fruitful when it comes to Mariama Ba, but overall it makes this thorough, well-documented book valuable to anyone interested in women's issues and useful in a women's studies program. To the best of my knowledge this is the only book devoted entirely to Senegalese female novelists, though the individual authors examined here are the subject of many other studies.[12] Since Stringer does do exactly what she set out to do, it would be unfair to criticize her for isolating women's writing from the rest of the novelistic production of Senegal, or for paying but little attention to the artistic merit of the novels analyzed.

Notes

[1]. The period covered is 1975 to the present.

[2]. Bugul, Ken, *Le Baobab fou*, Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1982 (translated by Modupe Bode-Thomas as *The Abandoned Baobab*, Brooklyn N.Y.: Lawrence Hill Books, 1991); Ndiaye, Adja Ndeye, *Collier de cheville*, Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1983; Mbacke, Mame Seck, *Le Froid et le piment*, Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1983; N'Diaye, Catherine, *Gens de sable*, Paris: P.O.L., 1984; Ka, Aminata Maiga, *La Voie du salut suivi de Le Miroir de la vie*, Paris: Presence Africaine, 1985 and *En votre nom et au mien*, Abidjan: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1989; Fall, Khadi, *Mademba*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1989; Diouri, Aicha, *La mauvaise passe*, Dakar: Khoudia, 1990.

[3]. The first modern francophone book of creative prose, Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir*, an autobiography, was published in 1953; the first by a woman, Nafissatou Diallo's *De Tilene au Plateau*, also an autobiography, in 1975.

[4]. Thirty-three percent is the overall literacy rate in 1995 as given by the 1998 *World Almanac and Book of Facts*. Exact recent data and breakdowns are not available, but it is known that women's literacy rates are considerably lower than men's. *The Statesman's Yearbook*, ed. Barry Turner, New York: St. Martin's Press, 1998 indicates that among university students only about 17 percent are female: 3136 out of a total of 14,833.

[5]. The works by N. Diallo which Stringer analyzes are: *Awa la petite marchande*, Dakar: Les Nou-

velles Editions Africaines, 1981; *De Tilene au Plateau*, Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1975 (translated as *A Dakar Childhood* by Dorothy S. Blair, Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1982); *Le Fort Maudit*, Paris: Hatier, 1980; and *La Pincesse de Tiali*, Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1987 (translated as *Fary, Princess of Tiali* by Anne Woollcombe, Washington D.C.: Three Continent Press, 1987).

[6]. The French text reads: "Diallo presente l'originalite de jouer le registre epique au femin" in *Litterature negre.* 2nd ed. Paris: Armand Colin, 1990, p. 153.

[7]. Discussed are both Mariama Ba's novels: *Une si longue lettre.* Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1979 (translated as *So Long a Letter* by Modupe Bode-Thomas, London: Heinemann, 1981); and *Un Chant ecarlate*, Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1981 (translated as *Scarlet Song*, by Dorothy S. Blair, Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1985).

[8]. Ba, Mariama, "La fonction politique des litteratures africaines ecrites," in *Ecriture française dans le monde*, 5.1 (1981), 7.

[9]. Novels discussed here are: *L'Appel des arenes*, Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1982; *L'Ex-pere de la nation*, Paris: L'Harmattan, 1987; *La Greve des Battu*, Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1979 (translated by Dorothy S. Blair as *The Beggars' Strike*, Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1981); *Le Jujubier du patriarche*, Dakar: Khoudia, 1993; *Le Revenant*, Dakar: Les Nouvelles Editions Africaines, 1976.

[10]. See note 2.

[11]. See Daley, Suzanne, "To Me it's Blatant Sexism; To South Africans, It's Not a Problem," in *The New York Times* 11 October 1998, section 4, 9.

Copyright (c) 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. This work may be copied for non-profit educational use if proper credit is given to the author and the list. For other permission, please contact H-Net@h-net.msu.edu.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the list discussion logs at:
http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl.

Citation: Natalie Sandomirsky. Review of Stringer, Susan, *The Senegalese Novel by Women: Through Their Own Eyes.* H-AfrLitCine, H-Net Reviews. November, 1998.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2503

Copyright © 1998 by H-Net, all rights reserved. H-Net permits the redistribution and reprinting of this work for nonprofit, educational purposes, with full and accurate attribution to the author, web location, date of publication, originating list, and H-Net: Humanities & Social Sciences Online. For any other proposed use, contact the Reviews editorial staff at hbooks@mail.h-net.msu.edu.