H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Pushpa Naidu Parekh, Siga Fatima Jagne, eds.. *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook.* Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1998. xxxii + 525 pp. $85.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-313-29056-5.

Reviewed by Sheila Petty

Published on H-AfrLitCine (February, 1999)

In *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*, Pushpa Naidu Parekh and Siga Fatima Jagne undertake the ambitious project of creating an overview of a diverse group of African literary authors under the auspices of a single volume. A much-needed sourcebook, this work brings together resources that would normally be scattered over several volumes and presents a critical examination of the issues, advantages, and shortcomings of postcolonial theory as it relates to African writing.

In the preface to this book, Parekh states that "the central organizing principle of the volume is postcoloniality as it is reflected in the novels, poetry, prose, and drama of major, minor, and emerging writers from diverse countries of Africa, including representative North and South African writers and writers of the Indian diaspora born in Africa, both male and female" (p. xiv). In addition, the editors have set themselves the task of creating a gender balance in terms of the selection of writers and contributors. In a response to the "center-versus-margin construction of identities and ideologies" (p. xv), the editors locate known and emerging men and women writers side by side in order to place full focus on African contexts, possibilities, and problematics and on the shape and meaning of African theoretical preoccupations (p. xv).

The book consists of sixty bio-bibliographical and critical entries organized into the following categories: biography, major works and themes, critical reception and bibliography which consists of selected works and selected studies. Of these, the major works and themes and critical reception sections are vital in advancing the book's goals because it is here that works are discussed in the context of "postcoloniality." In addition, works are also situated within the historical and cultural context of the authors' contemporaries. This resists the compartmentalization of individual African writers either by stature or gender and allows for a greater sense of African literature as a whole comprised of many strands.

In her foreword to the book, Carole Boyce Davies asserts that "its primary and most important contribution is that it accounts concretely for a range of writers of a specific geographic speci-

ficity within the larger field of postcolonial studies... a body of writers emanating from the African cultural experience" (p. x). The volume advances this project by the inclusion of new writers such as Mositi Torontle (Botswana) and Tijan Sallah (Gambia) alongside established luminaries such as Chinua Achebe (Nigeria) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Kenya). Thus, the book possesses unusual breadth and documents African literature as a vibrant and continually unfolding literary practice.

The book is successful in foregrounding African feminism as a critical stance distinct from western feminism and its underlying precepts. As Jagne observes, western feminist critics and theorists, in applying their own parameters to African writing, frequently fail to "leave space for the authors' own theoretical preoccupations" (p. 8). By openly challenging existing theoretical boundaries, some contributors in this volume add to the ongoing debate surrounding the existence of unique African feminist practices. For example, the long history of African women's contribution to their own representation is demonstrated by Lisa McNee's contribution on the seminal works of Senegalese writer Nafissatou Diallo. The first Senegalese woman to publish a long narrative work and extended autobiography, Diallo's work subtly interrogates the cultural roles of women within Senegalese society. McNee raises the issue of certain criticisms leveled at Diallo's work because of its subtle nature, but correctly redresses them by suggesting that this is a misreading of Diallo's cultural context and use of language.

Christine Loflin's entry on Flora Nwapa is of particular interest because it discusses how critics such as Obioma Nnaemeka, Chikwenye Ogunyemi and Marie Umeh, through their analyses of Nwapa's works, advocate "the potential for an African-based feminist or womanist theory which does not reject but rather builds from the foundations of traditional culture" (p. 341). Thus, African feminism is seen to arise, as it always has, from texts focused on African preoccupations and conditions, which supersede any interventionist western constructions.

If there is a weakness in the volume, it occurs in the introduction, where there is a marked imbalance between the development of the book's two major goals. Divided into a section by Parekh entitled "Postcolonial Criticism and African Writing" and another section by Jagne entitled "Theorizing African Women," the introduction devotes more energy developing the editors' positions on the inclusion of African women writers than it does on the often contradictory and problematic area of postcoloniality as an analytical practice. Although Parekh raises some of the ongoing controversies and debates concerning postcolonialism,[1] this section seems somewhat underdeveloped, particularly given that this sourcebook will be of special interest to those who are investigating this area for the first time.

This shortcoming is redressed to a degree by the wide variety of stances on postcoloniality reflected by the contributors. In fact, one of the greatest strengths of this volume is its potential for creating debate over a vast area of issues in postcolonial studies. Parekh makes it clear that "at this juncture, it would be useful to consider the term 'post-colonial' as indicative of chronological historicity and 'postcolonial' as an ideological conceptualization" (p. 3). She warns against homogenizing postcolonial criticism into one unified methodology and advocates "theory aligned more closely to practice" (p. 4).

Parekh openly engages the reader in debate when she states that "the critics' and theorists' insights, whether in this volume or outside, should not go unchallenged" (p. xv). Thus, one is invited, as it were, to consider how key concepts such as "counternarratives" or "oppositional versions" contribute to the advancement of the postcolonial project, particularly in view of the fact that this is a literary practice that has gone well beyond writing back to the empire.

The existence of such terminology indicates the continuing problematics of postcolonial theory and the struggles of contributors to locate authors and works adequately within a framework that foregrounds African experience over western imperatives. For example, in John C. Hawley's otherwise insightful entry on Ngugi wa Thiong'o, he compares Ngugi's exploration of motivation in ***Petals of Blood*** to Dostoyevsky (p 324). Such an observation raises the question of why African writers continue to be "legitimized" through comparison to European writers, almost as if their own artistic practice fails to speak for itself.

However, such lapses are offset by the variety and strength of the African experiences presented in the volume. Soraya Mekerta's contribution on Moroccan writer, Tahar Ben Jelloun, illustrates the complexity of deriving identity "from both sides of the Mediterranean" (p. 242), as Jelloun draws on both France and Morocco as influences in his writing. Mekerta's observations on Ben Jelloun's use of "les voix" (the voices), to both disrupt a linear approach to time and as a strategy to dismantle French language from the inside, underscores the author's critical fervor and originality (p. 245).

In another interesting entry, the work of Somalian author Nuruddin Farah is explored by Hema Chari. Chari states that Farah "perceives and critiques the horrors of oppression and celebrates the liberatory goals of African nationalism" (p. 176) by "decrying the hypocrisy and vacuity of a political freedom that allows the ongoing oppression of women" (p. 177). Like Ben Jelloun, Farah is dealing with a postcolonial reality fissured by a colonial legacy and oppressive neocolonial dictators (pp. 175-76). Chari suggests that Farah argues "that a country can be free only when its female citizens are emancipated" (p. 177). Thus, although both writers come from different African realities, their works share common ground as they measure the struggles of their cultures to come to terms with lost pasts and difficult presents.

In the end, despite minor flaws, ***Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-bibliographical Critical Sourcebook*** is excellent in scope and organization. The divergent intellectual and cultural frameworks of both the writers and contributors represented in this volume present a cogent discussion of the many ways in which Africans are circumscribing their own experiences for global audiences.

The author would like to thank V. Borden, C. Cunningham and D.L. McGregor for lively discussion on the concept of the "postcolonial."

Notes

[1]. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, ***The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*** (London: Routledge, 1989); Karin Barber, "African-Language Literature and Postcolonial Criticism," ***Research in African Literatures*** 26.4 (Winter 1995): 3-30; Homi Bhabha, "Remembering Fanon: Self, Psyche, and the Colonial Condition," ***Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader***, ed. Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), pp. 112-123; Carole Boyce Davies, ***Black Women, Writing, and Identity: Migrations of the Subject*** (London: Routledge, 1994); Trinh T. Minh-ha, ***Woman, Native Other: Writing Postcoloniality and Feminism*** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989); Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo and Lourdes Torres, eds, ***Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*** (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Chris Tiffin and Alan Lawson, eds., ***De-scribing Empire: Postcolonialism and Textuality*** (London: Routledge, 1994).

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-afrlitcine

Citation: Sheila Petty. Review of Parekh, Pushpa Naidu; Jagne, Siga Fatima, eds. *Postcolonial African Writers: A Bio-Bibliographical Critical Sourcebook.* H-AfrLitCine, H-Net Reviews. February, 1999.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=2771