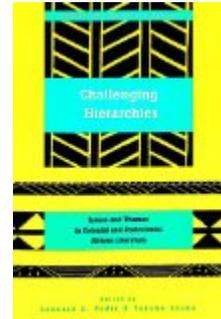


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Leonard A. Podis, and Yakubu Saaka, eds. *Challenging Hierarchies. Issues and Themes in Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*. New York: Peter Lang, 1998. xiii + 326 pp. \$34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8204-3710-1.

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Challenging Hierarchies?

Challenging Hierarchies has big and admirable aims: to challenge literary critical hierarchies, especially those “that have relegated African women and African women writers to a subordinate position” (xi). And indeed, although these aims are all too sadly familiar, there is much that is good and admirable about any book that includes a number of autobiographical (or auto-critical) essays by writers of the stature of Ama Ata Aidoo, Micere Mugo, and Kofi Anyidoho that draw attention to the role of African literature and African writers in the western (especially U.S.) teaching machine. Ultimately, however, I remain unconvinced that this collection lives up to its claims.

The book is divided into five sections. The first—dominated by Aidoo and Mugo and addressing the challenges facing women writers—and the second (“A Critical Debate on Achebe’s Depiction of Women”) focus on gender issues, while the third and fourth examine Eurocentric and Afrocentric challenges to colonialism respectively. The final section, “Envisioning Successful Challenges: Shapes of the New Order,” includes an essay by the editors on the creation of a usable past in *Anthills of the Savannah* and *Petals of Blood* which, while providing a workmanlike comparison between the two novels, is notable for its almost complete lack of historical specificity. That is followed by a more interesting attempt by Obioma Nnaemeka to replace the hierarchical tendency of Western binary thinking with the complementary tendency of African binaries, as expressed in the Igbo proverb “When something stands, something stands beside it.”

Telling though many of the essays are, however, as a collection *Challenging Hierarchies* does not quite add up. It has its origin apparently in a team-taught course at Oberlin College, and has the feel of an extended course-packet or proceedings of a small conference. Although the editors try to make a virtue out of the diversity of the material by claiming that “one of the hierarchies that must inevitably be challenged . . . is that of traditional scholarly discourse which has tended to elevate the formal, analytic essay to the highest stature” (6), the variety seems merely arbitrary. Although some of the authors make implicit judgments on academic and disciplinary hierarchies, none pursues the theme explicitly, definitively or thoroughly.

The lack of thoroughness in the collection is its most disappointing feature. With only a couple of exceptions the essays are all relatively brief—about ten pages, or the sort of length associated with conference presentations. Such brevity may make the essays useful to undergraduates dealing with, say, *Things Fall Apart* for the first time, but it also makes them too sketchy to really clinch any broad arguments. The two longer pieces—Mugo’s critical commentary on “The Woman Artist in Africa Today,” and Awuyah’s survey of Ghanaian writers—are perhaps the most valuable in the book. Awuyah’s article in particular struck me as opening up really interesting possibilities for the teaching of specific African literatures in a postcolonial context, as it posits a centuries long tradition of anglophone Ghanaian writing back to the imperial center. The bulk of the book, however, focuses

on much more well-worn academic issues, and implicitly seems to endorse the difference-erasing view that African literature starts with negritude in French and things falling apart in English. From those inaugural moments it has moved on to the work of Cheik Hamidou Kane, Ngugi, Soyinka, and the Achebe of *Anthills of the Savannah*, with Aidoo, Mugo, and Dangarembga adding some feminist spice. That strikes me as reductive, and, for a book purporting to challenge hierarchies, remarkably conservative–intellectually unadventurous at the very least.

There is also something worryingly solipsistic about the collection. Of the seventeen pieces, three are by Aidoo (the second of which is a brief introduction to her third, while the first is a rather rancorous response to criticism of her and other women’s work), two are by Vincent Odamtten (in which he cites his own earlier work on Aidoo, who cites Odamtten in *her* essay, and so on), two are by the editors as co-authors, with a third

by Podis as sole author, two are by Mugo, and two are by Nnaemeka. Not satisfied with a general introduction the editors also avail themselves of writing a further five mini-introductions to the book’s five sections. More editing and less editorializing could surely have produced a tauter book.

I didn’t set out to be carping in this review. As someone who regularly teaches courses at the undergraduate level on African women writers, for instance, I share the editors’ regret that there are very few book-length treatments of individual authors. It seems to me, though, that if the editors and the publisher, Peter Lang, want to commit themselves to work that will have significant impact on the field, they might be better off commissioning those very books whose lack we all recognize and suffer from.

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