

UCLA

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies

Title

Women in African Literature Today , Eldred D. Jones, et. Al. (eds)

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3d34r1fq>

Journal

Ufahamu: A Journal of African Studies, 16(3)

ISSN

0041-5715

Author

Boss, Joyce

Publication Date

1988

DOI

10.5070/F716316926

Copyright Information

Copyright 1988 by the author(s). All rights reserved unless otherwise indicated. Contact the author(s) for any necessary permissions. Learn more at <https://escholarship.org/terms>

Peer reviewed

Eldred Durosini Jones, Eustace Palmer and Marjorie Jones, eds. **Women in African Literature Today**. Trenton, New Jersey; Africa World Press, 1987. 162 pp. Cloth \$29.95; paper \$8.95.

What expectations and responsibilities are carried by the designation "African woman writer"? What commonalities are shared in fiction written by African and non-African woman writers, and what differences exist? What are the implications behind the different ways in which women have been portrayed by male African writers? These are some of the many issues addressed by the thirteen essays which comprise Women in African Literature Today, which is in fact the most recent issue (15) of the journal African Literature Today: A Review. While many of the writers and general topics under review in this volume are not unfamiliar, this noteworthy collection does succeed in presenting, through its various contributors, a broad range of thought-provoking perspectives.

One of the major strengths of Women in African Literature Today is the way in which the editors have organized the articles, so that the focus moves first from a consideration of the more general issues at hand to an examination of the works of five specific authors, then to those of male writers, and finally looks at one thematic relationship between West African and Afro-American literature. This organizational structure facilitates an appreciation of the authors and issues under consideration, especially for those only marginally familiar with them. The opening essay by Molara Ogundipe-Leslie, "The Female Writer and Her Commitment", is an especially notable thinking-through of the issues facing the woman writer, particularly that repudiating the false, objectified images of African women which have been perpetrated in the works of male writers. Ogundipe-Leslie closes with the problematic question: "Does the African female writer have any moral prerogative to point the way to others and educate the spirit? And why?" Is this prerogative itself not an extension of one of the stereotypical qualities attributed to women, that of possessing a "higher moral quality"? Does this responsibility preclude artistic freedom? Ogundipe-Leslie's analysis eloquently demonstrates that there are no easy answers.

The three articles which follow are thematic surveys. Katherine Frank's "Women Without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa", while stimulating and thoughtfully argued, takes as its problematic thesis the contention that the novels under consideration (Mariama Ba's So Long a Letter, Flora Nwapa's One is Enough, Buchi Emecheta's Double Yoke and Destination Biafra, and Ama Ata Aidoo's Our Sister Killjoy), as representative of the "new feminist novel" in Africa, "all embrace the solution of a world without men." Although this is one possible reading of the thematic content of these works, it seems more prudent (in the light of other, more recent works by these and other authors) to say that

what is embraced is a world free of male domination, or of exploitative forces as represented by men; it is improbable that any of these "non-Utopian" (in Frank's words) authors would advocate anything as Utopian as feminist separatism. Mineke Schipper's "Mother Africa on a Pedestal: The Male Heritage in African Literature and Criticism", a study of the images of women in African literature from myths to the colonial period and through the post-colonial 60's and 70's, although informative, serves mainly as a primer, as this vast topic requires more than the twenty pages here. Jean F. Barr's "Feminist Issues in the Fiction of Kenya's Women Writers" breaks new, significant ground in its life cycle approach to gender role questions in literature, which may serve as a model for future critical inquiry.

Of the five articles which focus on the works of specific writers, Mbye B. Cham's "Contemporary Society and the Female Imagination: A Study of the Novels of Mariama Ba" stands out as an extensive and skillful analysis of Ba's fiction. This piece begins with an examination of the condition of abandonment as one which is specific to the experience of women, within which Cham evaluates social machinations and uses of (and access to) power, as well as the necessity that social change be rooted in culture. Another excellent article is Arlene Elder's "Ama Ata Aidoo and the Oral Tradition: A Paradox of Form and Substance", which argues that Aidoo's use of primarily "oral" techniques in the fragmented prose/poetry style of Our Sister Killjoy is a metaphor for the fragmented nature of African culture in the aftermath of colonial oppression. Jennifer Gordon's "Dreams of a Common Language: Nadine Gordimer's July's People", directly and concisely written, also analyzes language as a metaphor, in this case for that of the impossibility of communication between blacks and whites within the social and political confines of apartheid. Adekunbo Pearce's "The Didactic Essence of Efua Sutherland's Plays" presents Sutherland and her sensibilities as embodying the qualities of a traditional African artist, concerned primarily with communal values rather than selfish individualism, and is a refreshing look at an important playwright long neglected by European and American critical circles. The one disappointing article among these, however, is Charles Ponnuthurai Sarvan's "Bessie Head: A Question of Power and Identity", which, while hitting many of the bigger points to be made about this novel, lacks depth and serves primarily as a review of the more obvious thematic conclusions which can be drawn after a first reading of the book. A writer as complex and as visionary as Head deserves better.

The three subsequent essays concern the works of male authors. The first two, Sylvia Brian's "Images of Woman in Wole Soyinka's Work" and Jennifer Evans' "Women and Resistance in Ngugi's Devil on the Cross", set each other off quite nicely in their analyses of how these two male writers, who are exceptions rather than the norm,

portray female characters--particularly women of strength--in their works. The norm is soundly taken to task in Adawale Maja-Pearce's "The House of Slavery", which looks at the persistence of the "stud" stereotype in works by male African authors, specifically in the portrayal of relationships between African men and European women. This otherwise powerful essay, however, is flawed by its lack of any contextualization or analysis. The final article in this volume, Brenda F. Berrian's "The Afro-American-West African Marriage Question: Its literary and Historical Contexts" is an engaging study of the contrasting depictions of marriage between Afro-Americans and West Africans in Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun and Ama Ata Aidoo's The Dilemma of the Ghost; it also serves to make the final "movement" in this collection, that of broadening the scope to encompass Africans of the Diaspora. It is a fitting conclusion to the book.

Obviously, Women in African Literature Today is not without its faults. The unevenness of the articles aside, the organization, praiseworthy as it may be, is symptomatic of the editors' desire to cover as much of the basic, foundation-type material as possible, the result being that, at several points, the articles read like a rehash of much that has already been said in the field of feminist and Third World feminist literary criticism. A secondary effect is that, with the exception of Efua Sutherland, all of the authors and works included belong in the already-developing canon of women African writers who are known in Western critical circles. As a result, lesser-known writers, such as Zulu Sofala, and those who write in African languages, such as Penina Mlama, continue to be ignored, as do women writers of North Africa.

None of this should, however, detract from the singular importance of Women in African Literature Today. Its structure and content make the articles readily accessible to the novice, while offering much that is of interest to more seasoned readers. There is no doubt that, as the editors state, African women writers "have been neglected in the largely male-authored journals, critical studies, and critical anthologies"; this recognition perhaps points forward to a time when specialized critical collections will no longer be necessary.

Joyce Boss

Tanzania: Crisis and Struggle for Survival,

Jannik Boesen, Kjell J. Havnevik, Juhani Koponen, Rie Odgaard, eds.
Scandinavian Institute of African Studies, Uppsala 1986. 325pp.

This book is a "must" for anyone who has ever engaged in a debate on whether Tanzania is a model for African development or an