

Book Reviews

Florence Stratton. *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*. New York: Routledge, 1994. pp. viii, 200. \$16.95 pb.

Florence Stratton's thesis in her *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* is that "dialogic interaction between men's and women's writings is one of the defining features of the contemporary African literary tradition" (1). Stratton begins by demonstrating how African women's writing has been omitted from male-produced constructions of African literature. Then, examining writers from east and west (but not South) Africa, both in English and in translation, she discusses how African women writers engage with literature by men and with the dominant patriarchal discourse of gender. She acknowledges a theoretical debt to Fredric Jameson's *The Political Unconscious* and Abdul R. JanMohamed's *Manichean Aesthetics*, but revises their ideas to include gender. Jameson's concept that the protagonist's life in "Third World" writing is always "an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture and society" (qtd. in Stratton 10) is problematic for women, who have been systematically excluded from the public life of African nations.

Stratton's book comprises three sections, "Aspects of the Male Literary Tradition," "Room for Women," and "Men Write Back." In "Aspects of the Male Literary Tradition," she first focuses on Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. As Rhonda Cobham points out, this novel, because of its quickly consolidated canonical status, has become a "point of reference" (26) for both non-African and African readers, the former often using it as evidence of the sexism of traditional Igbo (and, by extension, all African) culture, and the latter often using it as a benchmark of pre-colonial cultural authenticity. Stratton shows how Achebe, concerned with countering European racism, failed to deal with either African or European sexism. The second chapter in "Aspects of the Male Literary Tradition" discusses "The Mother Africa Trope," which designates the national subject as male, while women are identified with Africa and thus subjected to male domination. Stratton traces the trope in the Negritude movement and through a series of male writers, in-

cluding Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Okot p'Bitek, Ousmane Sembène, Camara Laye, Nuruddin Farah, Wole Soyinka, and Mongo Beti. The middle section devotes chapters to Grace Ogot (Kenya), Flora Nwapa (Nigeria), Buchi Emecheta (Nigeria), and Miriam Bâ (Senegal). Each chapter examines how the works of these women interrogate the male tradition and dominant tropes of womanhood and how their production and reception were affected by gender issues. The final section examines Ngugi's *Devil on the Cross* (English translation, 1982) and Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) as partially successful attempts to enter the dialogue with women and to "transform the status of women from that of object to that of subject" (158).

Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender is readable, clearly argued, comprehensively researched, and, despite its obvious feminist agenda, balanced and thoughtful. By revealing women's writing as integral to the African literary tradition and dominant discourse of gender, Stratton has made it difficult, if not impossible, for critics to continue to marginalize this writing. This feminist work remains to be done for other postcolonial literatures; Kay Schaffer's *Women and the Bush: Forces of Desire in the Australian Cultural Tradition* has begun the task for Australia, but I can think of few other books working on this project.

Since no book can deal with more than a few of a text's important contextual discourses, all critical generalizations necessarily suffer from gaps and failures of comprehensiveness. Stratton emphasizes that although her "primary concern is with gender discourse," the writings she discusses belong to other systems of discourse as well, "none of which can be adequately understood if the systems are examined in isolation from one another" (18). None the less, Stratton occasionally seems to overlook the possibility that her own work might in some contexts contribute to such inadequate understanding. A problem emerges in the unavoidable fact that *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender* is produced primarily for the Western academy. As Biodun Jeyifo points out, "the great paradox surrounding the study of African literature today [is that] historic de-colonization having initially enabled the curricular legitimation of African literary study in African universities and schools, the equally historical arrest of de-colonization has swung the centre of African literary study away from Africa to Europe and America" (40). Stratton, perhaps because she taught in Njala University College in Sierra Leone for 19 years and therefore has spent a long time "inside" African discourses, shows no signs of concern that she might be reading (or be read as reading) African women's resistance to male domination into a Western feminist academic project, although she points out that Guadeloupean critic Maryse Condé overlooks "the cultural and historical specificity of western feminism which she represents as universal" (61). Stratton does touch on some of the difficulties of defining postcolonial feminism,

but more work on distinguishing the specificity of Western and post-colonial feminisms is necessary.

Stratton states that she has tried "to write women's writing back into the African literary tradition, a task that has also been undertaken by a number of the authors, men as well as women, whose works I have examined" (176). Yet she does not portray the African women critics whom she quotes as having produced a tradition of literary criticism to which her work is at least as much indebted as it is to Jameson and Jan-Mohamed (see Adams).

Finally, while obviously Stratton could discuss only a few women writers in detail, I wish Ama Ata Aidoo had been one of them; a Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1992 for her novel *Changes* publicly recognized a writing career dating back to 1965. Indeed, Stratton cites a 1986 study of the canonization of African writers that reports that "ranking fifteenth and eighteenth respectively, Aidoo and Head are the only women who come close to acquiring canonical status" (3). Despite these quibbles, Stratton has consolidated the critical position of African women's writing in a book that will definitively change the shape of African literary studies.

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Andrew Vogel Ettin. *Betrayals of the Body Politic: The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer*. Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1993. pp. 150. \$26.50.

Of the small number of book-length studies of Nadine Gordimer, the pre-eminent reference for critics outside of South Africa must be Stephen Clingman's *The Novels of Nadine Gordimer: History from the Inside* (1986). Clingman offers a rigorous analysis of Gordimer's novels as representations of their historical moment and recuperates Gordimer from charges of a simplistic liberalism. His detailed study of the political, social, and literary particularities of Gordimer's fiction functions as the materialist base that implicitly grounds—and makes possible—Andrew Vogel Ettin's project in *Betrayals of the Body Politic: The Literary Commitments of Nadine Gordimer*. Ettin writes: