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Fang: Feminism in West African Women's Fiction in the College Classroom

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n Fiction and Film" at Morehouse College, upper level students, majors, are not only engaging in literary studies to sharpen their expand their international perspectives—the students at one of CUs are also fulfilling an integral goal of the College's mission: to ge of African-Americans through the study of Africa and the le African American college, we

students have even conceived of the "triple consciousness" of the African woman. The plight of African women is invariably tied to the often reductively applied dichotomy of modernity and tradition in Africa. One student concludes his essay: "Bâ seems to suggest that modernity (Western customs) does not necessarily threaten the moral integrity of West African culture, and in some cases, modernity even offers hope and progress where tradition and custom fail" (Moon 5).

Students in the course are given notes on the diverse schools of the international feminist movements and secondary readings on Africana feminism/womanism. In the October 2006 *PMLA*, Sharon Marcus argues that one of the tenets of international feminism is that it "attends to differences among women, often by being self-critical, and thus extends its purview not only to gender in general but to all inequalities that affect women or intersect with gender" (1722**)**. The original womanist source is Alice Walker's *In Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (1983), which responds to shortcomings of m80Td(of)Tj/C2_0 1 Tf 0.0238 Tc 0.3350 Tw (responds)Tj 0.3750Td(responds)Tc0.3350Td(Alice)Tj/C2

multiplicity of reasons. First, there is the unquestionable need to reclaim Africana women; second, they are perplexed over the racist origins of the feminist movement; third, they have found little solace in the doctrines and mission of the feminist movement…" (qtd. in Kolawole 21-22).What the pedagogical experience of "West African Fiction and Film" teaches is both the importance of the student-centered approach—the rich dialogue that ensues from students' engagement with African cultures—and the obligation of the professor to provide critical context, through supplementary reading on Africana feminism, in order to help students steer away from generalizations about Africa and Africans and to read culture and fiction with attention to diverse forms of feminist agency and resistance.

The reception of African women's fiction in the West and the discussion of African women's novels in the college classroom labor under a critical bind in terms of the evaluation of colonial and patriarchal oppression. By underscoring the ambivalence of the colonial encounter and of gender relations and by focusing on the empowerment of women under colonial and under patriarchal control, the analysis of African cultures runs the risk of a problem Henry Louis Gates puts succinctly: "You can empower discursively the native, and open yourself up to charges of downplaying the epistemic (and literal) violence of colonialism, or play up the absolute nature of colonial

postcolonial theory (including a certain politically strategic use of the word “native” that coincides with trends in Subaltern Studies), Gates’s outline of an historical

In *ReπInventing Africa* (1997), Ifi Amadiume, also working on Igbo history and sociology, makes much more far-reaching claims about female independence in precolonial Africa. This work shows that the renowned Dancing Women's Movement of 1925, the Spirit Movement of 1927, and the Women's War of 1929 protest the "economic disadvantage women felt under the new [colonial] system, the marginalization of their social organizations, the banning of their religion, and the new economic and political advantages men were gaining under the new system" (125). Many of the Igbo societies are known as having some of the most egalitarian gender relations and democratic of political systems in West Africa. (A unique aspect of Igbo gender relations is discussed in Amadiume's *Male Daughters, Female Husbands: Gender and Sex in African Society* 1987), which analyzes the female matricentric unit, *mkpuke*, male head of compound, *obi*, and shows that females can become an *obi*; a daughter

The important efforts of such forms of historical analysis, the focus on matrilineal power structures as a deeper ideological structure based on "a powerful goddess-based religion, a strong ideology of motherhood, and a general moral principal of love" (101), if applied to all of Africa, run the risk of overgeneralization, of what Paulin Hountondji, in philosophical contexts, calls the danger of "unanimism"; here the problem is not only a demand for ideological unanimity, but also a unanimous belief in the uniformity of (precolonial) African societies. Amadiume admits to widespread practices of slavery in ancient kingdoms, but not to general exploitation of slaves or of women. She claims patriarchal oppression begins in sub-Saharan contexts after Islam in the tenth century (arriving as early as the seventh century in some areas of the continent), while arguing that Islam did not attempt to eradicate African social structures to the degree that Europe and Christianization did in later centuries. Writers such as Yambo Ouologuem, Wole Soyinka, and Ousmane Sembène, while waging rigorous attacks on European and Arab colonialism, do not read African history in such monolithic terms, nor do most female African novelists.

From an historical perspective, Okonjo's commentary on the critical ramifications of gender inequality parallels the literary debates that ensue as novels by African women, such as Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo, Buchi Emecheta, and Mariama Bâ, find a wide reception among literary scholars. Okonjo warns against extrapolating from the patriarchal framework of African societies a reductive view of subordinate women, a "distorted picture of the 'oppressive' African man and the 'deprived' African woman" (45). Commenting on Western feminist perspectives on Emecheta's *The Joys of*

Motherhood

single identity. The female existence is as multifaceted as the women's different backgrounds and intrinsic personalities (75).

(182).

In arguing that Nnu Ego, the protagonist of *The Joys of Motherhood*, does not represent Igbo women, or African women, in general, Nnoromele demonstrates both the cultural imperative and the epistemological complexity of reading fiction ethnographically.

There is perhaps no better example of the complexity of feminist readings of African fiction than *Ekomo* (1985) by María Nsue Angüe, the first novel by a female author from Equatorial Guinea. In an interview with M'baré N'gom, María Nsue Angüe describes her novel *Ekomo* as "a panorama" (296) of Fang life in Equatorial Guinea, but dismisses readings of the work as a prototype of the nation or as an anti-colonialist tract. Born in 1948 in Biyabiyán, district of Ebebiyín, Nsue, who has lived most of her life in Spain, believes that her writing must be seen as the voice of an individual, and expresses discomfort with the label of feminism due to its Eurocentrism, instead stressing her

While employing the aesthetic counterpoint of intimacy and distance through the use of the first person, Nsue's work, not a Bildungsroman in the mode of Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir*, nor an Erziehungsroman in the mode of Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre*, maintains a crucial distance from the reach of colonialism as a narrative of the village and forest. For this reason, María Zielina Limonta compares the novel to Ngûgî wa Thiong'o's *Devil on the Cross* and Birago Diop's *Contes d'Amadou Koumba*, which seek "to decolonize the minds of their readers through the deliberate use of orality, while maintaining an African aesthetic" (descolonizar la mente de sus lectores a través del uso deliberado de la oralidad, y al mismo tiempo conservar la estética africana; 93).

While the careful treatment of Fang culture in *Ekomo* is without question, critics have begun to inquire into the postcolonial perspective of its novelistic ethnography. The suggestion that in the work there is an "absence of anti-colonialist sentiments" (ausencia t h e r e

inhabitants of Africa, a moment of attenuated ethnographic import. Marvin Lewis argues that "Ekomo and his wife are treated as the first couple" (133), a notion framed somewhat differently by Lola Aponte-Ramos, who describes them as "the tragic primordial pair" (la pareja primodial y trágica; 106). The ancestral line from creation the *curandero* narrates, if it is to be read in terms of a mythological background for the couple, serves as a genealogy of the African universe, in which the two find themselves lost. Their despair, stemming from Ekomo's transgression and Nnanga's oppression, is foreshadowed by the ethical domain portrayed in the opening pages, in which a woman named Nchama is punished for adultery; this inversion of the story of the protagonists reveals the dual forces of good and evil, which are combative and complimentary in the myth of the first African religion. The myth is related through the story of the children of Africara. The *curandero* prays to the ancestors, to the origins of the complex lineage, intoning, "Hear me, Hamata and Ana. Forefather and root of our origin. You engendered Ngoo-Jañ, wife of Abata, parents of Mangoo and of Mamengoo, who engendered Tamengoo, who in turn engendered Africara (AFRICA), who, having many wives, married Nnanengoo in the last days of his life" (112, orig. text). He then later separately invokes the name of Nnanengoo, "the name of the first woman born of our race, as Eve is for the whites" (117,

set aflame, and as a dancer thwarted by the sacrifices required of her dedication to her husband, she sheds spectral light on relationships between the genders from an archetypal African cosmology that

offers to readers is then a hybrid text of Equatorial Guinean cultural tradition and a unique female perspective.

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