

Feminist and womanist criticism of african literature: a bibliography

[Sociology](#), [Feminism](#)



Feminist and Womanist Criticism of African Literature: A Bibliography By Sharon Verba July 20, 1997 Those women who struggle without giving up hope, herald the impending change... : change in attitude for both men and women as they evaluate and re-evaluate their social roles.... -Rosemary Moyana, " Men & Women" Rereading, willful misreading, and de- and re-coding are tools used in African literature and womanist or feminist discourse to challenge " canonized 'literature'" that tends to black out Black and blanch out Woman. -Kofi Owusu, " Canons Under Siege" T]he collective effort has to emerge from the ranks of those whose life is theorized. -Sisi Maqagi, " Who Theorizes" Feminist criticism of African literatures is a steadily growing field. The following bibliography includes articles and essays in English and French which examine African literatures (fiction, poetry, drama and oral literature) from a feminist or womanist perspective. It does not include, unfortunately, criticism in other languages -- such as Wolof, Xhosa, Zulu, Portuguese, German, or Arabic -- due to my own inability to read those languages.

Also, authors whose works are originally written in languages other than French or English, such as Ngugi wa Thiongo's plays and the novel, Devil on the Cross, and Nawal al Sa'dawi's works, may be under-represented in this bibliography, as criticism often tends to be written in the language of the work being addressed. The first sections of this essay will present overviews on two key issues for those interested in bothfeminismand African literatures: the current ebate over the role of feminist criticisms in addressing African literatures, and an examination of the changes which have developed over the past decade in the ways feminist criticism approaches African literatures. This examination will trace these changes

from 1985-1996 by considering articles which represent the ongoing evolution of feminist criticism in this field. Finally, this essay also includes a section which explains my methodology and sources in compiling the bibliography, and a section offering hints for future searches, especially of online indexes. Feminist Criticism and African Literature

Many issues of concern to feminist/womanist thought are raised and addressed in these articles. (1) Among the issues taken up in the state of feminist theory and criticism are the importance of feminism as a literary critical method; the representation and mis-representation of women in literary texts; the education of women; the access of women to the economic means of survival; motherhood; women in the domestic sphere; women as part of their communities; women's role in politics and revolution; sexuality; and the direct treatment of women by men, and men by women.

Underlying this array of specific interests are questions of gender in representation and of the reality or realities of life for women in Africa--past, present, and future. The arguments found in the articles in this bibliography present a multiplicity of views, a few of which may even be anti-feminist, but all of which make gender a basis of discussion, and all of which offer much for the consideration of feminist thought with respect to African literatures.

The state of feminist literary criticism/thought in Africa "now" is the direct focus of several of the articles, although all of the articles could be said in some degree or another to be a part of this particular debate. I put "now" in quotations, because these articles cover a broad range of time--1980-1996--and those which focus on this particular topic present an evolving discourse.

Two collections of essays in particular are noteworthy for their presentation of a range of ideas on feminism and literary criticism in Africa: Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature (1986) and South African Feminisms: Writing, Theory and Criticism 1990-1994 (1995). Ngambika includes twenty articles which focus on the representation of women in African literature. Taken together the articles provide an invaluable overview of the types of feminist criticism being applied to African literatures in the mid 1980s, although most do not focus on the issue of feminism as a critical method. One essay in this collection proves a notable exception. In the collection's introductory essay Carole Boyce Davies(2) does write of the tension found in the works of many critics of African literatures, especially female critics.

These critics, she says, work out of a growing awareness of the requirement to balance both " the need to liberate African peoples from neo-colonialism and other forms of race and class oppression, coupled with a respect for certain features of traditional African cultures," and " the recognition that a feminist consciousness is necessary in examining the position of women in African societies" (1).

Davies then outlines the issues of women writers in Africa (including the relatively small number of women writers) and the presentation of women in fiction written by African men, as well as the development of an African feminist criticism. In her treatment of the latter concern, she lists four major areas which African feminist critics tend to address: the development of the canon of African women writers, the examination of stereotyped images of women in African literature, the study of African women writers and the

development of an African female aesthetic, and the examination of women and the oral tradition (13-14).

While Davies acknowledges the objections African women writers and critics have to the term "feminist" and discusses womanist theory, she focuses on the idea of a developing African feminist theory which will not only perform the balancing act mentioned at the beginning, but continue to address the major issues she has outlined. Seven years later, in the 1993 publication *A History of Twentieth-Century African Literatures*, Davies and Elaine Savory Fido contributed a chapter entitled "African Women Writers: A Literary History". In it, they examine African women writers and their writings, focusing especially on the styles and genres used by these writers. Included is a brief segment on "Feminism and African Women Writers" as well as a separate section on "Criticism and African Women's Writing." In the section on feminism, they note the continued reluctance of many African women writers and critics to be labeled as feminists because of the overtones of westernization the term carries, but they also point out that most African women writers are committed, in the words of Omolara Ogundipe-Leslie, "as a writer, as a woman and as a third world person" (339).

This triple commitment encompasses much of the politics of African feminism, as well as womanism, whether the labels are accepted or not. Fido and Davies conclude: "The role and history of feminist politics or activism on women's rights in Africa is a discourse which African women are studying and clarifying for themselves" (339). One of the places in which this

discourse can be seen is *South African Feminisms: Writing, Theory and Criticism 1990-1994*.

South African Feminisms presents a collection of articles on feminist literature and criticism, including and expanding the debate on feminist criticism of African literatures which was part of the special issue *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa 2* (1990). M. J. Daymond's introduction gives a good overview of the issues raised in the collection, including the debate over feminist criticism and the development of an African feminist theory.

The section "Theory and Context" includes eight articles originally published from 1990-1993. Taken together, these articles constitute an excellent sampling of some of the issues and trends in African feminist criticism, including Sisi Maqagi's "Who Theorizes?" in which she questions the ability of white critics, African or non-African, female or male, to develop a theory which will adequately address the issues of black African women, rather than appropriating those issues, and the voices which raise them.

Jill Arnott, in an article entitled "French Feminism in a South Africa? Gayatri Spivak and the Problem of Representation in South African Feminism," contends that difference, which can often lead to misrepresentation, can also at times lead to accurate and insightful work: "to power a genuinely dialectical interaction between two vigilantly foregrounded subject-positions," but only with an awareness of the position of difference and a consciousness of the act of representation (87). Desiree Lewis, in "The Politics of Feminism in South Africa," counters that such a conscious and

effective use of difference may well be impossible, as long as there is a political climate in which white female academics are attempting to hold on to their power within the academy, at the expense of black women.

In the same article she also points out that unless black working class women can make their statements about the current "oppressive orthodoxies" and do so without creating, as she argues Western feminism has, another oppressive orthodoxy, there may be no way out of the current impasse. Changes in Feminist Criticism of African Literature Although some of the articles included in this bibliography, like those above, examine feminist literary criticism as a topic, most focus on literary concerns: texts, authors, or issues.

In the seventeen years this bibliography presents there are shifts in the coverage these concerns are given. Critical analyses of individual authors naturally both broaden and deepen over the years, especially as an individual author's body of work grows or is reclaimed from obscurity. In general, in the 1990s there are fewer works of criticism that examine several authors and more which focus on individuals and their work than there were in the 1980s. Also, the topics focused upon subtly shift over the years. Images of women in the works of.... " could be the subtitle for many of the articles written in the 1980s as feminist critics examined representations, or misrepresentations, of African women in literary texts. At the same time these critics raised the question of the role of African authors, male and female, in expanding and/or correcting such representations. These concerns are still addressed; indeed,

the feminist criticism on these topics is, like the criticism of specific authors, expanding and deepening.

To highlight these changes, I shall examine here some of the collections and representative individual articles which have been produced over the years, beginning with the landmark collection *Ngambika*, which was published in 1986, followed by *Women in African Literature Today* in 1987, articles by Kofi Owusu and Elleke Boehmer in 1990, the 1990 issue of *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, *Essays on African Writing 2: Contemporary Literature* published in 1995 and *The Marabout and the Muse: New Approaches to Islam in African Literature* in 1996.

All of the articles in the first section of *Ngambika* overtly tackle the issue of the representations of women in the works of African authors. Carole Boyce Davies writes one of these articles: "Maidens, Mistresses, and Matrons: Feminine Images in Selected Soyinka Works." In it, she argues that Soyinka often offers only stereotyped images of women which fall into one of three categories: the foolish virgin in rural settings, the femme fatale in urban settings, and the masculinized matron.

Those characters which fall in the latter category, in Davies' opinion, come closest to being non-stereotypes, but even they are drawn with "no depth" (81). The "foolish virgins" and the "femme fatales," Davies argues, fill only the roles of stereotypes and symbols, possessions or trophies to be won away from Western influences by African traditions, or, more threateningly, these women are seen as dangers which can distract and destroy.

Davies acknowledges that Soyinka sometimes shows women briefly in a positive light but notes that " throughout Soyinka's works one finds the kernel of positive portrayal of the female image which is never fully realized" (85). Davies concludes with the argument " that the artist has the power to create new realities;... women as neither victors nor victims but partners in struggle" (86). Davies' article is representative of the criticism which examines the image of women in African literatures. That is, she carefully addresses the concerns of the author (i. e. he need for recognizable symbols) as she argues against the relegation of women solely to symbolic roles, asking for characterizations which do not "[reinforce] a negative perception of self to the female viewer/reader and, concomitantly, a condescension in the appraisal of women on the part of the male" (78). In the years following the publishing of *Ngambika*, several journals and monograph series devoted to African literatures published issues on women as authors of or characters in African literatures. One of the first was the *Women in African Literature Today* issue of *African Literature Today* (Vol. 5). Like *Ngambika*, this issue contains many excellent articles, almost all of which are written from a feminist perspective. I would like to discuss two of these articles as representative not merely of this particular collection, but of the feminist criticism on African literatures being published at this time. In " Feminist Issues in the Fiction of Kenya's Women Writers" Jean F. O'Barr list three main categories of feminist concerns in the fiction of Kenyan woman writers: " how female children become women; ... what marriage means for women;... here women's work fits into their lives" (57). O'Barr notes that the women authors she analyzes " all write from the woman's point of view, sharply underscoring

the idea that the female perspective may be different from the male perspective on the same topic" (58). O'Barr analyzes the works of Kenya's female authors from a sociological approach, hoping to establish a stronger image of the social lives of Kenya's women than is possible from the works of male authors. She concludes that Kenya's women find themselves in a quadruple bind: " they see themselves performing traditional roles... ithout traditional resources... while at the same time they are undertaking modern activities... while being denied access to modern support systems" (69). While O'Barr looks at the fiction of Kenyan women in order to locate the reality of women's lives, Katherine Frank attempts in the controversial article " Women without Men: The Feminist Novel in Africa" to find a radically feminist future for African women. Frank endeavors to place African women writers into the Western feminist mold by speaking of their work as a more radical extension of the Western feminist tradition.

In speaking of " the contemporary British or American novel" she claims " our heroine slams the door on her domestic prison, journeys out into the great world, slays the dragon of her patriarchal society, and triumphantly discovers the grail of feminism by 'finding herself,'" (14). She argues that in comparison African novels by women go far beyond their Western counterparts, refusing to " dabble in daydreaming about enlightened heroes or reformed, non-sexist societies," (15). Frank finds that the " feminist" writers of Africa portray women not only as taking on active and shared roles with men, but as finding " a destiny of their own. ... destiny with a vengeance," (15). Frank contends that Mariama Ba, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and Ama Ata Aidoo's novels are, in their feminisms, " more

radical, even more militant, than [their] Western counterpart[s]" (15). But Frank's interpretations place African heroines on a path which is not different, but rather the same, if more intense, than the one taken by the British and American heroines she notes above. Frank stresses that in these novels women find only pain and degradation in their relationships with men, but on their own and in their relationships with other women they find "female solidarity, power, independence" (33).

In her interpretation, Barr neglects to note examples in which the future is shared by men and women. For example, when she speaks of Mariama Ba's *So Long a Letter*, she focuses on Ramatoulaye and Aissatou's friendship and the "world they create apart from men," (20). While this in itself glosses over the complex (and by no means completely negative) relationships these women have with the men in their lives, she also does not speak of Ramatoulaye's daughter and son-in-law, and the hope Ramatoulaye finds in their relationship.

In this article, Frank does not acknowledge a difference between demonstrating that a woman's worth is not inextricable from her relationship with men, that a woman can take care of herself, as Ramatoulaye discovers, and an actual desire to live a life without men. However, controversial as some of her interpretations are, her essay effectively outlines the some of the subtle feminisms of African women novelists.

Katherine Frank's stance is one which falls into the category of "radical, feminist-separatist ideology" which Kofi Owusu defines and rejects in his article in *Callaloo* entitled "Canons Under Siege: Blackness, Femaleness, and

Ama Ata Aidoo's *Our Sister Killjoy* (1990). While Frank sees Aidoo's character Sissie as moving towards an autonomous, self-determining life without men (Frank 32), Owusu finds Aidoo to be "in tune with the 'old' (Achebe's 'vast corpus of African traditional stories') and the 'new' ('modern feminist theory') (357).

Owusu sees Aidoo, and other female writers, not as bridging a gap between Western and African thought but creating something new out of both and challenging the canons that would ignore either black or female concerns. Much of Owusu's article analyzes "the discontinuities as well as continuities between womanist-feminist perspectives, on the one hand, and African literature, on the other" (342), allowing Owusu to regard Aidoo's work as one which "give[s] a sense of structural and linguistic irony which is functional. ... signify[ing] a couple of things: the need for, and very process of, revamping" (361).

Here, the canons need to be reformed in recognition of both race and gender, not one or the other, or one without the other. While Kofi Owusu focused on Aidoo's linguistic and textual manipulations, the question of the image of women in African literature continues to be a highly examined topic. Elleke Boehmer explores the construction of women as mothers, whores, representations of national pride, or finally, as spiritual advisors and supporters, but not as individuals actively and crucially involved in political activity.

In "Of Goddesses and Stories: Gender and a New Politics in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*," Boehmer analyzes Chinua Achebe's efforts to include

women in his re-vision of the future and questions whether women remain a "vehicle" of transformation rather than actual women with an active role in the future of the country, that is, whether "woman is the ground of change or discursive displacement but not the subject of transformation" (102).

She concludes that Achebe has still idealized women but that his creation of a female character with an important yet undefined role for the future has opened up space for women to have active and involved roles, side by side with men, in the building of the future. Like Davies' article on Soyinka from Ngambika discussed earlier, Boehmer's work recognizes Achebe's literary prowess and commends his willingness to make women positive symbols, but in the end laments the lack of depth in his female characters.

Although *South African Feminisms* was published in 1996, many of the articles in it come from the 1990 issue of *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, which was dedicated to "Feminism and Writing." This issue continued the trend of publishing articles debating not only the appropriateness of feminism in an African context but also the challenges of applying it to African literatures, as well as articles focusing on women writers or women's images in literature.

In "A Correspondence Without Theory: Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions*," Brenda Bosman addresses the psychological dislocation forced upon the women of the heroine's family by "Englishness," the term used by her mother to describe the process of assimilation which various members of the family undergo. However, one of the most interesting aspects of the

article is Bosman's explicit attempt to find a position from which to speak, as a white South African woman, to --not for, or of-- Dangarembga.

She writes her article in the form of a letter to Dangarembga, and acknowledges that she might not have succeeded in finding a legitimate position: " you may find... despite all my conscious efforts, I have nonetheless submitted to the voice of my education"(311). Considering the problematics of education in *Nervous Conditions*, this could be seen as a double entendre, but her article shows a conscious attempt to find a place from which to speak comfortably, an increasingly difficult matter for some African feminists.

The last two articles I will discuss reveal change in the field of feminist criticism of Africa on two levels: both are located in collections of essays on African literature which can be considered " general," and both are examples of the further increase in variety in the forms of feminist criticism of African literature. Although very good collections of critical essays focusing exclusively on women and African literature are published, it is important to note that few, if any " general" collections are now being published without the inclusion of at least one, if not several essays which address feminist concerns.

In *Essays on African Writing 2: Contemporary Literature* (1995), there are three articles which are written from a feminist perspective. One of these is Belinda Jack's " Strategies of Transgression in the Writings of Assia Djébar. " In it she explores the means by which Djébar writes for Arabic women of Algeria in the language of the colonizer.

Jack distinguishes Djébar's writings by arguing that her " texts are not written in the French language but a French language" a language which no longer belongs to the colonizers because of the deliberate shifts Djébar makes (23). Jack also notes that Djébar also transgresses against Islam in her choices of subject matter, especially sexuality, again firm in the knowledge that while such speech may be a transgression, it is only a transgression because with speech (or writing) comes power.

The last article I wish to discuss also focuses on Assia Djébar and her concerns with Islam. *The Marabout and the Muse: New Approaches to Islam in African Literature* (1996) contains four articles which approach literature from a distinctly feminist perspective: one on Somali women's Sittaat (songs sung for and to notable women in Islamic history), one on the tradition of female Islamic writers in Nigeria, and two which examine Djébar's *Loin de Médine*.

In " Daughters of Hagar: Daughters of Muhammad" Sonia Lee argues that through her early fictional exploration of women in Islam, Djébar is attempting to make a space for Islamic women " to reclaim the true law of God" (60). Lee finds that Djébar's historical training combined with her literary skills allow her to "[oscillate] between the actual and the probable, thus underlying the real subject matter of the novel, the problematic of Islamic collective memory with regard to women" (51). The above articles typify the growing expansion of feminist approaches to African literatures.

While feminist criticisms continue to broaden the literary canon by bringing literature by African women to critical attention and continue to address the

representation of African women in literatures, the methods used by such criticism in relation to African literatures continue to evolve. As feminist critics, both African and non-African, use sociological, linguistic, psychoanalytic, historical and other approaches to broaden the examination of African literatures, at least some Western feminist critics are also trying to incorporate a heightened awareness of their own positions with regards to the authors and literatures they discuss.

Methodology This bibliography is, in every sense of the word, selective. African authors were included if an article (in English or French) could be located which discussed him or her from the angle of feminism, womanism, or the treatment of gender. Authors were not excluded or included on any other basis, including race and gender. Interviews were included for many of the female writers because such interviews often are a main source of feminist thought (their own) on their works.

The sources I used to find these articles were the bibliographies of African literature located in the journal *Callaloo* (1987-89 and 1990-93), the MLA Bibliography, the African studies bibliographies for the years 1995-96, the CD-Rom resource *Women's Resources International*, 1972-August 1996, as well as various library catalogs for monographs, whether collections or single-authored. In addition, I scanned the bibliographies of articles and books to find other relevant citations.

There are several good bibliographies which focus, at least in part, on feminist criticism of African literatures from the 1970s through the mid 1980s. Brenda Berrian's *Bibliography of African Women Writers and*

Journalists, Carole Boyce Davies' " A Bibliography of Criticism and Related Works" in Ngambika, and Barbara Fister's bibliography on criticism in Third World Women's Literature in combination cover this earlier period very thoroughly.

I did not use these bibliographies to compile this one; to avoid excess duplication, I have focused on criticism published from 1980 on and simply cite these earlier bibliographies at the end of this one, although I am sure some duplication has occurred. This bibliography is organized by authors and also includes a section on general works, which is organized first by those which cover African literatures without focusing on a specific country, region or author, then by region, and then individual countries.

Works of criticism are placed in this section if they refer to several authors/works from the continent, a particular region, or country. If an article focuses on four or fewer authors, it is included under the name of each author. The bibliography includes articles on eighty-seven individual authors, as well as general articles on Africa, East Africa, North Africa, West Africa, Algeria, Egypt, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Somali, South Africa, and Zimbabwe; it cites more than four hundred articles and monographs.

It is interesting to compare the authors found in this bibliography with the ninety-five authors found in the biography section of Hans Zell's *A New Reader's Guide to African Fiction* (1st ed. , 1971; 2nd rev. ed. , 1983). The authors in Zell's work are often considered the early canon of African literatures. Only twenty-five authors appear in both the current bibliography and Hans Zell's Guide. There may be several reasons for this difference.

Many of the authors included in my bibliography were not then considered a part of the canon of African literature; and a few had not even published at the time Zell's work appeared.

Carole Boyce Davies also offers an insight which may explain the lack of overlap. She notes in her introduction to *Ngambika* that one of the priorities of African feminist literary criticism is "the development of a canon of African women writers and a parallel canon of critical works with the final aim of expanding the African literary canon" (14). The Guides were compiled in the early years of this expansion, and it is quite possible that today the lists would be more reflective of each other.

At the same time, many African women writers actively rebuke attempts to place African men on the defensive, arguing that a critical approach to literature (as well as other social, political, and cultural expressions) must explore the strengths of both African women and African men. While feminist criticism does focus on male authors, it more often strives to bring to the forefront of literary discussions the works of female African authors and the strong, individualistic portrayals of women they offer.

Future Search Hints The issues discussed above make feminist criticism of African fiction an exciting and dynamic field. They also make it a very complex field to research. There are several issues to keep in mind when beginning research in this area. One of the most difficult to overcome is the lack of coverage of this area in mainstream indexing sources, such as the MLA, especially when one looks for early works, which were often carried in journals not then indexed by the MLA.

Other sources which do cover these journals, such as the excellent bibliographies periodically offered by Callaloo on studies of African literature, do not offer separate sections for feminist criticism, and it is necessary to assess which ones are relevant by the titles or, at times, the authors, of the articles. For my own part it should be noted that it is entirely possible that I have missed articles which should appear in this bibliography.

Many of the best sources are only available in print, such as International African Bibliography, Current Bibliography of African Affairs, and Cahiers d'etudes africaines, which are more time-consuming to search, but well worth the effort. As the discussion above indicates, the term " feminism" can be extremely limiting when it is being used as a descriptor in either online or print indexes. For this reason, it is advisable to keep other terms in mind when searching for articles, whether in print or electronic resources, such as the keywords/descriptors " Gender" and " Womanism/Womanist".

It is important, as well, not to limit searches to the term " African. " While some articles are indexed with this descriptor, those articles which deal with a specific author may be listed under that author's country instead, as of course are those which deal with the literatures of a specific region or country. Finally, especially when searching for articles in online indexes, it is useful to keep in mind specific topics, such as " sexuality," " motherhood," and " politics" combined with " women" or " female. "