

The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminisms, 1958-1988

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If I were to come up with a succinct and snappy slogan for Susan Andrade's finely chiselled study of pioneering African literature in English and French, it would be "Back to the Future." While any resemblance to a real mid-1980s science fiction comedy is purely coincidental, *The Nation Writ Small* seems to share with the film the idea of returning to a (literary) past and of "renegotiating" history—rereading older texts—for the future of literary studies. In an age where the "national" has long been replaced by various "trans-s" in current critical theory, Andrade takes us back to African writers of the immediate post-independence period and their authoring of nationalism and national politics in works of fiction, particularly the novel. Those of us acquainted with 1990s critical debates will be familiar with the basic starting points of her argument: the complex relation of the genre to cultural nationalism and the African continent; its importance for the writing-back paradigm and the critical conception of resistance; the idea of narrative as national allegory as exemplified by Frederic Jameson's influential, if controversial, essay "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986); and the assumed divide between male and female writers, with the former addressing the public arena and the latter the private sphere. Though the literary iconography of decolonizing nationalism was deeply gendered in African men's writing—with Mother Africa and the prostitute as the most utilized tropes—female writers rarely represented nations or national struggles in their texts. Instead, they focused on the microdiscursive practices of the domestic realm. As a result, many women writers were little acknowledged as part of their national literary histories; household and family matters became "the nation writ small" (21). Rereading Jameson in relation to a "progressive feminist politics of decolonization" (29), Andrade sets out to change this perspective by making evident the intricate literal and figurative links between private and public spheres in women's works, and how they function in relation to the master narratives of nationalism. *The Nation Writ Small* is retrospective feminist literary historiography at its best, and certainly at its most elegant.

In four chapters, framed by an in-depth critical introduction and a much shorter conclusion, Andrade takes us through a number of seminal texts by female (and some male) writers in both English and French. Chapter 1 discusses "The Joys of Daughterhood" by reading Flora Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966) and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979) not only against the Nigerian "father" text, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), but also, more importantly, in relation to women's resistance in the era of colonialism, particularly

the Igbo Women's War of 1929. Thus, Andrade offers an alternative reading which shows that women's confrontation and participation in the nation's agenda was achieved through culturally appropriate—"feminine"—means. These were rooted in a strong sense of female support and community rather than expressed through direct intervention in the nationalist agenda. While the eponymous Efuru still conforms to the Mother Africa trope of male cultural nationalism—with the exception of her childlessness—Nnu Ego, the protagonist in *The Joys of Motherhood*, takes up where Efuru has left off and offers a much sharper critique of local patriarchy and colonialism. The figurative connection between the two novels serves as a reminder that the "feminine" has indeed rebellious potential and can challenge conventional, male-centred historiographies.

Chapter 2 analyses Mariama Bâ's *Une si longue lettre* (1979) in dialogue with Sembène's *Xala* (1973) (both film and novella), but also in its genealogical relation to Frantz Fanon's powerful reasoning in "The Pitfalls of National Consciousness" which voices a disillusionment with nationalism. Identifying the centrality of "the marriage plot" (79) and the "hyper-domesticized space of Muslim widowhood" (87) from which the first-person narrator tells her tale, Andrade reads Bâ as a failed national romance in which the critique of Senegalese national failure is expressed through the seemingly apolitical genre of heterosexual romantic love. Unlike the previous chapter, texts are examined in reverse chronological order. Andrade makes her argument from Bâ via Sembène to Fanon and, finally, to Aminata Sow Fall's *La grève des bàttu* (1979) which enters the conversation by putting Islamic principles in dialogue with African socialism. By rejecting the communal indignation found in both Sembène and Fall, Bâ advances gender, women's individuality, and a somewhat "sentimental feminism" (113) as important elements of the literary agenda.

Chapters 3 and 4 turn from a historical, generational and dialogic approach to a synchronous reading of the genre of the *Bildungsroman*, with particular emphasis on the development of female subject formation. Aptly entitled "Bildung in Formation and Deformation," Chapter 3 examines "the relation of the decolonized nation to that of individual growth" (115) by reading two very different English-language novels from the mid- to late 1980s; *Nervous Conditions* (1988) by the Zimbabwean Tsitsi Dangarembga, and *Maps* (1986) by the Somali Nuruddin Farah. Again, Andrade draws on an essay by Jameson, here the much lesser-known "On Literary and Cultural Import-Substitution in the Third World" (1996). In this essay Jameson highlights the performative interventions of the extended family in the protagonist's process of individual self-discovery—"Bildung"—in relation to the public sphere. Though effacing the historical narrative of Rhodesia's struggle for independence, *Nervous Conditions* produces a national allegory through the process of Tambudzai's successful social and personal maturation while her unconventional, rebellious cousin, Nyasha, gradually disintegrates. *Maps*, on the other hand, functions as an anti-*Bildungsroman* by refusing the genre's teleological sense of direction and its usual adherence to literary

realism. The novel rejects an allegorical reading by representing the figure of the Ethiopian Misra as a rather atypical symbol for the Somali nation, largely seen through the unreliable consciousness of Askar, her adopted Somali son. In the place of “conventionality and embourgeoisement” (42) as key elements of individual and collective development, *Maps* represents the failure of Bildung and nation, and addresses the unmentionable within families instead.

Finally, in “Bildung at Its Boundaries” (Chapter 4), Andrade offers a remarkable reading of two novels by Assia Djebar, *L’amour, la fantasia* (1985) and *Ombre sultane* (1987), which she understands as two parts of a single *Bildungsroman*. As *L’amour* writes the national allegory of Algeria more openly, *Ombre* narrates women’s emancipation as a domestic tale through the inner lives of two female characters. Both texts connect to women’s stories not otherwise part of the narrative action; *L’amour* to women’s oral histories of the Algerian liberation war, *Ombre* to the tales of Scheherazade and her sister, Dinarzade, in *One Thousand and One Nights*. Read as one, the novels challenge the generic boundaries of the *Bildungsroman*—and provide proof for her earlier argument that texts which foreground familial dramas at the expense of the openly political have often received much less critical attention.

Given that this book developed out of earlier published essays (and possibly her doctoral dissertation), none of Andrade’s arguments are entirely new. Extraordinary, however, is the elegance and clarity with which she broaches her case, and her insistence that we pay closer attention to the basics of literary analysis—poetics and narratology—when studying texts and their workings. Beautiful and enlightening is her exposition on “reflection” and “mimesis,” for example, which “haunts criticism of the African novel” (16) to this day and has occasionally led to very crude ideas of literature performing anthropology or sociology. Equally constructive is her careful re-evaluation of Jameson’s notion of “national allegory,” a critical paradigm to which I was introduced at an early stage of my career and which many of my colleagues have long abandoned. While agreeing that nationalism “is only one among many political or cultural formations in the wake of decolonization” (27), Andrade is adamant to point out that the concept still haunts “the imagination of writers from Africa . . . and therefore offers one way, and an important way, to thematize literary history” (27).

The Nation Writ Small will certainly help to reassess current literary historiography, particularly in relation to gender, and will facilitate a more nuanced understanding of foundational texts, also across the language divide. Equally important, it will assist our analysis of more recent African narratives which no longer “hesitate to represent the nation in conjunction with fully developed female characterization” (206). Andrade is a must-have for any library with holdings in Africana and comparative literature, and should be essential reading for anybody studying and teaching African literatures. But before this sounds like yet another literary chore: *The Nation Writ Small* simply makes for great reading.

Works Cited

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