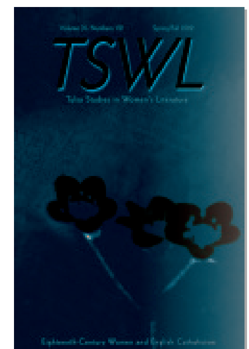
The Nation Writ Small: African Fictions and Feminisms, 1958-1988 by Susan Z. Andrade (review)



Samantha Pinto

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THE NATION WRIT SMALL: AFRICAN FICTIONS AND FEMINISMS, 1958–1988, by Susan Z. Andrade. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011. 272 pp. $89.95 cloth; $24.95 paper.

In a 2003 interview, the spectacular multi-genre Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo responds with her trademark honesty to a question about silence and African women:

> [African Women] are not silent at all. It is true they are not marching, but if we talk about silence in terms of people who do not talk, it is not here. These women are talking all the time . . . [I]f the women in my stories are articulate, it is because that is the only type of women I grew up among. And I learnt those first feminist lessons in Africa from African women.[1]

Susan Andrade's important new book, *The Nation Writ Small*, is a response in the vein of Aidoo's above critique, one that attempts to address and correct a critical silencing of African feminist writing by asserting an impressive genealogy of political presence in novels from the latter half of the twentieth century. Though other feminist critics have taken up this body of work and its trenchant critiques of gender politics (most notably Florence Stratton's 1994 *Contemporary African Literature and the Politics of Gender*), Andrade seeks to claim African feminist fiction as literature about politics at large, particularly national politics. She persuasively argues that "readers who hope to understand the relation of women to politics face the task of developing new forms of literacy, new means of understanding these novels' mode of political representation" (p. 36). Her fine close readings of canonical African feminist texts—from the works of Nigerian author Flora Nwapa to Algerian novelist Assia Djebar—perform this new way of reading the links between feminism and decolonization.

Andrade recovers the category of the "political"—and the national—for feminist novelists, partially by asserting that the personal is political by way of allegory. Though many postcolonial critics may bristle at a recovery of Fredric Jameson's infamous assertion that all third-world novels are national allegories, Andrade does a thoughtful and not uncritical renegotiation of his argument; she finds the structure of national allegory useful, namely, when turned toward early African feminist novels that are so often overlooked in criticism of the politics of decolonization.[2] Rather than pigeonhole "women's writing" as only about women, *The Nation Writ Small* thinks through how politics is gendered in works like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and Nwapa's *Efuru* (1966), which she reads alongside the Igbo Women's War of 1929 as a touchstone for Nigerian feminism that informs the domestic and national politics that surface in the novels (and reverberate in such second generation works as Buchi Emecheta's classic, *The Joys of Motherhood*, 1979). In what I see

as the most paradigmatic chapter of the book, "The Loved and the Left," Andrade reads Ousmane Sembène's *Xala* (1973) against Mariama Bâ's *Une Si Longue Lettre* (1979; *So Long a Letter*, 1981)—as well as Bâ's less revered compatriot Aminata Sow Fall's novel *La Grève des Bàttu* (1979; *The Beggar's Strike*, 1986). She claims these texts as feminist allegories of the state but also analyzes Bâ's higher stakes in the gendering of African nationalism itself—as a cautionary romance narrative that dares to imagine individuality as a mode of citizenship for women in Senegal (p. 113). This is, perhaps not surprisingly, followed up by two final chapters that explore the bildungsroman as a potentially feminist site of national revision, including a complex reading of the place of sexuality and desire in Tsitsi Dangarembga's *Nervous Conditions* (1988) that I thought could be an even more integral part of the chapter's argument.

Andrade's inclusive, revisionist moves here—she includes Anglophone and Francophone, male- and female-authored, Northern and Sub-Saharan African texts—reveal what I think of as her book's greatest strength; in many ways, she is challenging not just how we as critics write about "women's writing" and feminist politics but how we teach African women's writing differently than we do the canonical male texts of the field. In her recovery of allegory, she calls on us to "attempt reading practices that includ[e] the unsaid," questioning what we look for when reading "political commitment" in the African novel (pp. 202, 203). That critical question should challenge all of us to rethink the silences we may maintain, especially in our classrooms, that limit the possible terrain of women's writing. While we may not all wish for or privilege women writers to engage more explicitly in the "macropolitics" that nationalism hails—we might, for example, think through what happens when we read "politics" outside the national, and outside of the novel, as political and cultural genres—Andrade's book asks us to make sure that we practice comparative feminist reading as a remapping of the definitions of nation, nationalism, decolonization, and the political (p. 207).

Samantha Pinto
Georgetown University

NOTES

[1] "An Interview with Ama Ata Aidoo: 'I Learnt my First Feminist Lessons in Africa,'" by María Frías, *Revista Estudios Ingleses*, 16 (2003), 27.

[2] Fredric Jameson, "Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text*, 15 (1986), 65-88.