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

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In “West African Fiction and Film” at Morehouse College, upper level students, most of them English majors, are not only engaging in literary studies to sharpen their analytical skills and to expand their international perspectives—the students at one of the nation’s oldest HBCUs are also fulfilling an integral goal of the College’s mission: to learn about the heritage of African-Americans through the study of Africa and the diaspora. At an all-male African American college, we are particularly concerned with the roles and status of men in Africa as we discuss one of the central themes of the course, feminist and womanist perspectives in African fiction.

By reading novels such as Mariama Bâ’s *So Long a Letter* and Buchi Emecheta’s *The Joys of Motherhood*, students at Morehouse learn of the oppression of women by men in Senegal and Nigeria and by the colonial regimes. They arrive at typical paradigms such as the “double oppression” of women by African patriarchy and European colonial patriarchy. Adapting the well-known Du Boisian existential paradigm,

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 the feminist movement, largely stemming from Euro-American inattention, from feminism’s foundations to the “second wave,” to Marcus’s third category vis-à-vis women of Africana, Asia, Latin American, and Caribbean descent. In *Womanism and African Consciousness*, Mary E. Modupe Kolawole, draws on the comments of Daphne Williams Ntiri: “For years Africana women have found themselves in a serious ideological predicament. In the absence of viable organized women’s groups they have been invited to embrace feminism as an instrument of emancipation and as a new-found source of empowerment and status-building. Unfortunately, the majority of Africana women on public platforms have rejected feminism for a

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 domination, and be open to charges of negating the subjectivity and agency of the colonized, thus textually replicating the repressive operations of colonialism" (462). Emblematic of the epistemological groundwork put in place by the Eighties boom of

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 and methodological dilemma applies to current debates in African Studies that reevaluate roles of feminism in Africa.

Important research in recent decades overturns the misconception that feminism is a Western invention that arrives in Africa in postcolonial contexts. The debate over the history of African women’s resistance may be framed by opposing points of view on the Igbo of southeastern Nigeria. While contemporary theorists are rightfully quick to point out the danger of conflating the cultures of African ethnic groups (keeping in mind the diversity of a continent with some 1,500 languages), it is precisely the question of cultural comparison that is at stake—stemming from the tendency by critics, African and non-African, to theorize approaches to the diversity of African (women’s) experience. Kamane Okonjo’s widely recognized work on the dual-sex political system of the Igbo shows that of the two monarchs in various communities, the *obi* and *omu*, only the former, the male head of the community, survived under British colonialism; however, the role *omu*, the “acknowledged mother of the whole community” (47), has been reestablished since independence. Women’s exclusion from politics must be seen as a result of the single-sex power structures imposed by colonialism. Okonjo also asserts, however, that the “existence of dual-sex systems in West Africa is particularly interesting because most West African societies are patrilineal and patrilocal. As elsewhere, men rule and dominate” (45).

In *Re-Inventing 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 can go through a ceremony to replace a father, becoming a "male daughter.") Drawing upon Chekh Anta Diop's *The Cultural Unity of Black Africa and Precolonial Black Africa*, she contrasts the egalitarianism of African matriarchy to the violence and oppression of the origins of patriarchy, which Diop traces to Greece and Rome. Further, she engages the socialist perspective, building upon the work of Marx and Engels, including the latter's *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*, written in 1884 after Marx's death with significant use of his notes. Amadiume emphasizes that "oppression arose alongside the division of society into classes and the development of private property. To Engels, this resulted in the world-historic defeat of the female sex—the defeat of mother-right and the establishment of family" (115).

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 (1979), Salome Nnoromele writes, “I find it troubling that even as African women are beginning to speak for themselves and to write about their lives, the popular misconception of African women as slaves, brutalized and abused by a patriarchal society, still overwhelmingly defines Western critical attitudes” (178). The “double bind” of the postcolonial feminist critic drawn at the outset thus remains integral to the analysis of African fiction, especially to the case of what is often labeled African “feminist” or “womanist” fiction, as anthropological work is brought to bear on the themes in the novels. She implores readers to investigate the important work that has been written on Igbo women and culture, by authors such as Denise Paulme, Kamene Okonjo, and Emma Nina Mba. In defending an ethical anthropological approach to African literature, Christopher L. Miller points out the “inescapable epistemological paradox...that access to non-Western systems is mediated through a discipline that has been invented and controlled by the West” (21); however, he argues that without engaging with and overcoming the paradox, African systems of thought cannot exist on their own epistemological plane. While the aforementioned anthropological studies are written by African authors, not Western ones, what must always be kept in mind is the complex epistemological questions that follow from fictional ethnographic textualities, as Nnoromele’s thesis on the novel evinces:

Rather than seeing the protagonist of the novel, Nnu Ego, as the quintessential African woman or mother, I ask in what ways are Nnu Ego's experiences and responses to events in her life representative of the conditions of African women? To what extent do cultural expectations contribute to her plight? Is there room for a contemplation of individual responsibility? In asking and evaluating these questions, I argue that *The Joys of Motherhood* is not a construction of the universal African woman. As Obioma Nnaemeka states, such a concept as universal African woman does not exist. Reality for African women is neither homogenous nor embodied in a

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 multiculturalist perspective as a writer in exile, one who claims, “As for my way of seeing things and acting, I am fifty percent pure African and the other fifty percent is Spanish”—and as a writer, “one hundred percent my own person” (295). This ironic comment on cultural hybridity answers critics who tend to place the postcolonial intellectual in the hackneyed “between-two-worlds” frame, for exile is not a prerequisite for both local and global insight. *Ekomo* is a novel that demands to be read as a chronicle of social forces such as colonialism and patriarchal oppression, as well as a particular treatment of questions of subjectivity, individual expression, and aesthetics.

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 Ngûgĩ 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 de sentimientos anticolonialistas; 13), advanced by Vicente Granados in his Prologue to first edition, has been assailed by Adam Lifshey, who points out that the "extended lament for the death of longstanding tribal and continental orders" (183) leads to the clear interpretation of the novel's attack on colonialism. One of the primary modes of this opposition to Spanish hegemony, the nuanced depiction of Fang village life outside the colonial metropole and the epic journey into the forest, situates Nsue's work within the context of ethnographic representation to which it in many ways belongs—or perhaps, better stated, from which such a work cannot escape.

When Nnanga and Ekomo, in search of a cure for his illness, consult the *curandero* (traditional healer), he tells the myths of the first Fang people and the first

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 primordial 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, orig. text).

The contrapuntal references to Nnanengoo and to Nchama support a reading of Nnanga not as an African Eve, but as a modern critique of the patriarchal ideology of the eternal woman, the deceptive femme fatal, of the biblical myth of the Fall. Paloma de Fuego (Dove of Fire), Nnganga’s sobriquet, is the symbol of peaceful relations on earth

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 is itself menaced by colonial incursion. If myths of the first couple surround the protagonists, as Aponte-Ramos and Lewis posit, thematic correspondences resonate with Senegalese women's novels such as Ken Bugul's *Le Baobab fou* and Amina Sow Fall's *L'Appel des arènes* and *Douceurs de bercail*. "All three novels portray the village as a garden of Eden, a place of innocence and dreaming," writes Chantal Thompson. "The Fall occurs when the protagonists partake of the fruit of Western knowledge and move to the city, where the thorns and thistles of alienation infest the soul" (91).

In *Ekomo*, however, the *ceiba* does not double as the forbidden Tree of Knowledge, but like the baobab, symbolizes the Tree of Life, one that has little to do with Jewish, Muslim, or Christian myths, although Nnanga is Protestant. Along with the *abaá*, or palaver-house, the *ceiba* represents Fang cosmology and mythology as well as its contemporary social structures, the community's palaver, its means of debate and negotiation with change. There is no recourse to an Edenic or prelapsarian African Village found in Bugul's and Fall's work, but a village, a couple, menaced by a curse, which carries within it traces of both colonialism and sexism. The couple's epic search for a cure—for Ekomo's wound as well as the wound of his mistreatment of his faithful wife—is not then a simple repetition of myth. Nnanga "realizes that my life with Ekomo has been nothing more than a long chain of new events" (orig. text, 114). What *Ekomo*

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

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