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A feminist “family drama”

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A Feminist “Family Drama”: *Stories of Women: Gender and Narrative in the Postcolonial Nation*

Elleke Boehmer

239 pages, 2005, \$79.95 USD (hardcover)

Manchester University Press, Manchester & New York.

Reviewed by Chantal Zabus, Université Paris 13

A prolific theoretician, at ease with her self-image as a feminist working from her Western platform, Elleke Boehmer weaves together her concerns with postcolonial narrative and gender with the idea of the nation in a fast-paced, dense monograph. Lassoing texts into her own symbolic system, Boehmer appears like an academic cow-girl or, rather, one of Chinua Achebe’s “girls at war” from his famed 1960s short story, which she uses to emblemize a gendered configuration of the postcolonial nation. Boehmer’s study joins a brace of other such gender-and-nation studies by women critics, including Susan Andrade, Neloufer de Mel, Marjorie Howes, Deniz Kandyoti, Anne McClintock, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, Joan W. Scott, Florence Stratton, Kumkum Sangari, and Sangeeta Ray.

In her attempt at identifying blind spots in postcolonial theory that still treats gender as subsidiary to race, Boehmer shows how men have thus far sired nations. In signaling the end of the monologic nation, she takes to task the most fervent advocate of the fictive nation, Benedict Anderson, for failing to address the sexual makeup of the imagined community. Yet, Boehmer uncritically endorses his analysis of, among others, the failure of national liberation struggles (51) and his construction of nationalist imaginings as following a “symbolic grammar” (70). She spares Homi K. Bhabha and Edward Said but denounces the male bias in such writers as Joe Cleary, Partha Chatterjee, Amilcar Cabral, Frantz Fanon, and Salman Rushdie.

Using as her postulate that stories *embody* nations, Boehmer opposes Fredric Jameson’s gender-blind theory of narrative and his confinement of nation-informing stories to the Third World, for “many hail from the First World” (12). Indeed, Boehmer sees her own creative work as a South African, Oxford-trained, U.K.-based writer as part of a womanly continuum that comprises other women writers who use the novel as a genre that helps perform national identities.

Stories of Women falls into three parts, by the author’s own reckoning: first, Chapters 1 through 4 exemplify the gendered formation of the nation in texts, which herald a *family drama*, after Freud’s 1909 phrase, itself embodied in “alpha-male” images like “father of the nation” or “son of the soil” (from Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi through Jomo

Kenyatta and Kenneth Kaunda, to Michael Manley and Nelson Mandela), as opposed to metaphors of motherlands, Mother Africa, the Indian Bharat Mata (Chapter 1). While Ngugi wa Thiong'o (Chapter 2) and Chinua Achebe (Chapter 3) in their later works set out to construct historically redemptive roles for their women characters, which are deemed as objectifying as the iconic mother roles of the past, Chapter 4 concerns the independence autobiography by male leaders such as Jawaharlal Nehru and Mandela, Kwame Nkrumah and Kenyatta, as their "ideological patriliney" intensifies the national family plot.

The second, unmarked part, made of Chapters 5 and 6 around "Stories of Women and Mothers" and "[the adolescent] Daughters of the House," deals with the space Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Christina Stead, Shashi Deshpande, and Carol Shields have claimed for themselves in the male-authored national family script.

The final part, which groups the last five chapters, deals with the re-imagining of nationality, subjectivity, and sexuality, as a response to the disillusionment of the *postcolony*, after Achille Mbembe's apt phrase. Chapter 7 focuses on postcolonial attempts to transfigure the native/colonized body by way of the "talking cure" of narrative in the fiction of Nuruddin Farah, Bessie Head, and Michelle Cliff whereas Chapter 8 deals with the exposure, by second-generation male writers like Chenjerai Hove and Dambudzo Marechera as well as Ben Okri, of the nation as traumatic fiction. Chapter 9 examines the fin-de-siècle construction of Sarojini Naidu as Indian female poet in the 1890s and her 1990s homologue Arundhati Roy, whom Boehmer presents unfairly and disrespectfully as a "neo-orientalist" (163) "Indo-chick" (164), after Graham Huggan's "Indo-chic." Chapter 10 extends the discussion of the interrelationship of gender and nation into the still little-explored area of same-sex desire in the fiction of two Zimbabwean women writers, Tsitsi Dangarembga and Yvonne Vera. The final chapter returns to the question of how Vera and Roy re-emblematize the nation in their work. The governing principle that traverses broadly the second half of the book is that women writers view the nation "not as a static but as a relational space" (17), a premise that Françoise Lionnet had already put forward.

Despite the heavily cross-referenced chapters, Boehmer sometimes writes in a critical vacuum as is the case with J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* or Ben Okri's *The Famished Road*. Also, what is missing, when discussing language, is the work of Bill Ashcroft and when discussing the Prospero/Miranda dyad, the numerous works on Shakespearean appropriations, including my own *Tempests after Shakespeare* (2002) (Boehmer's most recent reference is to Donaldson's 1992 article, p. 123). Overall, there is a sweeping sense of marshaling too much material for one's own good.

Another problem with the book is that 10 of its 12 chapters have previously been published as articles in the 1990s in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* and *Novel* or as chapters from edited books such as *From Commonwealth to Postcolonial, Chinua Achebe: A*

Celebration, Motherlands, and English Studies in Transition. The book also contains more recent articles published in *African Studies* (1999) and reprinted in *English Studies in Africa* (2000), as well as in edited books such as *Small Worlds* (2001). The most recent article is certainly “Tropes of Yearning and Dissent: The Troping of Desire in Yvonne Vera and Tsitsi Dangarembga” published in the *Journal of Commonwealth Literature* (2003), which was also published under a slightly different title—“Versions of Yearning”—but with the same content in *Body, Sexuality, and Gender: Versions and Subversions in African Literatures 1*, edited by F. Veit-Wild & D. Naguschewski by Rodopi in the same year as this book (2005), in which it is taken up again under “Tropes of Yearning and Dissent” with “Inflection” instead of “Troping” in the subtitle. This detour through the publishing history of the individual chapters, with the last one unacknowledged, points to the book’s major weakness. Boehmer’s own question: “Aren’t there elements of this criticism that create a profound sense of *déjà vu*?” (164) could have been my own. Yet, the book ends up being larger than the sum of its chapters and, in its critical flair and know-how, consolidates Boehmer’s earlier work on iconic women and their nationalist creators.