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Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature by Carole Boyce Davies, Anne Adams Graves

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Ngambika: Studies of Women in African Literature. Carole Boyce Davies, Anne Adams Graves, eds. Trenton, N.J. Africa World. 1986. xiv + 298 pages, ill. \$35 (\$11.95 paper).

Prior to the publication of Lloyd Brown's *Women Writers in Black Africa* (1981), Kenneth Little's *Sociology of Urban Women's Image in African Literature* (1980; see *WLT* 55:3, p. 518), and Davies and Graves's *Ngambika* (1986), African feminist criticism existed merely in the form of occasional articles on or interviews with African women writers. The predominantly male-centered literary criticism had tended to regard the comparatively small but significant number of African women writers and critics as the parentheses and footnotes of male-oriented, male-centered African literary history. As a new generation of critics and writers emerge, most of them women, it is evident that a view of African literature and criticism through feminist lenses must be reckoned with. Hence, *Ngambika*.

Appropriately titled and illustrated (note the critical head-and-back-load balancing metaphor), *Ngambika* is a collection of scholarly essays by women and men which attempt to articulate a legitimized redefinition of the feminine presence without which the developing canon(s) of African literature must be judged incomplete. Its claimed objective "involves both a rereading of the earlier writings, produced entirely by women, and a balanced reading of the more recent writings by women and by men."

Although the anthology is by no means comprehensive, its eighteen essays are representative. Geographically, they cover West, East, Central, and South Africa, and the Maghreb. Topologically, they span the precolonial, colonial, and contemporary periods, the traditional, and the modern. Thematically, they scan the traditional and the modern, the mythological and the folkloric, as well as the rural and the urban in the genres of short story, novel, drama, poetry, and biography.

Ngambika's focus is, cautiously, on the literature's presentation of the feminine presence and its persistent neglect in male-centered criticism of African literature. It suggests a much-needed literary framework for research and analysis on the ever-recurring question of the status of African women which, to date, has been heavily sociopolitically oriented. The introductory essay, "Introduction: Feminist

Consciousness and African Literary Criticism," is particularly valuable to developing an African feminist critical theory. Its sensitive and insightful "review of the literature" on African feminism and the development of a carefully delineated distinction between African feminist theory and Western feminist theory set the critical framework for both the textual and contextual perspective of the essays that follow, and the thematic "load balancing" thrust of the anthology. *Ngambika* is a welcome "balance" to the corpus of female-authored, male-critiqued literature on African women, and to the host of attendant research possibilities.

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