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Claiming Her Authority From Life: Twenty Years of African Women's Literary Criticism

"Why write about female African writers at all?" The question that introduced the very first critical study of the subject bears review and reconsideration now twenty years after it was raised. The Guadeloupean novelist/critic Maryse Condé articulated it in her 1972 Présence Africaine article "Three Female Writers in Modern Africa: Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo and Grace Ogot."¹ The question and its article served notice to the literary world of the phenomenon of literary texts produced by African women. Of course, there had appeared publications by African women previously, for example, by Ghanaian-Sierra Leonian Adelaide Casely-Hayford, since the 1940s and '50s. However, the 1960s novels and other writings to which Condé's article calls attention are now recognized, with twenty years' hindsight, as the beginnings of a sustained current in African literature that has by now seen the evolution of two generations.

At that moment, 1972, Condé delineated the issues in terms of the following questions:

Does this mean that one assumes that a female writer has, as a female, a particular message to deliver? That her universe and preoccupations differ from those of a male writer? Does this mean, in short, that one accepts the widely-spread belief that a woman is an altogether different being from a man whose place and part to play in the world have been defined by her very nature?

Answering her own question, Maryse says:

Far from it. I simply believe that the personality and the inner reality of African women have been hidden under such a heap

of myths, so-called ethnological theories, vapid generalizations and patent untruths that it might be interesting to study what they have to say for themselves when they decide to speak.

Soon after Conde's introduction to what would develop as the sub-field of African women's literary criticism, numerous other scholars who had established reputations in African men's literary criticism (not labeled as such, of course) ventured into the emerging sub-field. By the mid-1980s, when dozens of African women were being published and generating critical studies, the respected journal *African Literature Today* devoted an issue to the subject. In his introduction to *Women in African Literature Today*, the editor, doyen of African literary criticism, Eldred Jones, claims to argue for the respect due to Africa's women writers, but subverts his own intent by making a patronizing, stereotyped mis-reading out of the job:

Just as some critics complained that it was possible to predict the concerns of almost every African novel of the 1950s and 1960s, so it might be possible to forecast the themes of works by African women writers. In fact, by giving the female point of view on issues like polygamy, marriage, love, motherhood and relations between the sexes in general, writers like Mariama Bâ, Aminata Sow Fall and Ama Ata Aidoo have considerably extended the range of the novel's concerns and we can surely hope that the day will come when, having put all this behind her, having corrected the misconceptions and set the record straight, the African woman writer will be free to follow her creative impulse and write about what she pleases.²

Speaking of "correct[ing] the misconceptions and set[ting] the record straight," it is lamentable that the tone-setting introduction to such an important volume should perpetuate the very misconceptions and skew the very record to which Professor Jones refers. No reader of Aminata Sow Fall can 'accuse' her of writing on "marriage, love, and motherhood": any reading of Ama Ata Aidoo, especially by the time of