Male Feminist Fiction
Literary Subversions of a Gender-Biased Script

The treatment of gender and gender relations in contemporary African literature has undergone a transformation. Cultural shifts in African societies have created an atmosphere in which gender is no longer a submerged category, and even male authors are dealing with gender more and more explicitly. Discarding the ambivalent heroines of earlier works, many more recent African novels by male authors portray the search by female characters for self-definition as a progressive development that affects both their external and their internal lives. What seems to be at stake is a gradual coming-to-terms by male authors with the recognition, understanding, and determination of changing gender relations and with the whole process of women changing things for themselves. Writers such as the Somali Nuruddin Farah, the Tanzanian Abdulrazak Gurnah, the South African André Brink and the Nigerian Ben Okri are syncretic products of a modern, migrant world. Each of them has forged from their personal experiences and cultural development the complex meaning of what it is to be an African writer at the beginning of the twenty-first century. Their status as the new voice of African writing is evidence of a growth in cultural conscious-
ness that, among other subjects, treats of the epistemological changes surrounding the status of women in Africa.

Farah, Brink, Gurnah and Okri do not constitute a ‘generation’, nor do they occupy identical positions with regard to writing politics. On the one side, partaking in the mood of migrancy, hybridity and transculturalism of the English-writing diaspora, their novels bring a new dimension that broadens older African perspectives. On the other side, as male authors, they have occasioned a change in the orientation of African literature by engaging with women writers in an open-ended dialogue on gender. Although these authors belong to different generations and contexts in Africa, their latest works may be taken as paradigmatic of a new direction in recent African fiction, a direction that signals an important departure in the treatment of gender matters by male authors. Talking of them as a group, then, is not an attempt to fix them in a particular writing mode; it is, rather, a way of suggesting a contrastive organizing principle for what I call ‘male feminist writing’.

The most striking feature of any conceptualization of male feminist writing lies in the evident paradox that informs it. If feminism is, by antonomasia, an ideology, theory and technique characterized by its commitment to the struggle against all forms of patriarchy and sexism,¹ and if patriarchy, in the popular sense, is defined “as male domination and the power relationships by which men dominate women,”² how can men possibly be engaged with feminism? One could argue that female writers are not automatically authoritative on the subject of feminism, although to a certain extent the voice of the oppressed can be read as authoritative: a tale told from the point of view of the victim carries an indisputable weight of authority. In principle, men can be feminists, but they cannot be women. Under patriarchy, men will always speak from a different position than women and any analysis of male political and narrative strategies must take this difference into account. As Luce Irigaray says, “I will never be in a man’s place, a man will never be in mine.