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Review : Female identity in contemporary Zimbabwean fiction by Katrin Berndt.

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com) and its directors, Stainbank and Associates, are to be commended for putting together these beautifully bound collections. The publication of this book was made possible by the Department of Arts and Culture.

—ABDUL SAMED BEMATH
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Female Identity in Contemporary Zimbabwean Fiction

BY KATRIN BERNDT

Bayreuth African Studies 73. Bayreuth: Pia Thielmann and Eckhard Breiting, 2005.
285 pp. ISBN 3-927510-88-2 paper.

Katrin Berndt presents us with an encyclopedic overview of Zimbabwean fiction in English, and this is indeed the main strength of her intervention, *Female Identity in Contemporary Zimbabwean Fiction*. While the field of postcolonial cultural studies in general, and African literature in particular, continues to struggle with the definitions, implications, and ramifications of globalization, the categories of national literatures may seem to be an outdated rubric. As Berndt's study demonstrates, however, there is still some value to examining bodies of literature in national terms. Through comparative readings, Berndt's work brings to light the on-going conversation between books coming from the same national space. Her study examines Zimbabwean literature in English centrally concerned with female characters, whether written by men or women. For the sake of her argument, Berndt divides this corpus up into three main genres: the bildungsroman, the "metahistorical" novel, and the realistic/didactic novel. In each case, she examines what she identifies as the different "identity layers" of the female protagonists and argues that female identity in all of these genres resembles a palimpsest of often conflicting constructions of female identity that the female characters more or less successfully seek to negotiate.

While Berndt's work is helpful in tracing some of the literary lineages that shape contemporary Zimbabwean fiction, it can be a bit of a rough going at times due to both a lack of careful proofreading and a tendency to overexplain basic concepts of literary scholarship with which it is safe to assume most of her audience is familiar. For example, there is a twenty-page discussion (199–220) of the definition and role of "flat" characters, didacticism, and realistic fiction. Her larger argument about the correspondence between flat characters in realistic fiction and symbolic types in orature gets lost in the overly reductive and simplistic explanations of basic narrative theory. For example, her definition of Structuralism (203) adds little to contemporary debates about the advantages or disadvantages of structuralism as a mode of reading, and its relevance to her larger argument is unclear.

Female Identity in Contemporary Zimbabwean Fiction has both strengths and weaknesses: it is truly comprehensive in its overview of the primary literature it takes as its object of study, but it also rehearses some of the more common theoretical stances of the field. It rightly pays a great deal of attention to the now-canonical

figures of Zimbabwean literature (Dangarembga, Vera, and Hove) but limits the space given to an examination of the materials that readers are less likely to know about and in which they are much more likely to be interested. While *Female Identity in Contemporary Zimbabwean Fiction* can be theoretically reductive at times, it is a valuable resource for those looking to expand their readings in Zimbabwean fiction in English. It is also an indication that the study of African literature may still have something to gain by interrogating the framework of national literatures.

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Vernacular Palaver

BY MORADEWUN ADEJUNMOBI.

Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters Ltd, 2004.

x + 224 pp. ISBN 1-85359-772-2 cloth; ISBN 1-85359-772-4 paper.

Starting her book with a succinct analysis of the etymology of the word “palaver,” Moradewun Adejunmobi says that the term palaver in West African Pidgin English or Creole languages connotes “contentious discussion” (vii). She intends her *Vernacular Palaver* to “be a contribution to an often contentious discussion about vernacular in postcolonial world” (vii). But she approaches the debate over language from the angle of literary and cultural studies (viii) and sets out to shift attention to “the use of non-native languages from the construction of new sites of belonging” (54), for she sees that the debate has “foregrounded the function of language with regard to the specific ethnicity of historic mother tongue speakers over the fundamental operation of language in the formation of affiliations, ethnic or otherwise” (54).

Vernacular Palaver throughout its five chapters consequently explores the “general features and language practices” (176) of these new sites of belonging, emphatically highlighting how they are realized by means of non-native languages. Its cardinal, probing question recurring in various forms throughout its analysis can be said to be: “what kinds of fields of interaction and spaces of belonging are now being constituted through recourse” to non-native languages? (169). Her analysis designates European languages (the former colonizers’ languages) together with lingua francas, most notably Pidgin English, Creole French, Arabic, and Kiswahili, as languages of wider communication, while mother tongues communicate effectively only within territorially circumscribed units and networks unless they are learnt and used outside their own particular domains. She uses the term “vernacular” to describe language “in its function as a mother tongue” (2) and describes the language of wider communication as “a non-native language, a secondary language enabling those who have acquired this language to form networks that do not rely on residence in the same location and or communication in a shared mother tongue” (166). The language of wider communication is apparently Adejunmobi’s own invented terminology as her own tool to explore her own perspective on the palaver over language and identity.