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The Heinemann Book of African Women's Writing by Charlotte H. Bruner

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GENERAL AREA

The Heinemann Book of African Women's Writing. Charlotte H. Bruner, ed. Portsmouth, N.H. Heinemann. 1993. viii + 211 pages. \$10.95.

"Nwanyibu--woman carrying (something)," the theme of the 1991 annual conference of the African Literature Association in New Orleans, was a necessary commemorative ritual to honor decades of often-neglected, tokenized literary contributions of African women writers to African literature. Naturally, the names of the handful of well-known fiction writers, mostly novelists, dominated then, as they still do now: Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta, Grace Ogot, Rebecca Njau, Bessie Head, Mariama Ba, Ama Ata Aidoo, Assia Djebar of Algeria, and Nawal El Saadawi of Egypt. Although African women writers such as Adelaide Casely-Hayford and Mabel Dove Danquah had pioneered fiction writing by women long before the 1960s, they did not receive critical attention and acclaim until after the 1966 publication of Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*, which formally placed the female experience from African women writers' perspective on the literary map. Since then, numerous interviews with African women writers, critical assessments of their writings (specifically in the novel and the drama), and the occasional inclusion of their more popularly known novels in women's-studies courses are gradually exposing African women writers to international audiences.

Over the last decade, Charlotte Bruner's two-volume anthologizing efforts have ensured that African women's writing will indeed continue to "unwind like a long thread." Gathered in her first volume, *Unwinding Threads: Writing by Women in Africa* (1983; see WET 58:4, p. 650), and now in its companion piece, *African Women's Writing*, is a representational mosaic of forty-five short stories by forty-one known and hitherto unknown women writers from North, West, East, and Southern Africa. Where the earlier volume featured stories by "pioneer" women writers through the early 1960s, the later one showcases selections by a new generation of writers from the 1960s to the present. A unique feature of the new volume is the inclusion of stories in their English original as well as English translations of stories from the French and Portuguese by writers who had been writing in those languages but were hitherto unexposed to an English-speaking readership.

Grouped within the four major geographic divisions of Africa, the topics and themes of the stories range from family, death, politics, religion, and war to the problem of polygyny and "the overlay of imposed colonial beliefs

and values." Whereas West African women writers focus on the contradictory and multifaceted position of women, their East African counterparts script the anguish of dispossession from ancestral land. As South African women writers preoccupy themselves with the pervasive issue of racial oppression, North African women writers shed light on their views of the emancipated woman under the Muslim tradition.

Reading the individual stories, one wonders why these writers had not been published previously. Judging from the brilliance of Gisele Halimi's "God on Probation," the excerpt from Tsitsi Dangarembga's well-crafted novel *Nervous Conditions* (1988; see *WLT* 64:2, p. 353), Bessie Head's short, dense "Women from Africa," and Andree Chedid's poignant "Death in Slow Motion," a wager that there are many more short-story writers and "stories" by African women like these waiting to be "discovered" would be appropriate. Bruner's far-reaching efforts imply as much.

Unlike many ambitious anthologies whose "smorgasbord" nature tends to limit their capability to "tell the full story," Bruner's two volumes are remarkably representational, making no claims to being inclusive. Happily, her efforts not only have focused literary lenses on the short story genre but also have begun to chip away at the "tip of the iceberg" in placing the full spectrum of African women writers in the mainstream of African and world literatures. Without doubt, *The Heinemann Book of African Women's Writing* and its companion piece can claim importance as significant and accessible contributions to understanding African literature.

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