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Nadezda Obradovic. African Rhapsody: Short Stories of the Contemporary African Experience.

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General Area

African Rhapsody: Short Stories of the Contemporary African Experience. Nadežda Obradović, ed. Chinua Achebe, foreword. New York: Doubleday. 1994. xxiii + 353 pages. \$12.95. ISBN 0385468164.

African Rhapsody, an anthology containing the work of twenty-five contemporary writers, prides itself on its diversity of topics from sixteen countries of North, South, East, and West Africa. In this fine harvest authentic stories are told by African writers about African characters and the overwhelming realities of their lives in Africa. Where similar anthologies have focused primarily on stories written in English with a few token translations from the French, *African Rhapsody* gives breadth not only to stories written originally in English but also to translated stories—five from French, three from Arabic, and one from Portuguese. The foreword by Chinua Achebe, itself a concise critical essay on the short story as a genre, situates the short story not only as the forerunner of the African novel, the “convenient bridge from oral to written literature,” but also as a genre whose appeal resonates with African writers.

The volume’s striking uniqueness is its mosaic of stories translated from various indigenous and European languages, spanning the entire continent. Indeed, along with the anthologizing efforts of Charlotte Bruner and others, Nadežda Obradović’s collection contributes to the unknown, potentially untapped creativity of the African continent, bringing together both familiar and hitherto unfamiliar names.

The editor’s choice of *African Rhapsody* as the collection’s title is apt, mirroring perhaps advertently or inadvertently the state of Africa today. The engaging metaphor not only delineates the stories’ pervasive atmosphere of pain and pathos but also appropriately captures

the qualities of the epic, recitation, sound, improvisation—all the characteristics of storytelling in African oral tradition. Also, the simple yet engaging assemblage of the volume, particularly its overlay of each writer’s biographical sketch on a traditional art motif immediately preceding each story, is reminiscent of an African traditional art display.

The theme of birth and death holds these stories together, making them all too human to be uniquely African. Still, the pervasive atmosphere of racism, colonialism, neocolonialism, sexism, and class oppression undeniably makes them recognizably African. Like the themes, which range from the cruelties of apartheid and the terrors of incest to the betrayal of innocence, war, and death, the style are broadly diverse. From Ken Saro-Wiwa’s experimental epistle “Africa Kills Her Sun,” for example, to the pathos and humor of Bloke Modisane’s story “The Dignity of Begging,” the terse, pathetic humor of Ali Deb’s “Three-Piece Suit,” the lucidness of Tayeb Salih’s “Handful of Dates,” and the poignant painfulness of Henri Lopes’s tale “The Advance” and Sindiwe Magona’s “It Was Easter the Day I Went to Netreg,” *African Rhapsody* chronicles a discordant recital that is not too far from the overwhelming realities of the lives of Africans today.

The volume’s obvious shortcoming is its paucity of selections by women writers—two of twenty-five. The editor’s reasoning that “new literary names such as Tsitsi Damgarembga have not cultivated the short story as a genre” is ill-informed, since African women writers, well known and otherwise, are indeed cultivating the short story. Obviously Obradović is unaware of the new crop of forty-one African women short-story writers anthologized in Charlotte Bruner’s two volumes: *Unwinding Threads: Writing by Women in Africa* (1983; see *WLT* 58:4, p. 650) and *African Women’s Writing* (1993; see *WLT* 68:1, p. 169). This shortcoming, however, is not enough to keep *African Rhapsody* from occupying a place of importance in the growing corpus of single-volume African short-story anthologies published in English.

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