

# Canonising our daughters

**T**HIS has at least two marks of distinction to win the attention of any serious student of contemporary Nigerian literature, women and African studies. One, it is the first sustained book-length study of the tradition of the Nigerian novel by women spanning twenty-eight years (1966 - 1994). Second, it is perhaps the most significant theory of narrative by a Nigerian female critic on the most significant theory of narrative by a Nigerian female critic on the novel genre to date. Up till now, Lloyd W. Brown's *Women Writers in Black Africa* (1981) and Oladele Taiwo's *Female Novelists of Modern Africa* (1984) have been noted as standard reference texts by readers of African women's literature, South of Sahara. These and other secondary texts are mainly descriptive of feminist or female narrative and historical about the condition of African womanhood.

It is possible to say that Ogunyemi has succeeded in mapping 'a calendar of fiction', to use Hortense Spillers' phrase, of a visible and as yet developing tradition of the female literary discourse in Nigeria. Ogunyemi's project is both derivative and subversive. It is derivative because the idea of a vernacular theory originally belongs to the black critical repertoire of Houston A Baker Jr. while the trope of 'signifying' which Ogunyemi appropriates so dexterously, is central to Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s theoretical project in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). It is subversive because it reproduces these 'masculinist' terms and others in order to reprocess them for a womanist cause.

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**Chikwenye O. Ogunyemi, AFRICAN WO/MAN PALAVA: THE NIGERIAN NOVEL BY WOMEN, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 1996, xiii + 353 pp.**

However, the unmistakable resonance of major terms of mainstream black literary theory is suppressed to a second echo by Ogunyemi's original weaving of a Nigerian womanist canon which essentially figures states of womanhood or motherhood in culture as a symbolic means of understanding and interpreting our world.

*African Wo/Man Palava* challenges the chauvinist strategies of reading the African novel in which female figuration is typically realised as goddess, mammywatta, prostitute, temptress, pariah or outcast, or evil beauty genie; it challenges the phallogocentric male-dominated literary tradition; and ultimately, the text channels a radical and restorative reception of female writing (portraiture) within the broad canon of African literature.

Central to this reading of female experience is the concept of *womanism* (apparently preferred to the more restrictive and provincial idea of Western feminism) which emphasised understanding sexist relationships - affiliation rather than separatism, equity rather than domination, and dialogue rather than division. Ogunyemi pragmatically conceives of African womanism as a 'mother-centred ideology, with its focus on caring - familial, communal, national, and international' (114). Thus, part of Ogunyemi's avowed propositions is to claim equal space

and opportunity in the horizontality of the literary scene, an insistence on the acknowledgement of women writing as the more objective, the 'other' voice which completes the tenor of human experience and literary expression (... *stories, left untold or hitherto distastefully told by men, now set down in writing to counter the ephemeral nature of women's traditional orature*, p.4).

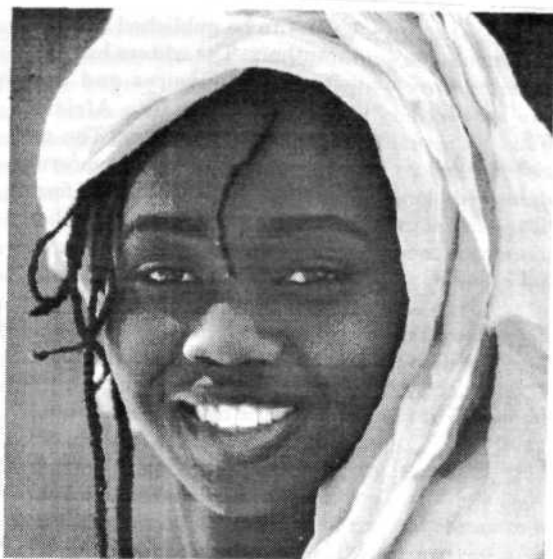
The grounding metaphors of *kwenu* and *aso ebi*, used as title headings of the two sections of this book, are a projection of the communality and filiation, the commonality and collective association of female experience in traditional and modern Nigerian society. The details of living may differ, but there seems to be a parallel, embroidered (textual-textile) pattern in the African woman's experience. Also, the metaphor of *lappa*, earlier employed by Anne Adams, is here deployed to describe the multiplicity and commonplaceness of female function and existence.

In the main, *Africa Wo/Ma Palava* historicizes and defines the nature and conception of female writing and orature in Africa; it chooses as focus the status of the women-mother goddess in popular myths, legends and folktales as well as stereotyped (mis) conceptions and reception of the female figure in Nigerian society; and it

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<< unveils the theoretical basis of an African womanist ideology with its intervening act of palaver-palava. Most practically, *Africa Wo/Man Palava* places eight Nigerian female writers and thirty novels in contemporary perspective, the texts as counter-narratives which respond to their male predecessors and contemporaries. These include the pioneering work of Flora Nwapa, the 'juju fiction' of Adaora Lily Ulasi, the 'been-to' novels of Funmilayo Fakunle, Ifeoma Okoye, Zaynab Alkali, Eno Obong and Simi Bedford. Essentially, the new writers are read as constructive activists in nation-building and their novels as narratives of nationhood.

The absence of one, if not two, remarkable new female novelists in the developing literary canon cannot however be ignored. Omowunmi Segun's *The Third Dimple* (1992), winner of the prose fiction prize of the Association of Nigerian Authors in 1991 and Mobolaji Adenubi's *Splendid* (1995), winner of the more prestigious All-Africa Okigbo Prize for Literature and a high contender for last year's Noma Award could have enriched the palaver sauce in



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the same brief but insightful manner that Martina Nwakoby's *A House Divided* (1985) is treated.

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## Women's voices, Dynamic voices

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TOYIN Adewale-Nduka & Omowunmi Segun,  
ed. *BREAKING THE SILENCE*, Lagos, The  
Women Writers of Nigeria, 1996. 142 pages.

**A**T a time when many observers and critics cry out that the Nigerian literary scene needs a fresh vitality, new voices and new vision have been injected into our literary production. The new anthology of short stories *Breaking the Silence* is a unique addition to existing anthologies of African short stories and a turning point in the nation's literary canon. Its uniqueness is revealed in the title as well as the editors, two

emergent female talents and the publishers, Women Writers of Nigeria. It is a landmark in diverse other ways. Since the emergence of women pioneers in the 60s, the previously male dominated literary scene has revealed the quest for feminine self-expression. The first generation of women writers including Flora Nwapa, Zulu Sofola, Molara Ogundipe-Leslie and Mabel Segun have progressively attempted the crusade of self-assertion to bring to life the famous Yoruba proverb, 'Owo ara eni la fi ntu

iwa ara eni se.' A second generation followed in the steps of their precursors to highlight the female intervention in Nigerian literature. Ifeoma Okoye, Tess Onwueme and Zaynab Alkali punctuated the creative arena to continue the womanist tradition. The third phase of Nigerian women's writing has begun at a crucial moment. With the death of Nwapa and Sofola, some critics are beginning to hold their breath as they wonder about the continuity of women's literary creativity in Nigeria to fill the gaps.

*Breaking the Silence* is a timely assurance both in terms of the collection of new, young and undocumented women writers and the image and scope of the anthology. Apart from two contributors, Mabel Segun and Ifeoma Okoye, the other seventeen writers are relatively new comers who made their debut in the last few years. Indeed, some of the stories are the

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