

### Charlotte Bruner: "Unwinding Threads"

"Women writers in Africa have been fewer in number, have published later, and generally have received less critical attention and acclaim than their male counterparts. But women's fiction which is both emotionally compelling and artistically excellent does exist". (Preface, p. XIV). With these lines, Charlotte Bruner gives us in a nut-shell the description of the situation of the African women writers, which has indeed been far too neglected on all levels – writer, reader, critic – due to various factors and conditions exposed in the book under study. Thanks to this excellent compilation of writings by women from various parts in Africa and to her critical and analytical introductory notes for each section and each writer, Charlotte Bruner has greatly remedied a deplorable situation.

The first part of the book deals with Western Africa. The first woman novelist to be published in London in the sixties was the Nigerian Flora Nwapa, who received international recognition. An excerpt from one of her novels: *This is Lagos* (1971) gives us an idea of one of the themes Nwapa has greatly developed in her work, namely that of women in traditional rural polygamous societies. Then came the Ghanaian, Ama Ata Aidoo whose short story "The Message" reprinted here, deals with women's reactions to change, a theme much developed in her writing. Buchi Emecheta, who like Nwapa is from Nigeria, first writes about her experience as a foreign wife in England as well as women's oppression in Nigeria. "A Man Needs Many Wives" is an excerpt from one of her novels: *The Joys of Motherhood* (1979).

Although rich in important male writers, Francophone Western Africa did not produce many women writers worthy of consideration, until Mariama Ba from Senegal, received the first Noma award in 1980. "Rejection", an excerpt from her novel *Une si Longue Lettre* (So Long a Letter), translated by Moduge Bode-Thomas, describes the fate of contemporary Senegalese women who are partners in Muslim polygamous marriages. Other stories and writers in this section, are "Anticipation" by Mabel Dove Danquah from Ghana, "Mista Courifer" by Adelaide Casely-Hayford from Sierra Leone, and "New Life at Kyerefaso" by Efua Sutherland from Ghana.

The second part is on Eastern Africa, "Mwipenza the Killer" by Matha Mvungi from Tanzania, "The Winner" by Barbara Kimenye from Uganda, "Itega and Irua" from Daughter of Mumbi (1969) by Charity Waciuma from Kenya, "Cold, Cold World" from *Black Night Quiloo* by Hazel Mugot, of mixed Sri-lanka and Seychelles parentage, who grew up in Kenya, and has extensively developed the theme of cross-cultural marriage and the changes taking place in the relationships between men and women, and finally "The Rain Came" by Grace Ogot from Kenya, who is known for her sense of the macabre and her utilization of witchcraft in her work.

The third part deals with Southern Africa. This country is probably one of the most, if not the most, troubled African country politically because of its system of apartheid, but it has produced some of the most important writers, showing that

sometimes political tension serves as a catalyst for creation. Here we are presented with Miriam Tlal, a Soweto writer whose first short story was banned in South Africa, and who assumes that most others will also be banned. Her piece "Point of No Return" shows her deep commitment to the problems of the oppressed in her country. Amelia House's "Conspiracy", part of her Master's thesis at the University of Louisville, shows her special interest in "Socialization Through Literature". Bessie Head's "Snapshots of a Wedding" reflects, as does much of her work, her experience as a woman in exile rejected by males, by the white African elite and by the black Africans. The section also includes "Inkalamu's place" by Nadine Gordimer who "speaks as a rational, sometimes idealistic, ever-sensitive white South African woman who makes real for her readers all over the world the pain that only whites in this confused, unstable and very sad plight can know" (p. 119). She has written eight novels, all set in South Africa in a context of growing violence. Doris Lessing's "Traitors" reflects the author's fascination with a child's exploration and developing awareness of human inter-relationships.

Lessing was born in Iran, spent her youth in Rhodesia, then moved to England; her stories and novels draw directly upon her African background. And Olive Schreiner's "Three dreams in a desert" from *Under a Mimoso-Tree*, focuses largely on women's roles in a writing style which is heavily biblical.

Finally, the last section discusses Northern Africa, known as the Maghreb, literally, the setting sun. "My Mother, my Mother-in-Law" from *Histoire de Ma Vie* (translated by Charlotte Bruner) reveals the strong ties, the bonds of affection and hatred in a kabyle extended family. It is the autobiography of Fadhma Amrouche, who came from "a family of kabyle village folk, a family of traditional singers who recounted the proverbial wisdom and sang the lyrics and epics of their past," (p. 165). Her daughter, Marguerite Taos-Amrouche's "The Story of the Chest" from *Le Grain Magique* (also translated by Charlotte

Bruner) includes definite kabyle characteristics. An excerpt from *Les Impatients* (translated by Len Ortzen) by the Algerian Assia Djebar, deals with the routine of Algerian women's lives and their hope for change and liberation. A short story "Another Evening at the Club" (translated from the Arabic by Denys Johnson-Davies) by the Egyptian Alifa Rifaat shows the writer's concern for women's social position and subordination. Another short-story "The picture" (also translated from the Arabic by Denys Johnson-Davies) by another Egyptian, Latifa El-Zayat, also shows concern for women's plight and lack of freedom. Finally the short-story "The Long Trial" (translated from French by David Bruner) by André Chédid, a writer born in Egypt, of Lebanese origin, and who has lived in France since 1946, has gained many literary prizes as well as international recognition, and has clearly a universal voice in theme, message and style.

This compilation with introductory notes could provide an excellent textbook for a class in literature, African studies or women's studies. It can also provide an excellent reference book as well as enjoyable and enlightening reading for anyone interested in the literature or sociology of that part of the world, or in women's literature, or in literature in general. Both Charlotte Bruner and her husband David, who often work as a remarkable team (and one that draws admiration) on many of their projects, ought to be praised for their long commitment and hard work as translators, critical analysts, radio-programmers, teachers, writers and recorders of literature of African women. Thanks to them many of the voices by known and unknown women have reached a wider audience.

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\* Bruner, Charlotte. *Unwinding Threads*. London: Heinemann, 1984.