

Taiwo, Oladele, 1984. Female Novelists of Modern Africa. MacMillan, 228 pages.

This book is a welcome addition to the literature of African writers -- African women writers in particular. The author reviews and evaluates 41 works by 14 women novelists -- all indigenous representatives -- whose works present African women and the centrality of their role in the context of social change as traditional and modern forces contend in various societies.

The structure of the book is organized so that it addresses several key issues and also provides an in depth look at the work of selected writers chosen as much for their strength and creativity as well as for their diversity in style and content. Before reviewing the work of each selected writer, the author discusses several issues which set the stage for what follows. Chapter I discusses the role of African women in literature -- considering their economic and literary contributions as well as their views on home and family life. This chapter also provides an overview of the images of women in African literature and it acknowledges that the male and female writers present views which are often at odds. In the second chapter, "The Woman as a Novelist in Modern Africa," Taiwo surveys six novels in which "a woman plays a leading role . . . and is often in the center of affairs and occasionally plays her part in competition with a man." This is the case regardless of the time, place, or culture in which the works are set.

In the chapters which follow, three through eight, the author discusses selected novelists and the body of their work with attention to most successful and representative works: Flora Nwapa, Nigeria; Adaora Lily Ulasi, Nigeria; Buchi Emechata, Nigeria; Grace Ogot, Kenya; Miriam Were, Kenya; Mariam Tlali, South Africa; and Bessie Head, South Africa. In his analysis, the author asserts that "each writer exploits her own immediate environment in order to dramatise those aspects of modern and traditional life she considers important" (ix). Furthermore, each writer "glorifies womanhood and shows concern for the material and spiritual well being of the society of which women are only a part" (p. 15).

Collectively, these women writers address issues which directly impinge upon the lives of women, determine the quality and direction of their lives and thereby reflect social and cultural norms and their affects upon individuals who both conform and challenge the status quo. The lietsmotif of issues includes the following: marriage, mothercare, childlessness in marriage, polygamy, education, religion, racial prejudice, bride price, slavery, war, the clash of the traditional and the

modern.

Because of its scope, this book is an excellent reference given its introduction of the reader to diverse women writers. It provides biographical sketches, discusses major themes, aspects of form and content, language, style, character development, and gives critical commentary. One therefore gains an appreciation for the varied approaches taken by the women writers -- novels, fiction and non-fiction, historical, detective and epistolary. While the format used in the discussion of each author and her work is the same, the level of criticism is uneven -- ranging from general and superficial remarks to in depth examination of themes, plot, and character development. The strongest sections are those devoted to Flora Nwapa, Grace Ogot, Miriam Were and Mariam Tlali.

What I found most useful about the book is the attention it gives to the breadth of issues and approaches reflected in the work by various women writers . . . and the acknowledgment that women writers do indeed write about more than sentimental concerns, romance, home and hearth. African women writers in this book discuss at length issues of local, regional, national and international import. Through the use of a study in contrasts -- the old and the new, the individual and the group, the secular and the religious -- the writers studied demonstrate the complexity of human life, the interplay of motives, desires and needs, and provides often searing social commentary about growth, change, and the formation of social and political values.

Indeed, Taiwo's book is a "celebration of the literary achievements of female novelists of modern Africa -- women in the Sub-Sahara, living and writing during the second half of the twentieth century" (iii). I strongly recommend this book because it breaks new ground and sows seeds to be harvested by further research. The next step would be for more books to be devoted to the works of African women writers which devote critical analysis to language, style, and content of individual authors. In the future, scholars of African literature should look forward to not only reading and writing more about female novelists of modern Africa but also they should be prepared to write about how the works of African women in the diaspora converge in their efforts to address not only social, economic and political issues of paramount concern, but also emphatically address issues of particular concern to women. African and African American women writers are striving to create images which reflect our various realities, present characters as three dimensional, positive, powerful, complex and non-stereotypic persons who have the survival of their people at heart. Taiwo's book has begun to pull the threads together.

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