

able oppositions. The result is a proliferation of contradictions that mar what is otherwise a fine study.

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Chikwenye O. Ogunyemi. *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel By Women*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1996. Pp. xiii, 353. \$35.00.

Chikwenye O. Ogunyemi's *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel By Women* has at least two marks of distinction to attract the attention of any serious student of contemporary Nigerian literature, Women's Studies, and African studies. The first sustained book-length study of the tradition of the Nigerian novel by women spanning 28 years (1966-94), it is perhaps the most significant theory of narrative by a Nigerian female critic on the novel genre to date. Until now, Lloyd W. Brown's *Women Writers in Black Africa* (1981) and Oladele Taiwo's *Female Novelists of Modern Africa* (1984) have been the standard reference texts for readers of African women's literature south of the Sahara. These and other secondary texts are mainly descriptive of feminist/female narrative with historical perspectives on the nature and condition of African womanhood.

Ogunyemi transcends the traditional character of the critic as interpreter; she takes on a quilt of roles, mainly as performer, ideologue, "righter," *griotte* (like her chosen authors), and most important, womanist theorist. *Africa Wo/Man Palava* is at once a complement and a sisterly response to the critical efforts of African-American female writers such as Alice Walker, Mary H. Washington, Barbara Christian, Marjorie Pryse, and Patricia Collins. It is possible to say that Ogunyemi has succeeded in mapping "a calendar of fiction" (to use Hortense Spillers's phrase) of a visible and as yet developing tradition of female literary discourse in Nigeria.

By reconstructing an exclusivist (women's) literary canon, *Africa Wo/Man Palava* hyphenates boundaries of knowledge to achieve a cross-current of understanding between methodology, theory per se, and creativity (that is, the authorial reproduction of experience).

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 womanist cause. The unmistakable resonance of major terms of mainstream black literary theory is Ogunyemi's original weaving of a Nigerian womanist canon which essentially figures states of womanhood/motherhood in culture as symbolic means of understanding and interpreting our world.

Africa Wo/Man Palava challenges the chauvinist strategies of reading the African novel in which female figuration is typically realized as goddess, *mammywatta*, prostitute, temptress, pariah/outcast, or evil beauty/genie; it challenges the phallogocentric erection of a 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. At the heart of this reading of female experience is the concept of *womanism*, apparently preferred to the more restrictive and provincial Western *feminism*.

Womanism, as espoused by Alice Walker, is a theory "committed to the survival and wholeness of entire people." Womanist theory emphasizes understanding relationships—affiliation rather than separation, 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 proposition 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 ("to counter the stories, left untold or hitherto distastefully told by men, now set down in writing ephemeral nature of women's traditional orature . . ." (4).

The grounding metaphors of *kwenu* and *aso ebi*, used as title headings of the two sections of this book, are projections of the communality and filiation, the commonality 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.

Part One of *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, comprising two chapters, historicizes and defines the nature and conception of female writing/orature in Africa. Specifically, it chooses as its focus the status of the woman/mother/goddess in popular myths, legends, and folktales as well as

stereotyped (mis)conceptions and reception of the female figure in Nigerian society. Also, it unveils the theoretical basis of an African womanist ideology with its intervening act of palaver-palava, which practically translates as female discourse and gender dialogue.

Part Two, consisting of four chapters, diachronically places 8 Nigerian female writers and 30 novels published between 1966 and 1994 in contemporary perspective. Ogunyemi argues that these texts are essentially counter-narratives, which respond to their male predecessors and contemporaries as exemplified in Flora Nwapa's *Efuru*—her response to Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*.

In Chapter Three, the first chapter of Part Two, Nwapa's five novels—from *Efuru* (1966) to *Women Are Different* (1986)—are incisively analysed as representational narratives of womanhood-motherhood in society, with *Efuru* projected as the first salvo from the cannon of emergent Nigerian women novels. Nwapa herself is signified as the matriarch of modern African/Nigerian writing. Chapter Four introduces the formation of a vernacular mystery novel otherwise known as *juju* fiction, with Adaora Lily Ulasi as its chief exponent. Ogunyemi proves that in most of Ulasi's novels, social realism is tainted with elements of the uncanny, the marvellous, and the supernatural to depict individual and collective experience. As it were, the womanist reader replaces Oladele Taiwo's reading of *The Man From Sagamu* (1978) as a detective novel with her own reconstruction of the text as a mythical realist novel. In other novels, such as *Many Thing You No Understand* (1970), the all-white-cast novel *The Night Harry Died* (1974), and *Who Is Jonah* (1978), Ogunyemi proffers the central trope of *juju* or black magic (as Ulasi herself calls it) for a valid illumination of the writer's historical and anti-colonial imagination.

In Chapter Five, Ogunyemi identifies Buchi Emecheta as the most prolific, international, and discursive of contemporary Nigerian (female) novelists. The entire body of her creative works, totalling 13, has been classified as the "been-to" novel with a functional motif of journeying—arrivals and departures—in and out of contrasting worlds. With (auto)biographical and sociological insights, Ogunyemi points to the essentially dual consciousness of Emecheta, which validates her ambiguous, controversial response to feminist ideology and praxis. In most of Emecheta's novels—from *The Bride Price* (1976) to *Kehinde* (1994), some of which contain powerful autobiographical resonances—the expository philosophy of *palava* is concretized in the portraiture of female oppression and the vagaries of powerlessness, "the cruel dynamics in gender relationships" (224).

Finally, the focus in Chapter Six on new voices such as Funmilayo, Fakunle, Ifeoma Okoye, Zaynab Alkali, Eno Obong and Simi Bedford, signals a broad participation in the palaver space of the Nigerian novel, with each novelist contributing her peculiar pattern of experience and vision to the national embroidery of writerly filiation.

In the more cosmopolitan texts of these writers—Obong's *Garden House* (1988) and Bedford's *Yoruba Girl Dancing* (1992), for instance—the traditional themes of marriage and family, childlessness, and invisibility are aesthetically re-presented. In the main, these writers are read as constructive activists in nation-building and their novels as narratives of nationhood. Thus the rise of a new clan of female writers in the 1980s marks a relative breaking of hymeneal silences, attesting to the attainment of an empowering and empowered level of creativity and self-intervention.

In *Africa Wo/Man Palava*, the overriding trope of *palava* is conceived not as an unequal dialogue of races but as a discourse of negotiated mutuality of the sexes. Therefore, what we may call the womanist manifesto of interrelationships in the world is built on four principles, namely, conciliation, collaboration, consensus, and complementarity (126).

Most scholars of Nigerian literature and African Women's Studies, however, are likely to query certain absences or silences in a groundbreaking work such as Ogunyemi's. In the course of re-reading Simone de Beauvoir, Hélène Cixous, and Barbara Johnson, Ogunyemi throws (up) vital questions at the pretentious universalism and covert provincialism of Western feminist theorizing. This deconstructive exercise seems to be the groundswell of the critic's choice of *womanism* as a more acceptable term than *feminism* in the development of a black female literary theory. But then, there seems to be a heavy silence on the cultural dynamics and achievement of black feminist consciousness (as in African-American literature, for example) and how possibly this could bear the burden of the African woman's experience. Incidentally, Catherine O. Acholonu has attempted to tackle this possibility by providing an Afrocentric alternative theory—*motherism*—to Western feminism. Also, I think that the reason proffered for the choice of *womanism* as a term, that is, "to appease the men . . . to avoid a stalemate over naming and renaming" (117), is suggestively apologetic; actually, this reason tends to reinforce woman's supplicatory gesture towards her Zeus-like male counterpart.

Furthermore, a deep encounter with this book is likely to leave the reader, androgynous or otherwise, both with a validating submission that the literary canon must be, and is, matricentric, and with the uneasy feeling that quintessential man is only macho and sexist, purely an irritant "other" of woman's natural character of versatility, creativity, and prolificacy. This surely runs counter to the dialogic proposition of African womanist ideology originally enunciated in Part One of *Africa Wo/Man Palava*.

Most important, the absence of one, if not two, equally remarkable new female novelists in the developing literary canon cannot 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 this year's Noma Award—could have enriched the palaver sauce of gender dialogue in the same brief but insightful manner that Martina Nwakoby's *A House Divided* (1985) is treated. It would be interesting to read what interpretive correlation Professor Ogunyemi would have constructed between Emecheta's "been-to" novels or Obong's *Garden House* and Segun's *The Third Dimple*, a post-civil war text with a triangular setting in Lagos, Lome, and Paris. Or imagine the critical affiliation between Emecheta's autobiographical novels and Adenubi's intimate biography of a male disabled but intelligently conversational child. Indeed, the inclusion of *The Third Dimple* (published within the temporal focus of this book) would have sutured the canonical gap which its omission might have provoked.

Without doubt, Chikwenye O. Ogunyemi has succeeded in achieving a deliberate, methodical construction of a woman-centred vernacular theory in reading the Nigerian novel by women. *Africa Wo/Man Palava: The Nigerian Novel by Women* has drawn on a series of textual stitches to create a common quilt of a womanist ideology in Nigerian women's literature at the close of the twentieth century.

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Linda Hutcheon. *Irony's Edge: The Theory and Politics of Irony*. New York: Routledge, 1995. Pp. ix, 248. \$22.95 pb.

Linda Hutcheon has fashioned a career out of taking aim at moving targets. Her books have often been attempts to define and discuss terms that are so widely and indiscriminately used that they have become almost meaningless. She is certainly best known for her extensive work on postmodernism, for instance, but she has also written about parody, on narrative self-reflexivity, on satire, and even about what it means to be Canadian. In fact, perhaps the biggest surprise about this particular book from Hutcheon is that it did not appear sooner. *Irony's Edge* is as engaging, interesting, wide-ranging, and provocative as one might expect new work from Hutcheon to be; further, it proclaims its topic to be "political," as one might also expect of a book on irony by Hutcheon: in a postmodern age, after all, it is always political to be ironic, and ironic to be political.

For all of its virtues, however, *Irony's Edge* left me with a lingering impression of distance and lack of involvement, a nagging doubt about why it is, if irony is really always politically charged, if it truly always has the "edge" that Hutcheon claims, that this book is itself neither intentionally ironic nor particularly political. While *Irony's Edge* is full of sophisticated readings by Hutcheon, and absorbing discussions about why those readings legitimately detect or construct the various ironies