

**Charlotte H. Bruner, ed. *Unwinding Threads: Writing by Women in Africa.* (London: Heinemann, 1984) xv, 208 pp., \$6.00 paper.**

Looking at the map of Africa locating contributors to this collection of women writers, one is struck by the seeming over-representation from some countries—Ghana, Algeria, Egypt, Republic of South Africa—and the vast stretch of lands that have, apparently, produced no female with a story to tell. In her Preface, Charlotte Bruner details some of the obstacles confronting women who defy the traditions of formerly non-literate societies, where the rigidity and permanence of the written word itself confounds a view of art as something fluid and circumstantial, where community takes precedence over the individual, where the act of writing is seen less as a means of recording and perpetuating folk materials than as a catalyst for change, and where questioning the legitimacy of confining women to the role of domestic servant amounts to religious iconoclasm.

Trapped inside our own heads and our own cultures, we are always troubled by the question of whether our judgments about what constitutes indignity and oppression are shared or even understood by people within other cultures subjected to indignity and oppression. The stories collected here rarely give an ambiguous answer to our question. In the lead story, “Anticipation” by Mabel Danquah, a man with fifty wives and a short memory buys one of his own wives a second time. She seems flattered and compliant, but the man appears a foolish dupe of his own carnal greed. In Grace Ogot’s “The Rain Came,” a young girl accepts her sacrifice to the lake monster to ensure the end of a drought, but when her young lover urges her to escape with him, the heavens conspire with them: “They began to run. Then the thunder roared, and the rain came down in torrents” (p. 99). And in “Another Evening at the Club,” written by Alifa Rifaat, a young wife who has carelessly lost a ring acquiesces to the unjust punishment of a servant girl after finding the ring rather than defy her husband: “he was the man, she the woman, he the one who carried the responsibilities, made the decision; she the one whose role it was to be beautiful, happy, carefree” (p. 193). If some of the stories tell us that the characters have accommodated themselves to oppression, it is clear to us that the authors have not.

More often even the characters cannot accept the commonplace indignities of their sex, as Buchi Emecheta illustrates in “A Man Needs Many Wives.” The woman Nnu Ego was “a good wife, happy with her lot” (p. 53) until the death of her brother-in-law brings a second wife into her house and she is humiliated by the noisy love making behind a thin curtain. That polygamy is not merely a variant practice “misunderstood” by Western moralists is likewise the point of Miriama Ba’s “Rejection,” in which a man marries his daughter’s classmate and the first wife

contemplates breaking with him.

Hampered by the problems of translation and writing in second languages, the quality of writing is uneven; however, the collection is a fascinating cultural document even though some of the stories told are heavily didactic or stylistically troublesome. "Traitors" by Doris Lessing and especially "Inkalamu's Place" by Nadine Gordimer show polished brilliance, while the seeming simplicity of Efua Sutherland's "New Life at Kyerefaso" shares their complexity and tension.

The introduction to the geographically arranged sections of the book and the short biographies of the individual writers are informative and succinct.

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**Philip Butcher. *The Ethnic Image in Modern American Literature: 1900-1950.* (Washington, D.C.: Howard University Press, 1984) Volume I, xviii, 430 pp., \$19.95. Volume II, xvi, 416 pp., \$19.95.**

American literary scholarship in the mid-1980s generally seems to be insufficiently sophisticated to give more than perfunctory attention to ethnicity's significant role in American writing from the colonial period to the present. When intellectual maturation finally is achieved, as there is reason to believe it will be even though progress proceeds at a disappointing snail's pace, credit for the event will be due in part to Philip Butcher's unique and impressive *The Ethnic Image in Modern American Literature: 1900-1950*, as well as to his earlier two-volume anthology, *The Minority Presence in American Literature: 1600-1900* (1977). These are essential books for all libraries.

The fiction, poetry, and drama in Butcher's latest massive collection impressively demonstrate that, in the first-half of our century, ethnicity has been a recurrent, often profoundly expressed concern of many great, good, and minor American writers. Furthermore, if we extend our perspective and take into account American literature written after Butcher's cut-off date of 1950, ethnicity makes itself visible even more as a major presence, one giving strong indication of remaining a vital literary theme.

Several sensible criteria guided Butcher in his choice of materials for *The Ethnic Image in Modern American Literature: 1900-1950*. Selections were chosen if they possessed a substantive capacity to "portray the