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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

Mary Modupe Kolawole

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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<< first to be published by their authors. The editors have injected new voices and new perspectives into African women's literature. The diversity of thematic concerns as well as the variety of form enhance the unique worth of this anthology. The format adopted by the editors provides vital biographical and bibliographical information about the contributors. Recognising the need to introduce the new comers, this format makes the Anthology a resource material of a kind.

Toying Adewale-Nduka and Omowumi Segun have broken the culture of silence with a bang. These dynamic young talents are equally poised to revitalise Nigerian curricula and encourage a reading culture. WRITA has already started a tour of some Nigerian cities to promote *Breaking the Silence*. These women will stop at nothing to see their dream come true in empowering young Nigerians towards a new attitude to reading and promote creative interests and skills. By putting together an exclusively female collection which is also

published by women writers, women are re-inscribing and re-creating themselves in response to older writers like Molara Ogundipe-Leslie.

The themes range from traditional to contemporary and topical issues. Some stories recast oral myths and folklore in a brilliant way while most reiterate problems that are peculiar to women. Burning contemporary social reality - failed bank, corruption, the other woman and her child, extended family's intrusion, are presented with a new consciousness. Women are portrayed not as passive suffering victims like older heroines but we see women responding positively or aggressively to intimidation. Women are also presented as facing contemporary challenges and sometimes helping each other to come to terms with their problems. Specific references to feminists, Beijing and women's empowerment, and social change removes the veil of fiction to show the zeal of these writers and the urge to bring fiction close to their gender ideology. Many of the writers seem to say, 'resilience and resource-

fulness will take women a long way.'

Nigerian women writers have indeed come a long way as the tellers of their own stories and the publishers of their newfound good news - to recreate themselves. These stories have shifted women's image in Nigerian literature from marginal liminal positions to the centre. These new voices are creating new images as they concern women's reality. I met these two young literary crusaders at the British High Commission in Ibadan recently. I had a chat with both Toyin and Omowumi and I was left with no doubt that these bubbling budding artists will go a long way to project Nigerian women's writing unto the threshold of renewed vigour at the turn of this century. Judging the likely trend from the genius of these duo, we are in deed at the intersection of a womanist literary renaissance.

Mary Modupe Kolawole, Associate of the African Gender Institute, recently returned from the University of Cape Town to Ife where she lectures in literature.

# When is a Nation ?

Segun Ayobolu

**Wole Soyinka, THE OPEN SORE OF A CONTINENT : A PERSONAL NARRATIVE OF THE NIGERIAN CRISIS, Oxford University Press, New York, 1996, 170 pp.**

**I**N his celebrated 1974 interview with the journalist, John Agetua after the publication of *The Man Died*, Wole Soyinka gave poignant expression to his perception of the social utility of literature. 'For me', he declared 'a book is a hand grenade which you detonate under a stagnant way of looking at the world'. Two and a half decades after that

encounter, Africa's first Nobel literature prize winner has certainly not changed his view. His latest literary offering, characteristically provocative and captivating, is a veritable time-bomb which is bound to explode indolent, self-serving assumptions as regards the parameters of the national question, the character of the State and the foundations of nationhood in contemporary Nigeria.

Spurred primarily by the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, widely believed to have been won by detained Chief MKO Abiola, *The Open Sore of a Continent* is perhaps the most penetrating and disturbing contribution to ongoing debate on the future of Nigeria. Along with the June 12 debacle, the Ogoni struggle and the subsequent execution of its foremost symbol, writer and environmentalist

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