

Women Writers of Gabon: Literature and Herstory. By CHERYL TOMAN. Lanham, MD: Lexington, 2016. 170 pp. Hb £52.95. ISBN: 1498537209

Cheryl Toman's study focuses on recent published Gabonese novels authored by women writers. This in itself should make it a valuable contribution to our understanding of how the literary system in former French colonies of Africa has been developing, and, importantly, how this development has been recognised – or not – in the international academic and literary worlds. 'The Literary history of Gabon', she writes, 'is remarkable in many ways, but what makes this literature especially unique from all the others on the continent is the sheer number of Gabonese women novelists and their overall importance in African literary history' (p.xi). Notwithstanding their importance, Toman argues convincingly that the literature she is presenting here has been woefully neglected by Western academics and publishers. Citing Irène Assiba d'Almeida's insightful study *A Rain of Words*, she locates the work in 'the empty canon: unknown, unpraised, uncriticized' (p.7).

The explanation Toman offers is a familiar one. Women writers are systematically overlooked by Western and African critics and commentators, and she produces evidence to this effect. The argument presented here, that the influential figures of the francophone literary world and the Western academies value male writing over female writing, is hardly news. But the evidence presented to support this argument does bring the reader to reflect on the ways the Western norm, subconscious or otherwise, to conflate multiple intellectual characteristics with binary biological characteristics to the advantage of (white) males (as attested in the intellectual occupations throughout the Western world), operate also through those postcolonial elites that chose to inherit these gendered ideologies from the former European occupier. Furthermore the author also deploys her evidence drawn from the history of novel-writing in Gabon, to reveal how multiple discriminations can result in rendering certain individuals invisible in our literary and critical circles. Citing the case of Gabon's first novelist, Angèle Rawiri, she notes that Rawiri's first novel *Elonga* (Editaf, Paris, 1980) is notably under-researched and remains in some quarters unacknowledged as the first novel (in the Western style), '[I]t is clear that there are additional obstacles the African woman writer confronts if she does not choose to write an overtly feminist novel; it is even more likely that her work will fall into the "empty canon"' (p.7). In essence, it appears that exclusion operates both at the act of writing and, in a case where the work has overcome that barrier, at the point of reading.

Other chapters explore works in French of Fang writers Justine Mintsa, Sylvie Ntsame, and Honorine Ngou. Here the author embarks on a deeper engagement with sociological context and the novel as political discourse. As Mintsa herself states a novel's themes are its political instruments (p.59). The richer contextual detail offered in these chapters includes fascinating insights into pre-colonial or extra-colonial modes of literary expression, such as the Fang mvvet (p.80). The book concludes with brief introductions of a younger generation of Gabonese women writers including Edna Merey-Apinda, Alice Endamne, Nadia Origo, Miryl Eteno, and Elisabeth Aworet.

A substantial proportion of the central chapters of the book, already relatively short at 170 pages, is devoted to plot and character summaries. Perhaps the lack of attention paid to these works, as Toman argues in her introduction, warrants this focus on storyline. In addition a generous use of citations from the novels provide further points of entry into this neglected body of literature. There is tremendous scope here for productive new lines of analytical enquiry. This study puts the spotlight on what is clearly a gap in literary and academic writing on African literary production in French. While it is clear from Toman's forensic exploration of literary criticism on Gabonese and African writing in French that this body of work has gained an unusually low level of recognition from the academy, feminist literary discourse from Gabon has made some contribution to multidisciplinary socio-cultural studies of postcolonial francophone Africa. The potential of this work to engage more widely across disciplinary boundaries and enrich other fields of postcolonial studies is evident, the book abounds with references of sociological and political significance inviting exciting new modes of engagement. Toman has worked with Gabonese women writers for several years and her research included field trips to Gabon. The rich literary review that has emerged from these encounters is an insightful introduction to a unique literary scene and a sound point of departure for future research.

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