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Grace Ogot

(15 May 1930 -)

Brenda F. Berrian
University of Pittsburgh

BOOKS: *The Promised Land* (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1966);
Land Without Thunder (Nairobi: East African Publishing House, 1968);
The Other Woman: Selected Short Stories (Nairobi: Transafrica, 1976);
The Island of Tears (Nairobi: Uzima, 1980);
The Graduate (Nairobi: Uzima, 1980);
Miaha (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1983); translated as *The Strange Bride* (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya, 1989).

PLAY PRODUCTIONS: *Simbi Nyaima*, adapted by Asenath B. Odaga, Kisumu, Kenya, Reunion Cultural Group Theater, 28 December 1982;
In the Beginning, adapted by Michael Ogot, Nairobi, 23 March 1983.

SELECTED PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS (-)
UNCOLLECTED: "Ward Nine," *Transition*, 3 (March/April 1964): 41-44;
"The African Writer," *East Africa Journal*, 5 (November 1968): 35-37.

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Grace Ogot is one of the few well-known Kenyan women writers. She is also the first Kenyan woman to have her fiction published by the East African Publishing House, her first book being the novel *The Promised Land* (1966). Her major contribution to literature has been in the short-story genre; so far she has published three collections: *Land Without Thunder* (1968), *The Other Woman* (1977), and *The Island of Tears* (1980). Speaking of her preference for the short story, Ogot once said (to interviewer Shailaja Ganguly), "A novel keeps you in its grip for a longer time. But remember, while the short story is shorter ... it is also harder to write."

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Ogot is devoted to relating native Luo folktales to the younger generation of Kenyans. Many of her writings are also based on the day-to-day life of people she has known or read about. As a nurse she has been intrigued by the continuing use of

traditional medical cures in Kenya. As Ogot explained to Bernth Lindfors, "Stories of African traditional medicine and of the medicine man against the background of modern science and medicine fascinated me." This fascination led to the writing of *The Promised Land*; the short stories "The Old White Witch," "The Hero," and "Night Sister," in *Land Without Thunder*; and "The Family Doctor" and "The Professor" in *The Other Woman*.

The debate between a medicine man and a Western-trained doctor does not delineate the only theme in *The Promised Land*. The novel is also an exploration of marriage and a woman's duties to her husband. The characters Nyapol and Ochola are based on people known by Ogot in Seme in the Maseno Division of Kenya. The plot centers on this poverty-stricken Luo couple, who migrate as farmers from Kenya to Tanzania. Their eventual success provokes the jealousy of the local Tanzanians, and one of the neighbors, a witch doctor, casts a spell on Ochola, resulting in a disfiguring skin disease. Yet Ochola is cured once he agrees to return to Kenya and to abandon the flourishing farm.

Nyapol's conduct as the dutiful wife, who follows and protects her husband, provides the role model for the majority of Ogot's women characters. Nyapol sets the trend for the naive, virginal Elizabeth of "Elizabeth"; the trustful Jedidah of "The Other Woman"; the dying Awino who cries out for her philandering husband in "Pay Day"; and the mother Oganda who abandons her daughter to save her marriage in "The Bamboo Hut" (all these stories being in *The Other Woman*). These women sacrifice themselves to maintain family harmony; they rarely oppose their men. Preservation of the family is more important to them, even though it can sometimes involve the subordination of a more intelligent woman to a shallow or tyrannical man. However, the wronged woman always has Ogot's sympathy. Ogot has stated (to Donald Burness) that she "sets out to write as a universal writer for both sexes. But of course one must see one's society as it is."

Grace Emily Okinyi Ogot was born on 15 May 1930 at Butere, near Kisumu, in Central Nyanza, Kenya. Her primary and secondary education was acquired at Maseno Junior School, Ng'iya Girls School, and Butere Girls' High School. As a little girl Ogot's interest in writing took root when she listened enthusiastically to the folktales recited by her grandmother to put her to sleep. A second influence was her father's readings from the Bible and storybooks with translations in Luo. As soon as Ogot mastered the English language, she was in-

spired to read the Old Testament several times. In her interview with Lindfors she recalled, "With that background, I extremely enjoyed the storytelling lessons at school, which were compulsory. I read any little booklets I could lay a hand on and discovered that some of my own stories compared favorably with those written in the booklets. But although the desire to write was stimulated in me, I never thought of writing my own stories down."

Ogot's active writing career did not begin until she corresponded with her future husband, the well-known historian Bethwell Allan Ogot, while she was training in England to be a nursing sister. Her fiancé (whom she married in 1959) encouraged her to publish some of her writings because her letters addressed to him were so poetic. Ogot first wrote short stories in her maternal language (Luo) and later in the two Kenyan national languages (Kiswahili and English). In 1962, before working as a nursing sister in charge of the Student Health Services at Makerere University College in Uganda (1963-1964), she attended a conference for African writers held on campus. This literary meeting affected Ogot and resulted in a period of heart-searching and self-examination, because no book exhibits from East Africa were on display. She, Ngũgĩ-wa Thiong'o, and other East Africans took the challenge to be more productive.

During the conference Ogot gave an oral reading of the short story "A Year of Sacrifice." This same story became her first publication, in 1963 in the journal *Black Orpheus*, and was republished as "The Rain Came" in *Land Without Thunder*. Encouraged by the publication of this story, Ogot decided to show it, along with others, to the European manager of the East African Literature Bureau, who said he "really could not understand how a Christian woman could write such stories, involved with sacrifices, traditional medicines and all, instead of writing about Salvation and Christianity." Not easily deterred, Ogot continued to write, drawing on her training at the Nursing Training Hospital at Mengo, near Kampala, Uganda (1959-1953), and Saint Thomas's Hospital and the British Hospital for Mothers and Babies in London (1955-1958).

Not all of Ogot's fiction takes place in Kenya and is concerned with medical and women's issues. In 1975 she was one of the Kenyan delegates to the United Nations General Assembly. A three-and-a-half month stay provided material for her story "New York," in *The Island of Tears*. Ancestral linkage between Kenyans and African-Americans is the main theme, with the action centering on a Kenyan ambassador who is directed to the subway station

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by an African/American. Unfortunately the ambassador is robbed and almost killed by this African/American. However, an unexpected twist occurs when the thief's parents visit the ambassador in the hospital, and an offer of a job is extended to their repentant son.

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As she writes, Ogot has no consistent predetermined ideology. Asked about her choice of subject material for her stories, she told Lee Nichols, "I just collect them, write them, because they stick in my mind like when you listen to the news." Ogot simply listens, observes, and records. For instance, her past work as a community development officer in Kisumu was utilized in her novella *The Graduate* (1980). The primary theme is that the former European colonial powers are still controlling independent Kenya, particularly because of its out-of-date bureaucratic system, which still employs condescending European staff members. Ogot's premise is that independence neither brings a sudden change of attitudes nor the adoption of Kenyanization.

Ogot is well aware of the social, political, and economic changes taking place around her and continues to retain a respect and a close understanding of the traditional thought of her people. An understanding and appreciation of Luo traditional ways, customs, superstitions, and history are the strengths of Ogot's writing. Her close attention to an accurate recalling of details was exhibited when she changed the title of her story "Ayiembo's Ghost" to "The Ivory Trinket" (in *The Island of Tears*) as soon as she learned that ghosts are not dead in Luo traditions. Another example is the recitation of the Nyamgondho legend in "The Fisherman" (also in *Island of Tears*).

As for historical facts, Ogot gives thanks to her husband. Marriage to a historian has had its advantages, Ogot admits. As she told Burness, "I would have been a fool if I did not seize the opportunity to use the vast knowledge he has of the background of my people and the way he has assembled everything that has ever been written about them." Her accumulation of historical facts has resulted in the completion of a book of over four hundred pages titled "In the Beginning," based on Luo history from 97 A.D. and the manuscript "Simbi Nyaima," based on the village history of her people. The former work was adapted as a play and translated from Luo into English by Asepath B. Odaga, a Kenyan woman who specializes in writing children's stories. ~~The play Simbi Nyaima was produced in 1982.~~

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after talking with Brenda

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her son, Michael Ogot; and the latter by Asepath B. Odaga in 1983

The tragic aspects of history and life also fascinate Ogot: six stories in *Land Without Thunder*, three

stories in *The Other Woman*, and two stories in *The Island of Tears* have an element of sadness in them. Ogot's belief is that "There are more tragic incidents in life than there are comic ones" (quoted by Helen Mwanzi). To support her statement, Ogot has written about Tom Mboya's funeral in "The Island of Tears"; the death of Dr. Sserwadda from poliomyelitis in "The Hero"; the mother's desperate attempt to find a doctor to save her child's life in "The Family Doctor"; and the sacrifice of the life of Oganda, a king's daughter, for the survival of the village in "The Rain Came." In short, tragedy cuts across class lines and touches a cross-section of Kenyan rural and urban society.

This preoccupation with a sacrificial act that can bring forth tragedy for some people (the king) and happiness for others (the villagers) in "The Rain Came" has been further explored in "The Professor," in *The Other Woman*. By far the most ambitious of Ogot's fiction, "The Professor" shows the negative and positive aspects of the first successful heart transplant in Kenya. From a scientist's perspective, Professor Miyare, the protagonist, needs to be commended for his skills as a surgeon. From a traditional Luo perspective, Miyare has performed an act that borders on witchcraft: he has removed the heart and soul from a deceased person and placed them in a living one. Miyare has also sacrificed precious time he could have spent with his family, parents, and clan in order to do the research necessary to conduct the transplant operation. The ironic twist is that, while Miyare is praised by the president of Kenya, he is labeled as a failure by his own father. According to his father, Miyare has not fulfilled the traditional expectation of constructing a house in the village. Unable to resist his father's and his wife's pleas, Miyare builds a village home against his will. This situation leads to his personal unhappiness. An insecure politician, fearful that Miyare might replace him, arranges an administrative position for him. The once-lively professor, who was content in his laboratory and with his patients, becomes a weary person with bowed shoulders. The burdens of society have overwhelmed another unwilling victim, who, at the end of the story, writes "AFRICA IS DEAD" on his note pad. The professor's ambition to become a doctor abroad has to take second place to the demands of his societal group.

Ogot says she got the ideas for this story through contact with devoted scientists and doctors whom society will not leave alone to do their work. Furthermore, as she told Lindfors: "There are often a lot of social demands made on them, and some of

- Jacques L. J.-B. Bede, "La femme et le pays natal dans *The Promised Land* de Grace Ogot," In *Mélanges Africains*, edited by Thomas Melone (Yaoundé, France: Editions Pédagogiques Afrique-Contact, n.d.), pp. 209-240;
- Marsye Condé, "Three Female Writers in Modern Africa: Flora Nwapa, Ama Ata Aidoo and Grace Ogot," *Présence Africaine*, 82 (1972): 132-143;
- Helen Mwanzi, *Notes on Grace Ogot's Land Without Thunder* (Nairobi: Heinemann, 1982);
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Miaha (~~Kisumu: Lake Publisher, 1983~~). (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1983).

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PERIODICAL PUBLICATIONS : "The Year of Sacrifice," Black Orpheus, 11

(1963): 41-50;

"Ward Nine," Transition, 3, 13 (March/April 1964): 41-44.

"Elizabeth," East Africa Journal, 3, 6 (September 1966): 11-18;

"The Bamboo Hut," East Africa Journal, 3, 10 (January 1967): 40-44;

"The African Writer," East Africa Journal, 5, 11 (November 1968): 35-37;

"Ayiembo's Ghost," Viva, 1,1 (December 1974): 51-55.

Grace Ogot's literary distinction rests upon the fact that she is one of the few well-known Kenyan women writers. She is also the first

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Kenyan woman to publish fiction ^{through} by the East African Publishing House, the novel The Promised Land (1966). Her major contribution has been to the short story medium; ^{so far} among which she has published three collections: Land Without Thunder (1968), The Other Woman and Other Stories (1977), and The Island of Tears (1980). ^{Speaking of} When asked about her preference for the short story, in Femina (1979), ^{she said} Ogot replied: "A novel keeps you in its grip for a longer time. But remember, while the short story is shorter, it is also harder to write."

Ogot is devoted to relating Luo folktales to the younger generation of Kenyans. Many of her writings are also based on ^{the} day-to-day life ^{of} about people she has known or read. As a nurse she has been intrigued with the ^{continuing} continuation of ~~the Kenyan people~~ to practice western ^{of} and traditional medical cures, ^{in Kenya,} Ogot explained to an interviewer ⁱⁿ ~~1976~~ that "Stories of African traditional medicine and of the medicine man against the background of modern science and medicine fascinated me." This fascination led to the publication of the novel, The Promised Land; the short stories, "The Old White Witch," "The Hero," and "Night Sister" from Land Without Thunder; and the stories "The Family Doctor" and "The Professor" from The Other Woman and Other Stories.

The debate between a medicine man and a Western-trained doctor is not the only theme found in The Promised Land. The novel is also an exploration of marriage and a woman's duties to her husband. The characters, Nyapoi and Ochola, are based upon people known by Ogot in Seme in the Maseno Division of Kenya. The plot centers around the poverty-stricken Luo couple who migrate as farmers from Kenya to Tanzania. Their eventual

success provokes the jealousy of the local Tanzanians, and one of the neighbors, a witch doctor, casts a spell on Ochola resulting in a disfiguring skin disease. Yet, Ochola is cured once he agrees to return to Kenya and to abandon the flourishing farm.

Nyapol's conduct as the dutiful wife^T who follows and protects her husband, provides the role model for the majority of Ogot's women characters. Nyapol sets the trend for the naive, virginal Elizabeth of "Elizabeth;" the trustful Jedidah of "The Other Woman;" the dying Awino who cries out for her philandering husband in "Pay Day;" and the mother Oganda who abandons her daughter to save her marriage in "The Bamboo Hut." ~~A first~~

~~reading of these women's sacrifices toward the maintenance of family harmony; is seen, but a second reading reveals that they are usually closer to the traditions and spiritual values of their ethnic group, than their men.~~ ^{themselves} ~~Nevertheless, the women rarely take a position totally opposite from that~~ ^{they oppose}

~~of their men and follow it to its completion.~~ ^{to them,} The familial ^{preservation of the family} is more important, even though it can involve sometimes the subordination of a more intelligent woman to a shallow or tyrannical man. However, the wronged woman always has Ogot's sympathy. ~~In an interview in 1983,~~ ^{has stated} ~~confirms~~ that she "sets out to write as a universal writer for both sexes. But of course one must see one's society as it is."

Grace Emily Akinyi Ogot was born on 15 May 1930 at Butere, near Kisumu, Siaya district, Central Nyanza, Kenya. Her primary and secondary education ~~was~~ ^{was} acquired at Maseno Junior School, Ng'iya Girls School, and Butere Girls High. As a little girl, Ogot's interest in writing took root when she listened enthusiastically to the folktales recited by her grand-

mother to put her to sleep. A second influence was ^{her father's} ~~the verbal~~ readings from the Bible and storybooks with on-the-spot translations in Luo ~~by~~ ^{her schoolteacher} father. As soon as Ogot mastered the English language, she was inspired to read the Old Testament from cover to cover several times. In an ~~1970~~ interview she ~~said~~ ^{recalled that}

With that background, I extremely enjoyed the storytelling lessons at school, which were compulsory. I read any little booklets I could lay a hand on and discovered that some of my own stories compared favorably with those written in the booklets. But although the desire to write was stimulated in me, I never thought of writing my own stories down.

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During the conference Ogot gave ~~a verbal~~^{an oral} reading of the short story, "A Year of Sacrifice." This same story became her first publication in 1963 in the journal, Black Orpheus, and was republished later as "The Rain Came" in Land Without Thunder. Encouraged by the publication of this ~~short~~ story, Ogot decided to show it along with others to the ~~colonial~~^g European manager of the East African Literature Bureau, who ~~in turn~~^{said he} "really could not understand how a Christian woman could write such stories, involved with sacrifices, traditional medicines and all, instead of writing about Salvation and Christianity." Not easily deterred, Ogot continued to write, drawing upon her training at the Nursing Training Hospital at Mengo, near Kampala, Uganda (1949-1953), the St. Thomas's Hospital and the British Hospital for Mothers and Babies in London, England (1955-1958).

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As she writes, Grace Ogot has no consistent predetermined ideology.

When asked about her choice of subject material for her ~~fiction~~^{stories,} she commented that "I just collect them, write them, because they stick in my mind like when you listen to the news." Ogot simply listens, observes, and records. For instance, her past work as a Community Development officer in Kisumu was utilized to write the novella, The Graduate (1980). The primary thesis of the novella is that the former European colonials are still controlling independent Kenya, particularly ~~with~~^{with} its out-of-date bureaucratic system ~~and the employment of~~^{which still employs} condescending European staff. Ogot's premise is that independence neither brings a sudden change of attitudes nor the adoption of Kenyanization.

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As for the historical facts, Ogot gives thanks to her husband of thirty years. Marriage to an historian certainly has had its advantages, admits Ogot: ~~in a 1983 interview.~~^{in a 1983 interview.} "I would have been a fool if I did not seize the opportunity to use the vast knowledge he has of the background of my people and the way he has assembled everything that has ever been written about them." Ogot's accumulation of historical facts has resulted

in the completion of a book of over four hundred pages entitled "In the Beginning" based on the Luo from 97 A.D., and the manuscript "Simbi Nyaima" based on the village of her people. The former, ~~has been~~ translated into Luo as "Kar Chakruok," ^{was} ~~and~~ adapted into a play by Ogot's son, Michael, in 1983; the latter ~~has been~~ ^{was} adapted into a play and translated into English by Asenath Odaga, a Kenyan woman who specializes in writing children's stories.

The tragic also fascinates Ogot; ~~and is illustrated by the fact that~~ six stories from Land Without Thunder, three stories from The Other Woman, and two stories from The Island of Tears have an element of sadness in them. Ogot's belief is that "There are more tragic incidents in life than there are comic ones." To support her statement, she has written about Tom Mboya's funeral in "The Island of Tears"; the death of Dr. Sserwadda from poliomyelitis in "The Hero"; the mother's desperate attempt to find a doctor to save her child's life in "The Family Doctor"; and the sacrifice of ^{the life of} Oganda, ~~the king's~~ a king's daughter, for the survival of the village in "The Rain Came." In short, tragedy cuts across class lines: and touches a cross-section of Kenyan rural and urban society.

This preoccupation with a sacrificial act that can bring forth tragedy for some people (like the king) and happiness for others (like the villagers) in "The Rain Came" has been further explored in the fifty-nine pages of the story, "The Professor" found in the collection, The Other Woman. By far the most ambitious and fascinating of Ogot's fiction, "The Professor" contemplates the ~~importance of~~ and the negative and positive aspects of the first successful heart transplant in Kenya. From a scientist's

perspective, Professor Miyare, the protagonist, needs to be commended for his skills as a surgeon. From a traditional Luo perspective, Professor Miyare has performed an act that borders on witchcraft: He has removed the heart and soul from a deceased person and placed them in a living one. ~~Confusion arises because the question is whether or not~~

~~the patient is real or artificial for the Luo.~~ Professor Miyare ~~has also~~ sacrifice, ~~has been the~~ precious time ^{he could have spent with} taken away ~~from~~ his family, parents, and clan in order to do the necessary research to conduct the transplant operation. The ironic twist is ^{that} while Professor Miyare is praised by the President of Kenya, he is labeled as a failure by his own father. According to his father, he has not fulfilled the traditional expectation of constructing a house in the village.

~~Professor Miyare's father wonders, "But what about me? What has your education earned me except laughter and scorn..."~~ Unable to resist his father's and wife's pleas, Miyare builds a village home against his will. ^{This} ~~As a consequence, Miyare's success~~ leads to his personal unhappiness, ~~with the demands made upon him by his family and the expectations of politicians.~~ An insecure politician, ^{fearful} ~~is sure~~ that Miyare might replace him, ~~so he~~ ^{he} arranges ~~for~~ an administrative position for ^{him.} ~~Miyare.~~ The once lively professor, who was content in his laboratory and with his patients, becomes a weary person with bowed shoulders. The burdens of society have overwhelmed another unwilling victim, who writes "AFRICA IS DEAD" on his pad at the end of the story. ~~The remodeling of~~ The professor's ^{ambition} ~~personality~~ to become a doctor abroad has to take second place to the demands of the societal group. Ogot relates that she got the idea for this story through

contact with devoted scientists and doctors whom society will not leave alone to do their work. Furthermore, she states: "There are often a lot of social demands made on them, and some of these men may wonder whether you can combine being a scientist and being an African, particularly if you want to be a good African."

Earning a living solely from creative writing is unknown for ~~the~~ most African writers. There is not a large enough literate audience to sustain ~~them~~. This explains why Ogot has held ~~some~~ positions ^{as} ~~in fields re-~~ ~~lated to writing~~. She has been a broadcaster, scriptwriter, and editor for the B.B.C Africa service in London (1959-1961), a broadcaster of a weekly radio magazine in Luo and Kiswahili for the Voice of Kenya radio in Nairobi, a Public Relations Officer for the Air India Corporation of East Africa, and the founding chairperson of the Writers' Association of Kenya. Time for writing has been allocated to the evenings when she returns home from work.

Since 1983, Grace Ogot's attempts to write creatively have been curtailed. President Daniel arap Moi appointed her a nominated member of parliament in October 1983. In July 1985, Ogot made history when she resigned as a nominated MP to contest successfully the GEM constituency by-election. ^{In Kenya this was} ~~Her decision set precedence as~~ the first time in Kenya that a nominated MP resigned from parliament to seek an electoral mandate. When one looks at Grace Ogot's versatile career, ~~it is noted that she leads her life exactly like she described a writer's role in Kenyan society in 1974:~~

~~I think it's good just to create a work of art. Now~~
~~if it fits into any categories, fine. If it doesn't.~~

one must admire her energy, persistence, and pioneering spirit. She has made her distinctive mark on Kenyan literature and politics. As a writer ^{probably} she will be remembered best for her meticulous documentation in fiction of Luo customs, legends and history.

Insert bibliographical entries from p. 1.

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fit, you still remain supreme. Because after all the writer or story teller is a free agent unto himself.

Ogot's own life and energy parallel some of the undiscovered stories that she has been so eager to put in writing. Also, her simplistic style of writing merits serious consideration in recognition of her meticulous documentation of Luo customs, legends, and history.

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- Helen Mwanzi, Notes on Grace Ogot's Land Without Thunder (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books, 1982);
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Quotations on page 2

1. See Ganjuly's interview in Femina (1979), p. 39
2. See Lindfors' interview in WLWE (1979), p. 57.

Quotation on page 3

1. See Burness' interview in Wanasema (1985), p. 61.

Quotation on page 4

1. See Lindfors' interview in WLWE (1979), p. 57.

Quotations on page 5

1. See Lindfors' interview in WLWE (1979), p. 59.
2. See Ogot's "New York," from The Island of Tears (1980), p. 22.

Quotations on page 6

1. See Nichols' interview in African Writers at the Microphone (1985), p. 109.
2. See Burness' interview in Wanasema (1985), p. 64.

Quotation on page 7

1. See Mwanzi's Notes on Grace Ogot's Land Without Thunder (1982), p. 3.

Quotation on page 8

1. See Ogot's "The Professor," from The Other Woman (1977), p. 242.

Quotations on page 9

1. See Lindfors' interview in WLWE (1979), p. 63.
2. See Nichols' African Writers at the Microphone (1985), p. 112.