

<< by different authors (in contrast to those by the same author) through their increasing ascendancy get notably suspect as doing a disservice to the literary canon because most of the new talents that have been published in anthologies do not become fully fledged artists with robust voices, vision and literary careers. Their expressions are mainly scanty and incidental fly-by-nights existing 'obscurely' only on the pages of the anthologies.

In view of this, it is worth reiterating that artistic production is still largely an individualistic pursuit. Robust and vibrant artistic individuality, expressed in equally robust and vibrant artistic productiveness over a period

of time, engenders a definable, easily recognisable character - call it the corpus of the artist - and thus establishes a lasting thematic, stylistic and technical basis for consistent reference and discussion.

Hopefully, the writers within *Trembling Leaves*, would grow far beyond their tentativeness and their short-stories, and in time establish, each of them, their unique, vibrant voices, vision and styles, and thereby contribute a meaningful plus to the prestige of the heritage they are committed to uphold.

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## From your child, with love

**Lookman Sanusi, Toyin Adewale, Richard Mammah (eds), OPEBI THE HUNTER AND OTHER STORIES, Synergy Educational (with Mace Books), Lagos, 1999, 72pp.**

**A**N experimental literary offering. Nineteen stories produced by certain Nigerian primary school pupils under the auspices of Synergy Educational's story writing competition, initiates the Nigerian literary landscape into a new tradition of children literature written by children themselves. This example is an effective challenge to a hitherto dominant tradition of children stories written by adults from the perspective and for the perspective of the child. Examples of the stories abound: *The Drummer Boy* by Cyprian Ekwensi, *Chike And The River* by Chinua Achebe, *Without A Silverspoon* by Eddie Iroh and so on. These books, by every intent and purpose, have been and will continue to be considered and accepted with an appropriate seriousness befitting the established literary canon.

In fact, after an adult reading of *Opebi The Hunter*, the feeling that develops is that of a pleasant encounter of a curio: an aggregation of children's perceptive and cognitive potentialities clothed by a very raw innocence, naivety and promise. Seriousness of acceptance and consideration may not be on immediate response, aided by a nagging suspicion woven from such puzzling thoughts as: aren't these stories merely a rehash of those heard from adults? Are they really original and imaginative? Can children really be storytellers with a confidence and deliberateness of thematic and technical intent comparable to the matured and experienced mind of the adult storytellers? Can these stories stand rigorous criticism?

Yet the anthology is truly a surprising reflection of the narrative imaginativeness and effort of very young people who, from the newest seeds which in the sprouting stage of this literary offering, will grow to become formidable materials for further literary growth and expansion. This is the conviction and vision of the editors and publishers and thus, the stories are presented as a serious and ingenious affair, to which a reader's consideration is understandably important.

The stories are mostly, and essentially, moralistic-didactic portraitures, animal and human stories operating within the mode and tradition of oral literature which in this instance are expressed and presented in the written medium. The resources of orality as regards development and presentation (thematic and structural) are judiciously adhered to and utilised.

The themes examined which are varied, are of the consequences of greed, arrogance, jealousy, larceny, lasciviousness and of being talkative; others are retribution or poetic justice in the face of inhuman treatment or evil and the glories of responsibility and humanness.

With the exception 'The Promise', 'The Wicked Nurse', 'The Stranger', 'Opebi The Hunter' and 'Oliaku And Ego', all the other stories (exemplified by 'The Blessed Family') are very restricted in development. But what they lack in length is compensated for by a certain succinctness and ingenuity of thematic unfolding. 'Joromi The Good Boy' expresses in a deeply touching manner the inevitability and finality of death. Joromi is 'a

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very good boy... respected his elders and everyone liked him' (p.55). Yet, in spite of this, he is poisoned by his jealous friends at a party and this sets in motion the process of his death. With a moving song of anguish and helplessness by both mother and child, his mother 'laid out his bed and Joromi lay down and died'. The essential goodness of Joromi, his loss of father at a very tender age, as well as the pointless poisoning by friends accentuates the impact of his undeserved, unexpected tragic end. By contrast, the assured death of Obi in 'The Wicked Step-mother' seems a well deserved punishment for a mother who has inadvertently poisoned her own son while in actuality she aims to eliminate by food poisoning the two children of her rival in marriage. Much resembling this mother is Okima in 'The Wicked Nurse' who loses her only child to death instigated by retribution. Her wickedness, by a pattern of not paying attention to patients, goes too far when she unknowingly refuses to attend to her own daughter who has been brought into hospital after being knocked down by a vehicle.

'Musa And The Big Fish' is a grisly, incredible tale. A headstrong Musa, defying his father's warning, goes afishing and encounters a mysterious fish that talks. On the request of the fish, Musa will kill, cut, fry and ultimately eat the fish. Because of this, his stomach swells so much that it fills a whole room until he dies. There is magical realism in this, which exists also in 'The Magic Needle'. A tailor's lazy wife uses a certain needle brought by an old man to sew, and after that, whatever she touches grow very big in size. The realism becomes more absurdly fanciful in 'The Naughty Boy' wherein a snake takes John away for three years. When he is eventually returned, he is completely reformed of his naughtiness. Oliaku and Ego are carried off to safety by an Eagle from an angry mob in 'Oliaku and Ego'. Opebi converses with a talking human skull in 'Opebi The Hunter'.

'The Wife Who Could Not Cook' extends the limit of implausibility by an original, very farcical use of hyperbole. To prepare a simple meal of pounded yam and vegetable, Bisi, a very beautiful wife, goes through the ridiculous process of buying and jumbling together 'one dozen tubers of yam, three packets of sugar, two packets of salt, a basket of pepper, a packet of tomatoes, two tins of milk, a tin of Bournvita and a big bunch of vegetables' (p.21). The husband 'tasted the food and shouted! 'Bisi ate it and fell sick!'. 'The Bird And The Golden Cage' expresses how the simplicity of a substantial choice or possession rates higher in a bird's perception

vis-à-vis the menacing glamour of life offered in a prescribed and caged environment. The bird's life in its nest, accompanied by its chicks, in the forest is free, unfettered and meaningful. This contrasts fundamentally with the loneliness, circumscription and emptiness of life in a supposedly golden cage. What is in focus here is the vanity and ultimate pointlessness of a wholly materialistic and ostentatious mode of existence.

'The Promise' which is the most thematically and structurally comprehensive of the stories, is a tale about love which is genuine, deep and resilient. Love, by the travails of Amina and Tunde, is portrayed as patient, long-suffering, result-oriented and having an uncanny power to surmount obstacles. The love hinges on a promise of the two lovers to marry beyond their educational pursuits. But the realisation of this through the years is tortuous as both have to overcome, firstly, the sentimental restrictions of their classically opposed backgrounds and circumstances: because Tunde, the boy, is from a poor home, a Christian and a Yoruba, whereas Amina, the girl, is of a rich family, a Muslim and an Hausa. Secondly, they will have to overcome the sudden and unexpected attempt of Amina's father to marry her to the son of his friend in Kaduna. Divine intervention in the form of a motor accident thwarts this marital attempt because Amina is critically injured and her brother loses his life. What is more, Amina's whereabouts is unknown to her lover and parents till years later. But what is to the advantage of the lovers' prospect is their education, liberality, honesty, generosity and an infinite dedication to each other's happiness. The story ends on a very happy note as their promise is eventually realised.

'The Stranger' expounds a vision of an ideal society, where people show concern for one another, trust themselves and completely abhor stealing. It is a fundamental contradiction of what is our problematic world today where evil reigns supreme and stealing and corruption are elevated to the ideals. The stranger is an image of a foreign and corruptive influence intruding into the community. But the deleterious impact of his thieving presence is quickly observed by the people and the authority and is effectively checked through a procedure unique to the society.

Though scanty in many respects and deserving of some improvement, it is a commendable effort that aims to sustain the presence and tempo of literary activity among a very young generation. It reassures that the folk-tale of traditional Africa is still very much alive and well, even surprisingly among those

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<< very young people who are born and bred within the city. The city is the veritable repository of urbane, very mundane cross-cultures, the astute purveyor of foreign influences and imitations: it is the variegated cosmopolis that thoroughly and relentlessly reaches out to everyone through its plural-

istic radios, televisions and newspapers. But in spite of all this, the young storytellers of *Opebi* demonstrate original cultural responsiveness and continuity and a commitment to a better humanity.

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## If you can talk you can sing

BY HELEN ATAWUBE YITAH

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**Marion Molteno, IF YOU CAN WALK YOU CAN DANCE, Shola Books, London, 1998, 405pp.**

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**I**f you can walk you can dance is Marion Molteno's third work of fiction. It is also the winning entry for the year 1999's Best Book Category of the Commonwealth Writers' prize for the Africa region. Considering the fact that the selection process for this prize is one of the most rigorous in the world today, a book like this must have a lot to its credit. A general trend among writers of literature had been to take the English man's language, dislocate his syntax, recharge his words with new strength and, more importantly, new meaning. Molteno is no exception.

The novel takes its title from a Zimbabwean saying, 'If you can walk, you can dance; if you can talk, you can sing'. It is a stunning piece of work, deeply imaginative, psychologically subtle and overwhelmingly musical. In fact, the world of the novel is a dance into discovery, of inner being, of the 'foreigner-element' in man, that part of him that is always craving to be recognised, to be known.

The book is not easily categorisable under any of the common labels for novels - thriller, adventure story, picaresque, epic, etc - because it is all of these and more. It ostensibly tells the story of Jennie, a young white South African lady. Born in Bloemfontein into a wealthy family, Jennie is not amenable to circumscription of any kind. She is resigned to living in reaction against any external imposition, or in relief from it, a quality that sets her constantly moving across borders, across cultures, touching and being touched by the people she encounters. In this sense the novel is a complex of many stories - of Neil the musician, Michael the retarded child, the village women of Mbabane and the Nyika Plateau.

As we watch Jennie's transformation from the little girl whose boundaries, geographical and otherwise, are limited (by herself) to her father's house and its garden, into the student-turned-human rights activist, and then the exile who is always both at home and a stranger wherever she goes, we also appreciate the compelling changes of time, place and circumstances which hurry her from one socio-political-personal scene to another.

For Jennie, music is both a metaphor and a reality. This duality is one fascinating quality of the novel which has to be experienced to be appreciated. It successfully fuses the simple with the complex, the elliptical with the elaborate, strange with familiar. Perhaps it is Jennie's (and Molteno's) way of coming to terms with the chaos of the modern world. Which is why the harmonising effect of music plays such an important role in the novel.

The mbira, the string musical instrument that was an old Swazi man's parting gift, symbolises in the novel cords of togetherness, participation and above all, self-discovery. The resulting music, alone or with accompaniment, is a release of synergy that is arresting, which is why it always catches a crowd. In such moments 'the whole universe is a dance' in which every round opens new vistas of knowledge, creative energy and a new set of motives which activates the next round. False steps are not noticed, or if they are, there is neither time nor need to dwell on them. Music is the reason for being, and everyone is in harmony.