

<< 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.

Yitah is of the University of Ghana, Legon.

## If you can talk you can sing BY HELEN ATAWUBE YITAH

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

**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.