

Books: African Series

One has no excuse these days to remain ignorant of the works of African Writers. In fact, they are making quite an impact in present day Literature. The Heinemann press provides a variety of works in the African Series that is extremely refreshing and rewarding to read. The collection is quite a mixed bag. ABIA is undertaking a review of these works beginning with the following:

1. Francis Selormey's — "The Narrow Path"
2. Samkange's — "On Trial for my Country"
3. Aluko's — "One man, one wife"
4. Kachingwe's — "No Easy Task"

Keep an eye on this column for you may soon have the pleasure of reading a Review of your own favourite Writers.

I. THE NARROW PATH

Number of Pages: 183

Price: 5/-

"Every time you see a boy passing, slap him, for, if he has not just done something wrong, he is about to do it." The truth of this Irish proverb is amply illustrated in "The Narrow Path". Kofi, the narrator and central character attracts trouble like a magnet. He steals, tells tales, and gambles away his school fees, and yet, Francis Selormey succeeds in making him a totally sympathetic character, standing beyond his years. Kofi has a sensitivity and depth of understanding of his family into relief. We learn to understand Kofi's life, also through the headmaster, who is afraid to show affection in case it should be mistaken for weakness, and his mother who causes a temporary split in the family because of her inability to live with her in-laws.

When one comes to judge this novel, one overlooks the stylistic immaturities and the grammatical errors because of the sincerity of the writer. His characters, particularly the galaxy of hungry, mischievous boys, are realistically drawn and sharply differentiated. When customs and beliefs are introduced they become an integral part of the plot, and never distract one from the main issues.

"The Narrow Path" is a simple story with few undercurrents or sub plots but it is told with great sympathy, and has the humour and the pathos of an African "Huckleberry Finn".

II. ON TRIAL FOR MY COUNTRY

Number of Pages:

Price:

"On Trial for My Country" is a most unusual novel. It deals with the creation of Rhodesia and the clash between Rhodes and Lobengula, king of the Amandebele. But, it is very much more than this. After a traditional type

novel, Stanlake Samkange tells the story through the medium of an other-worldly law court. He uses Gobinsimbi Khumalo as his device, for Khumalo had died and returned to life after witnessing the trials of Rhodes and Lobengula. As the title suggests, both men are on trial for their country, but, soon the scope of the novel deepens. White and black behaviour, colonial policy and even Christianity are put on trial. Was Obangula a strong or weak ruler? Did he tell his birthright or, was he a victim of unscrupulous men? Did Rhodes attempt to be straight-forward in his dealings with the Amandebele or did he feel that the end justified any means? Was he really only concerned with the glory of England or did the lust for power corrupt him? Fascinating questions All posed by the writer, but the answers are only implied. We can however Khumalo's appraisal that the answers are "in the bosom of the spirits" or we can sift the evidence for ourselves and reach our own conclusions. Samkange appears scrupulously just. He uses a technique of balance—Lobengula and Rhodes are both tried by fathers they have disappointed. Both are to be judged according to the ethical standards of their own day and their own people. Both call witnesses to their defence. Both stand revealed in all their humanity—in their weakness and strength. The balance is maintained throughout as the scene swings from the one "Court" to the other, frequently giving the same information from different angles. Samkange certainly contrasts the simplicity and kindness of the African with the greed and duplicity of the whiteman, but an occasional reference to African cruelty helps to restore the balance.

Gradually, in the trials, the history of the destruction of an African, and the creation of a British Empire, is unfolded, and the reader, who has listened to all the evidence is left to consider his verdict.

"On Trial for My Country" is extremely well written. At a time when one could understand a Rhodesian being anti-British or belligerently pro-African, Samkange's attitude is mature and scholarly. Occasionally the novel is repetitive and overdocumented, but this is compensated for by flashes of rich, unexpected humour, as when, Lobengula, in perplexity, offers to marry Queen Victoria as a way out of his dilemma, and is puzzled that his offer has been ignored!

The opening and concluding chapters form a bridge, linking the past, the present, and the world to come, and it is by this device of fitting his trials into a background of popular belief that he Africanises his story and prepares the reader to accept the evidence of the spirit world.

III. ONE MAN, ONE WIFE

Price:

Number of Pages:

What Chinua Achebe did for the Igbo in "Things Fall Apart" and "Arrow of God", Aluko has attempted to do in "One Man, One Wife". The novel is centred around the life of Isolo village and gives an account of the fluctuations of religious zeal. Shonponna, the God of smallpox, and the needs of the villagers, a following which increases or decreases according to each of them and there are many sub plots, but, the thread running through each of them—uniting it to the main theme is the hardship attached to the Christian doctrine— one man, one wife.

We have many excellent character sketches, the best of all being Royasin, (one time village catechist, expelled from the church after being accused of having an affair with Jacob's wife), who set himself up as a "Public Letter Writer, Friend of the Illiterate, Advocate of the Oppressed". He is intoxicated with the sound of words, and, knowing how to wield them, becomes extremely prosperous in his new calling. Apart from Royasin, we meet Bible Jeregers, trapped between the traditional and the whiteman's religion. Aluko describes a life which he knows very well, and, it is, largely, the interest of the subject matter which impresses the reader. Too often his story is disjointed or unrealistic, but, he has caught and transmitted the atmosphere of village life with its feuds and scandals, its weaknesses and strength.

IV. NO EASY TASK

Number of Pages:

Price:

Frequently in English literature, one comes across a novel whose plot is derivative and so it reminds one of other books and other writers. It was inevitable that this would happen in African literature, as it has done in, "No Easy Task". This novel leaves one with the feeling that one has read it before, and, in a sense, one has. It is one more political novel which describes a British colony's struggle for freedom, but, Kachingwe rarely succeeds in persuading the reader that he is writing about particular people, in a particular country at a particular time. The events could have taken place almost anywhere, but this impression does not universalise the action. Instead, it produces a feeling of unreality. When Kachingwe is content to report on rallies or the treatment of prisoners or the arrival at the airport of V.I.P.s., his style is racy and one's interest is held, but he lacks the architectonic skill of a really great novelist. His characters are flat; his dialogue is often forced; the pseudo-poetic element in his language jars and he has a tendency to moralize.

Having said all that, it is perhaps only fair to add that one cannot expect all African novels to be masterpieces. The title "No Easy Task" is perhaps more appropriate than the author intended, but the story is still interesting even though, it is unoriginally treated.

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