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the jacket summary evokes.

And Mother Figures? Archetypal, Sonless Mother in patriarchal Society (allegorised not just in Fatima’s mother, but also in Sigeema and the Queen in one of the folk tales) is more central to the novel than the specific ‘sonless mother’ of Fatima. So, the emotionally loaded term ‘tragedy’ used in the jacket summary does not really apply to The Tent. Tragedy presupposes three-dimensional characters with whom you can sympathise, development, conflict and so on. All we know about Fatima’s pale mother, all Fatima herself knows about her, is that she sobs all day in her dark room, probably because of all the miscarriages she has had. Hardly material for ‘tragedy’. Neither, grow fond of her, though we do, is Fatima. A psychic condition which goes from bad to worse and finally, to worst simply cannot be plotted against the tragic curve.

Women. Bedouin, sonless and oppressed, patriarch - and a Western woman. If the jacket summary did not spotlight her, a less ‘sophisticated’ reader, while obviously noticing Ann’s strange presence in the novel would have placed her on equal format footing as, say, Mouha the gypsy and may well have asked: ‘just what is this unlikely, anomalous foreigner doing in a tale of cloistered Bedouin women?’ An ‘academic’ reader however, would quickly recognise that though her appearance in the novel is quite brief, Ann is being used to make a (by now perhaps trite) point, namely: though power is gendered (men tend to have more power to make life-affecting decisions than do women especially in ‘traditional society’), nonetheless, ‘male’ is a social construct, and women can occupy a subjucative ‘male’ position vi-a-vits other women. Hakima with her prodding cane and Ann are such women - except that Ann is also a Westerner an ‘Orientalist’ who educates a native because she wants her horse and also that she can amuse her with exotic folk tales and songs, a Westerner whose knowledge of modern health practices leads to Fatima’s (already gangrenous) leg being amputated. The jacket summary packaging of the novel simply mirrors what a post-colonial/feminist reading of The Tent would, inevitably, do: it zooms in on Ann, even if Ann is as insubstantial a shade in Fatima’s sensitive, fragile psyche as are the other characters, even if Fatima is already pretty well oppressed, marginalised and schizophrenic long before Ann comes into picture.

There is something in this novel for everyone - even for the incorrigible Orientalist Western male who might voyeuristically want the ‘intimate glimpse inside the women’s quarters’ which the jacket promises. For the ‘average’ reader who does want to be taxed with a high dose of complexity or ambiguity, there are beautiful images, a myriad of lovely tales and symbols that do not overwhelm by their density. A reader who would be put off by the kind of novel that goes down well with a ‘politically correct’ audience while at the same time retaining a veneer of exoticism to appeal to the Orientalist in us all, would do well not to heed the signs on the jacket summary of this edition of The Tent. Instead of heeding them, the reader can go straight from the jacket cover, beautifully illustrated by Hod Lutfi, to the elegantly translated ‘thing itself’.

Elmessiri writes for Alhaim Weekly in Egypt

Writers, Natives and Former Colonies

BY JOHN OTU

Part of the exhilaration and enduring beauty of well-told tales is in the ability of the storyteller to devise apparently new props with which to reformulate the tale. When the mode of narration has become fixed perhaps because of its ubiquity, there is the possibility that even fresh ideas which the author throws up would inadvertently be demystified.

Only few readers would be willing to go the whole hog and, of course, fewer critics approve the author’s power of inventiveness


Arundhati Roy. THE GOD OF SMALL THINGS, Flamingo, London. 335pp
in such a situation. Moreover no matter how barren or uninteresting are the ideas underscored by any given writer, her/his readiness to weave new structures to encapsulate the seemingly ordinary message would cause many readers to applaud her/his craftsmanship.

Two women writers unique in some ways but sharing a number of qualities, prominent of which is the fact that they are natives of some of the world's former colonies, compel an exploration of two recent novels, the work of the two authors- Kicking Tongues and Our Wife and Other Stories.

Karen King-Aribisala's latest work and The God of Small Things the only published fiction so far by Indian author Arundhati Roy which won the Booker prize in 1997.

King-Aribisala's Our Wife and Other Stories had earlier in 1990/91 also won the Commonwealth Writer's prize for the Best First Book category (African Region).

She (King-Aribisala) is for her own part both Guyanese and Nigerian, the dual heritage, a result of her marriage to a Nigerian. Hence it is little wonder that their stories reflect the rich folk style reminiscent of the pristine tales told in Africa and the diaspora. And, by extension, a subversion of traditional Western modes of narration even though, in King-Aribisala's case, there is the veneer of the structure of Chaucer's Canterbury Tales. Which is why the two writers can be read as partly adding to the swelling corpus of post colonial literatures. The caveat is used partly because while it is safely arguable that their modes of narration reflect the eclectic and unpredictable heave of folktales, the texts nevertheless underscore messages of universal applicability.

In The God of Small Things Arundhati Roy tells the story of the caste system prevalent in India in which the Paravans (the untouchables) are discriminated against in virtually all spheres of life by the Brahmins (the free-born). Roy symbolically puts the two against each other with the Brahmins, of course, defeating the Paravans and thus, perpetuating, the segregationist system. This is quite a commonplace theme, especially in India. But Roy transforms what otherwise could have been a dreary and uninteresting discourse into a lifting if suspenseful narration. The text confounds even the most assured reader in that it rigmorasles and hedges like a coquette. The reader of Roy's novel cannot pre-determine, even by a clever guess the heave and breath of The God of Small Things. This is because the novel defies the orthodox structure of beginning, middle and end. In fact, the beginning is the end and the end, the beginning, validating TS. Eliot's dictum in 'Little Gidding' that in our beginning, is our end. The author marshals one signifier, suspends it in mid-stream, introduces a seemingly countervailing one, suspends it, introduces another, ad infinitum in a nexus of counter-balancing or unpredictable signifiers until the very end when the apparently disparate and muted signifiers merge into one concrete dramatised referent: the author's disapporation of India's caste system. No doubt the impatient reader would be unable to endure this endless game of signifier deferral. However, the joy derivable at the very end approximates an orgiastic pleasure and hence, the uniqueness of this novel.

The main characters Ammu and Velutha, represent the freeborn and the untouchable respectively. However, the two, by a tortuous stroke, fall in love with each other in spite of the fatal potentiality of the union. It is significant that Ammu hails from the Kochanma family, which despite owning the paradise pickles company which should cater for the country's basic needs, is an irrepressible Brahmin. Similarly, despite the fact that Velutha has been apparently accepted into the Kochanma family and adored by Rahel and Esthappen - Ammu's children - perhaps because of his respectable genius at repairing household wares, he is eventually ostracised by the family and beaten to death by the police, on the bidding of the Kochanmas, for making love to Ammu. Here, Roy rubs in the message: a natural emotion of love is damned by the invocation of a wicked and segregationist law by dyed-in-the-wool traditionalists. The author makes Esthappen and Rahel - symbols of the younger generation - witness to good effect, Velutha's brutalisation by the police for loving their mother, who had been deserted by a freeborn husband. The narrator's words are full of sarcasm and loathing for the whole caste system at this point:

What Esthappen and Rahel witnessed that morning, though they didn't know it then, was a clinical demonstration in controlled conditions (this was not war afterall, or genocide of human nature's pursuit of ascendency. Structure, Order, Complete monopoly. It was human history masquerading as God's purpose, revealing herself to an under-age audience. P309.

Is it therefore any wonder that when
Rahel - Ammu's daughter - wants to marry she 'drifts into (it) lifee a passenger drifts to-
wards an unoccupied chair in an airport lounge?' (p. 18). Apparently, the adults have
eaten sour grapes and now the children's
teeth are on edge.

However, the point of emphasis is the
uniqueness of Roy's narrative, which, as we
have stated earlier, reaches its climax by dis-
persing with predictable parameters. This
mode is aesthetically fulfilling: the author
dexterously handles the different strands of
the tale until they all culminate in the signi-
fied which bears the ultimate message: the
murder of Velutha by the police for mabing
love to a freeborn. In this narrative, episodes
libe the death of Ammu which should tradi-
tionally and chronologically come after the
death of Velutha come much earlier in the
narrative, in chapter seven (Wisdom Exercise
Notebooks). In the same vein, as early as the
first chapter the marriage of Ammu's daugh-
ter Rahel and the death of Sophie Mol are
already intimated even before Ammu's own
marriage is broached. This is analogous to
Toni Morrison's style in Beloved, a style de-
scribable as the tale in a circle. In the hands
of Roy, these snippets of tenebrous signifiers
are tied together at the end of the novel just
as Morrison's Beloved resolves numerous plot
detours.

It bears remarking that the aesthetics of
The God of Small Things is not extrinsic but
intrinsic in the sense that the author, albeit
in the language of indirectness, weaves good
art into this novel in the story of the Kathakali
man in chapter twelve (Kochu Thomban). A
juxtaposition of the style in the story told by
the Kathakali man and in the overall craft of
the book reveals some deliberate coinci-
dence between the two. Hence, by meta-
phoric extension, the Kathakali man who, in
telling stories, can 'punish it, send it up like a
bubble... wrestle it to the ground and let it go
again... (who) can stop for hours to examine
a wilting leaf' (pp. 229/230) is Arundhati Roy
wrestling with the labyrinthine tale of The
God of Small Things.

Karen King-Aribisala also reinvents the
tale, but differently, in Kicking Tongues. She
on her own part levels out the grey areas
existing between prose and poetry and
thereby brings about a striving coalescence
of the two genres. In doing so, she re-affirms
the tenuousness of the differences between
literary genres in general and between po-
etic prose in particular. For her, it seems, the
compartmentalisation of literature into
genres is bound to circumscribe the diverse
resonance of the subject itself and hence, has
inaugurated an uncanny but enriching unity
between the traditionally polarised genres.

However, the mutual existence of prose
and poetry in Kicking Tongues is not merely
designed to achieve aesthetic effect but to
reflect the troubled activity of what she de-
scribes as the kicking tongue. A tongue kicks
in a moment of fury or rage and so its activ-
ity cannot but be ambivalent: kicking against
the truth or kicking against lies. King-Aribisala
carefully privileges the latter function of the
tongue over the former. Hence, the narrator
in the Epilogue regales us with:

The Lord
Hath done
Great things
For them
For us
He has done great things
Blessed us
Blessed
As we are
With tongues
Which
Kick
The truth
TONGUES RISING UP
AND KICKING DOWN PERVERSITIES (pp.241/242)

With the above graphological permutation, the author concentrates the action of the tongue which kicks against lies and roots for truth rather than that which privileges lies over truth. The consequence of the preference of lies is often grave: a free and fair election on June 12 1993 in Nigeria won by businessman politician Moshood Abiola was truncated, she says, by lying tongues kicking against truth.

From the outset of the novel in ‘the journey to Abuja’, the tongues have begun to kick, broaching diverse issues of importance to both Nigeria and humanity in general. Significantly also, the novel ends with the kicking tongue, a factor which underscores the text's constitutive unity.

Kicking Tongues basically thematises the necessity for peace and unity in the world. In this regard, the author debunks all war-inducing cleavages, preoccupied as she is with integrating opposites. This is a recurring theme in the novel which is underscored by the pastor through the black lady who says, ‘Race is just another barrier in life to prevent us from doing good, and which people use to separate us from the love of God.’

This is the point at which Kicking Tongues intersects with Roy’s The God of Small Things, a pointer to the fact that artists, in keeping with the postulate of Carl Jung, draw on the unpredictable and subtle vein of pristine tale by telling tales characterised by seemingly digressive and unwieldy plots.

This is part of the staple features of stories told in the former colonies. Meaning was never deduced by word-for-word correspondence but the accretion of the tales. The meaning of a tale was often unraveled through song, puns and in fact, the techniques of the story within a story. Arundhati Roy and Karen King-Aribisala have simply exhumed this rich medley to enrich the contemporary novel.

Olu is a member of the Editorial Board of the Nigerian Guardian

A cultural economy of the book in Africa

BY ODIA OFEIMUN

James Gibbs, Jack Mapanje (eds)

AFRICAN literature and publishing, especially in the last quarter of the 20th Century, appeared to be governed by a vicious circle: the more the writers' conferences, bookfairs, publishers' get-togethers and book foundations organised, the more the problems of the