

"Cry, The Beloved Country"

Rand 10/11/13
Daily Mail
25-9-48

IT is difficult for us, living here in South Africa, to see our Native problems in a true perspective. Perhaps that is the reason why it was not until Alan Paton was travelling abroad and thousands of miles away that he was seized with the urge to write: "Cry, the Beloved Country" (London: Jonathan Cape), which is a complete vision of the whole complex panorama of transition through which our Native peoples are now living.

Johannesburg Station Any Morning

A very good preparation for reading it intelligently is to go down to Johannesburg Station at nine o'clock in the morning and watch the Natal train come in and pour its passenger-load of problems on the platform. This stream of humanity is so vividly heterogeneous that you cannot fail to be shocked by it into a sudden, sharp realisation of the extent of Johannesburg's impact upon these people, and it is precisely this impact which is the theme and impulse of the book.

You will see here both ends of the scale of black humanity: respectable, confident citizens on the one hand, newspaper under arm, spectacles on nose, more or less secure in an understanding of city life, no longer baffled by the laws of passes or brewing; and on the other, the new arrivals, carrying their strangeness with simple dignity, their innocence as yet untouched by the powers of the unknown. And between these two extremes you have the heart-breaking hordes of the imperfectly absorbed: the shocking by-products of this relentless process. There are the shrill-voiced girls with patchy rouge and lip-stick and cigarettes, screaming conversation spiked with "Amen!" and there are the flashy youths sporting both spats and blankets—the whole army of the in-betweens.

"Cry, the Beloved Country" translates this piece of living history into terms of a single family, a family whose fortunes could certainly be matched in thousands of real cases, because its essence is true.

Stephen Kumalo is a Zulu minister of the Anglican Church, living a useful life in his native Zululand, but aware through his own family and others around him of the influence of Johannesburg upon his people. It is always there, a fascinating and

mysterious power, attracting and beckoning, never letting go. And now there is a summons from a brother-minister in Johannesburg, begging Kumalo to come because his sister needs him. The whole of the story is his search for the scattered members of his family, the search and the heartbreaking findings.

The sister has long ago lost track of the husband she herself came to seek, and she has abandoned domestic arts for prostitution and brewing. The loved son on whom the old man's pride and hopes have centred is traced from place to place and finally found in tragedy. Bad company and a general incapacity to find his own niche in any scheme of things have led him from delinquency to murder. The girl with whom the son has been living presents a new problem: she is a city product compounded of innocence and depravity, a child who knows nothing of any reasonable law or tradition, yet has an instinctive feeling for the security she lacks. And an elder brother has developed through education and a cock-eyed sort of sophistication into a cheap politician and agitator.

This Odyssey Of Disillusion

Through all this odyssey of disillusion, Kumalo preserves his own integrity, his stolid acceptance and approval of the white man's world. Few relevant details of Johannesburg life are missing, and all are fitted into place with accuracy and a sure sense of proportion. There is a fine appreciation of the work of the late Professor Hoernlé put into the mouth of the friendly fellow-priest. There is the sympathetic white man arranging lifts into Alexandra Township during the bus-strike, the fair-minded lawyer who arranges a *pro-deo* defence for Kumalo's son. All these awaken sensitive response in Kumalo. On the other hand there is the bitterly penetrating chatter of a party of well-off white women who discuss and dismiss the problem of giving these creatures somewhere to play — a recreation place—but not here, somewhere else, somewhere a long way off.

To read this fine book is to undertake a new step in our own education. The story itself is both moving and compelling; the writing fits its subject like a skin, and like a skin is at once both perfect and unobtrusive.

It is one of the most significant pieces of literature ever to come out of Africa.