

result is not abstraction, but surrealism. The Nok figures two thousand years old, the Ibo masks, the Ijo masks and ancestral screens, countless examples could be given of the element of surrealism which has survived in West Africa from the remote past. In recent years we have seen surrealism flourishing in West African literature in the novels of Amos Tutuola and Fagunwa and the plays of Wole Soyinka.

Readers of the novels of Amos Tutuola will be aware of the burgeoning pressure of African religion with its world of teeming spirits. It is the awareness of spirits of fantastic shapes and strange potentialities which can thrust their presence into the lives of ordinary people at any time or place which forms the background to the surrealist qualities of African art. A stage is set for the controlled influence of these spirits in the masquerade; but the masquerade is not necessarily a religious ceremony. It is an entertainment, a theatrical performance, in which the spirits and their powers can be used to amuse, to frighten and excite by their near presence, and to caricature and criticise society. The masquerader possessed by a spirit is above the rules which govern everyday living and he can give voice to hopes and fears and social criticism which are not open to him in ordinary society. The men who perform the masquerade are artists who have rejected the codes and values of everyday living. The techniques of drumming and dancing, the creative inventions of the masquerade are jealously guarded properties which are often brought from groups in other villages.

SURREALISM THEREFORE IS BUILT INTO the artistic institutions of West African society and the romantic artist who expresses his alienation from the status-seeking of social groups is not just an invention of modern Europe. The surrealism of Africa has acted as a fund of inspiration for the strange figures in the early work of Ben Enwonwu, for the man-animals in the sculpture of Vincent Kofi, and the paintings of Demas Nwoko and Uche Okeke. It has also inspired the theatre designs of Nwoko for the Palm-Wine Drinkard of Tutuola's novels staged by the School of Drama in Ibadan, with Ogunmola whose folk-opera drummers and musicians owe their origins to the masquerade.

It is not to be wondered at therefore that when etching and lithography were introduced to Nigeria they should have produced some extraordinary developments in surrealism. Goya and Odilon Redon have explored the dark depths and strange revelations of the etcher's plate and needle in Europe. Seven Seven of Mbari Oshogbo has added a new dimension in making use of his own Nigerian surrealist experience. Opabakope has taken chalk and stone and revealed strange semi-animal, semi-human forms lurking behind the lithographer's veils. Both the naturalism and the surrealism, the dualities of modern African painting can be seen in the exhibitions at the Commonwealth Festival.

Les Grandes Dames

LEWIS NKOSI

NADINE GORDIMER AND DORIS LESSING occupy an enviable place in African letters of English expression. They are the kind of ladies of whom both Jane Austen and George Eliot would certainly approve, one imagines, and yet it pains one to describe them as ladies. For one thing, these ladies deal with the jungle, a society yet unformed, and surely these two grand ladies—if one may call them that—know enough of the jungle to sheathe their knives in their garters. In the company of wild men they are likely to evoke the necessary respect by uncovering enough of thigh to show the flash of steel under the skirt.

Both are pretty. Gordimer is beautiful, in fact. Both are wickedly intelligent. Gordimer's intelligence is even more restless, showy, fussy, prim and complex; you couldn't think of her as having been naive enough to take Marxism seriously—that secular theology, the failure of which provides the mellowing despairing tone to Lessing's *Landlocked*, the fourth sequel in her impressive series of novels published under the title of *The Children of Violence*.

As a matter of fact there is an interesting contrast between the two grand ladies of African letters. Lessing started with an intense involvement with the world of public manners rooted in the conflict of economic classes (read races for classes if you want) and has moved inexorably toward the private; Gordimer has always dealt with the private relationships, the shock of self-recognition, or the awareness of the ugliness of others, but this enquiry into the world was always conducted from the centre of a very private Self, the exploration of which was Gordimer's preference to that of public turbulence. However, as the South African situation grows progressively worse Gordimer has moved further outward to the public arena where the noise is.

AFTER ALL THE THEME of her last novel, *Occasion for Loving*, concerns the collapse of the private in the face of the overwhelming pressures growing from the absurd public demands. In her story, "Through

Time and Distance," the lady has put on flat shoes instead of high heels and is out there running with the mob. Still, in the present volume * of stories there is enough of the earlier Gordimer of *The Soft Voice of the Serpent* or *Six Feet of the Country* to delight those whose concern is mainly with craft, purity of tone, or those marvellous epiphanies which are the special reward of reading through a story like "The African Magician" or "A Company of Laughing Faces."

The short story form still suits Gordimer's fussy temperament better than the novel. In an extended form her primness shows sooner. For instance, she is too appalled by sentimentality, by emotional exuberance, a certain amount of vulgar high spirits, which is almost inescapable in a novel, not to grow tedious by the way she worries prose over the motives of what seem to us simple actions. Her scrupulous intelligence will not allow the simplest emotion to go unchecked, unassessed. For this her indisputable powers of observation have always stood her in good stead.

WHAT IMPRESSES ONE ABOUT DORIS LESSING is her unflinching honesty and the energy which goes into her writing. Her talent is more that of a recorder than that of an act of imagination; her prose is pedestrian, workaday, adequate but rarely rising to a pitch of lyricism. When this honesty is devoted to analysing relationships between men and women the result is devastating. Necessarily, since Doris Lessing is a partisan, the men come off worst of all—petty, cowardly, equivocating and full of vanity. There is just enough of bitchiness in the lady to let her knife glance across the cheek when you are down.

Though the core of this, her latest novel, is the failure of the Communist vision, the discovery of how complex the world really is, it is also a novel dealing with a single woman's continuing search for a truthful life, for fulfilment; finally about her movement from darkness to light. Martha Quest is a truly questing woman. She holds the centre of her life mainly because she doesn't lie—and one suspects that this is also partly her undoing which amounts to two divorces, alienation from family and child, and from all those party members who refuse to readjust their lives to the possibility of a future in which the eschatology of Marxist religion has not been fulfilled.

What finally makes Martha Quest less interesting as a modern heroine is that Miss Lessing is both too close and not removed far enough to make her rounded. She remains too mystical, a figure through which moral judgment is passed on all the others. But who judges her? It is hardly explained how she avoids the lies in a war-time Zambezi where everybody lived by lies and dissimulation. Is she human enough?

As for Miss Lessing's African characters they are totally absurd and nothing more is to be said about them!

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