

*Abyssinian Chronicles* by Moses Isegawa. (Picador).

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Moses Isegawa's debut novel blasts off with perhaps the most arresting opening sentence since Anthony Burgess, in *Earthly Powers*, had the bishop call while his eighty-one year old protagonist was in bed with his catamite. Isegawa's man is more terminally discomfited: "Three final images flashed across Serenity's mind as he disappeared into the jaws of the colossal crocodile . . . ."

Isegawa has set himself the near-impossible task of sustaining for 460 pages the humour and energy of that opening, and it is not surprising that he does not succeed: the novel is over-long and at times painfully laboured.

Still, the first section, "Village Days", constitutes, in its lively depiction of a family blighted by loveless piety and virtuous coercion, a kind of Ugandan *Way of All Flesh*. The unfortunate Serenity, father of the narrator Mugezi, and also and especially Padlock, his holier-than-everybody mother, are comic creations of a high order, even while they energetically embody the arbitrary exercise of power that earns them their place in the thematic structure of the novel.

Isegawa's theme is power and its abuse, and Mugezi's growth to maturity is paralleled by the rise and fall of Idi Amin. This connection is made quite explicit through Mugezi's habit of referring to his father and mother as 'the despots' or 'the dictators', and by his identification, in his resistance to their tyranny, with the heroic coup of the General.

Paradoxically, the novel's concern with power is most cogently embodied in the narrow circle of the family: in extending his subject beyond that, Isegawa over-reaches his own powers. Things go wrong for character and novel alike when Mugezi leaves the village for the city. The kind of metaphorical excess that works so well in the comic context of the family seems over-strained and imprecise when self-consciously applied to a "large" theme: "The skyline, gawking with architectural indigence, towered over the bowl like a row of stained, gap-toothed jawbones. The buildings resembled cracked, time-whipped relics from a decayed epoch."

The theme of power and dictatorship is extended in the account of the Roman Catholic seminary to which Mugezi is sent against his will: here the Church occupies the position of the colonial powers that in other post-colonial novels figure as the centres of influence. The suave apparition of Fr Lageau, the French-Canadian priest,

comes upon the seminary with all the glamour and prestige of the First World: “The fluid movements of his well-tended body was a lucid announcement of naked power, in whose perquisites every optimistic seminarian hoped to share.” Indeed, Fr Lageau is made to bear a metaphorical burden that has more to do with his function in the symbolic scheme of the novel than with the presented reality of the man: “This man also gave off intimations of the World Bank and International Monetary Fund hegemony.”

After the extended battle against his parents and the infatuation with Amin, Mugezi’s liberation from both is perfunctory and unmotivated: “My flirtation with General Amin had ended, killed by the murderous light of truth. I felt I had more or less outgrown the fight with Serenity and Padlock.” More or less outgrowing things, however common in life, hardly constitutes narrative resolution, especially in a novel that promises closure by crocodile.

The two long sections recounting the fall of Amin and its aftermath make for engrossing reading in themselves, but the material is inadequately fictionalised, in that the characters become mere puppets of history. What is lacking here is a fusion of the personal with the public, such as, for instance, Shimmer Chinodya achieves in his novel on the Rhodesian war, *Harvest of Thorns*, where fictional representation becomes a mode of internalised understanding and interpretation as well as of documentation.

There is some attempt to lend personal allure to the narrative by the introduction of love interest, but here, too, the lack of inwardness turns what would be a description of love at first sight into naively banal tumescence: ‘Her wasp waist and solid bum had me bursting with excitement.’ The young lover, achieving his aim, ‘trying to create something new and beautiful’, pays his mistress what must be one of the most disconcertingly pragmatic tributes in all of literature: ‘this was one super-tight woman, the tightest I was ever to encounter.’ Who said romance was dead?

In general, the writing is extremely uneven, occasional flashes of brilliance illuminating stretches of lack-lustre cliché (“With bated breath, the nation watched the negotiations. When the fighting reached Aunt Kasawo’s little town, everyone knew that it was now or never”) and patches of dark-purple prose (“The words dropped from his despotic lips like heavy gongs whose reverberations were accentuated by the red darkness they were uttered in”). Against such overwrought ineptitude must be

placed the novel's strongest narrative ploy, the effortless segueing from first-person narration to full omniscience.

The last section of the novel has Mugezi establishing himself in Amsterdam, partly through love affairs with two consecutive women, whose different styles of domination represent the last forms of dictatorship that Mugezi needs to resist. Here, too, the narrative is enlivened by, at last, a full account of Serenity's fateful encounter with the crocodile – and, to boot, of Padlock's apotheosis by buffalo.

The novel closes on Mugezi sitting on the Central Station, alone, friendless, homeless, but grown-up and free. *Abyssinian Chronicles* is in essence a Bildungsroman, and like others of the genre (*Sons and Lovers*, say, or *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*), leaves its protagonist at the end with nothing but the determination to commence Life.

It may not bode well for Isegawa's development as a writer that the strongest parts of his first novel – those depicting village life in Uganda – deal with experiences that he will probably leave behind him (he has lived for the past ten years in Amsterdam). Still, critics fulfil their highest function in being proved wrong, and I look forward to being proved wrong by Moses Isegawa.