

After the Eclipse by Tom Rymour (Discobolus)

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In *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) Jonathan Swift sent his protagonist to what we would now call a parallel universe, a country operating according to its own rules and assumptions in blissful ignorance of any others. Swift's purpose, of course, was to raise a satirical eyebrow at his own society, no less blandly assuming that its own way of doing was the right and natural one.

Later writers, like Samuel Butler in *Erewhon* (1872) and Aldous Huxley in *Brave New World* (1932) have used the same technique; indeed, the grotesque little society of South Park, is clearly intended as a comment on the grotesque large society of the United States and its imitators.

After the Eclipse, which won the Sanlam Literary Award, is an African creation in the same tradition. The country of Rudisha, somewhere in the 23rd century, offers an inversion of the values of ... well, Rhodesia three centuries earlier, and by extension any social system based on racial discrimination.

Rhudisha is run by a small, privileged, intolerant, racist minority, which happens to be black. The Whites, living in squalor in their ghettos and shanty towns, are for the most part menial labourers or janissaries, a kind of secret police of the regime. They are regarded as trouble-makers and potential thieves and they "all look the same to the rulers." Some of the more liberal blacks argue that whites should be treated humanely, however inherently inferior they may be. Some others, though, complain that the "bosses" are getting "soft on Whites."

But this is not the only inversion Rymour treats us to. In Rudisha eating is regarded as obscene: the lower face is always covered with a kerchief, and any reference to mouth, lips or teeth is treated as the ultimate obscenity: a holy man is revered for sewing his oral opening shut. Food is euphemistically referred to as "the necessary", and people who eat in secret are regarded as perverts and punished accordingly.

Sex, on the other hand, is practised often and openly, in the form of both formal four-course orgies (presided over by the court chaplain) and more casual shag sessions. Marriage is unknown, the family unit consisting of brother and sister and such children as are born to the sister from the promiscuous couplings in which she, as the dominant partner, takes the lead; property and power pass through the female line.

The point of all these inversions is of course to satirise the whole concept of normality, and the unquestioning obedience with which most people accept the norms of their society. Our own views on race and sex are quite as arbitrary as those of the Rudishans, Rymour seems to imply – possibly a bit anachronistically. I am not sure that racism, sexism and sexual prudery have enough stuffing left in them to stand up to being knocked about in this fashion, but the coconuts are shied with rare vigour and accuracy.

Rymour drives his satire by creating an innocent protagonist, a young White called, amongst other names, January Beeswax. He naively accepts the way things are, believing, for instance, that the Bible decrees that Whites should be subservient to Blacks.

In the tradition of the picaresque novel, January is set travelling, and in the course of his travels is exposed to almost every horror his society is capable of. He also becomes

subject to an immensely complicated plot hinging on the succession to the throne, and ends up as a *gombwe*, a ruling spirit of the land.

Rymour shows great skill in constructing his imaginary country and in assembling a whole little society, complete with the most involved history, hierarchies and rituals. In its creation of an imaginary society the novel approaches something of the fertility of imagination of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, though it is, mercifully, shorter. The movements of the characters and the time-span of the action are meticulously plotted, producing a Byzantine succession of twists and turns.

At times all this feels like rather too much of a good thing. The poor January is subjected to an apparently endless series of mishaps and complications, all driven by a mystery that becomes ever more convoluted and a cast of characters that multiply alarmingly, even while half of them are written off. One starts suspecting that any explanation of so much subterfuge, so many reversals of fortune, so many massacres, must turn out to be an anti-climax.

It is something of an achievement that Rymour does, after all, manage to surprise us, and, indeed, force us to reconsider our reading of the whole novel, through an Epilogue and Postscript that introduce a whole new perspective on the main action. Ideally, one would now reread this clever and accomplished novel to appreciate the skill with which the whole box of tricks has been assembled.