

REALITY AND FICTION IN SOUTH AFRICAN LITERATURE.

South African writers, like South African politicians and economists, may be divided into two classes: those who live in the world of reality and those who live in a dream of "White South Africa". A large number of white South Africans believe that there is in South Africa a nation consisting exclusively of white men. This nation is in no way connected with anyone of a different colour, save that there are some black men who form part of the hostile environment in which the nation has to live. This attitude of mind has produced the politicians who prate of "the native problem", the economists who divide by 2,000,000 when calculating South Africa's national income per head of population, and the writers for whom non-Europeans are not living characters but merely a background source of "local colour".

Both English and Afrikaners writers are to be found in this category, though the approach of the two is slightly different. Lewis Sowden, writing in "Trek" (Sept. 1950), pleaded for South African writing entirely divorced from the colour issue, on the grounds that "people in South Africa, white people at any rate can and mostly do live lives not much different from those lived by people in Europe and America". Mr. Sowden apparently sees South Africa as an English country mysteriously transported to the Southern Hemisphere. Writing based on this assumption abounds in the columns of "The Outspan", but nothing worthy of serious discussion has been produced by this school.

Afrikaners writers do not generally go as far as Mr. Sowden in ignoring the existence of racial problems. They see their task as the description of the Afrikaner's struggles in an environment consisting of veld, animals, kaffirs and Englishmen. Non-European characters appear in their books in conventional, stereotyped forms. Sometimes these characters are sympathetic -- the faithful "good boys" who form part of the furniture in the idyllic rural setting in which Afrikaners writers are so fond of starting their stories. Thus C.H. van der Heever, in "Somer", introduces some comic coloured labourers to help create bucolic atmosphere. More often they are unsympathetic - either bloodthirsty tribesmen or insolent, "spoiled" town dwellers. When van der Heever, in "Droogte", wants a symbol to epitomise the downfall of the Afrikaners family who are driven from their pastoral paradise to the alien cities, he finds it in the native taxi by which his hero

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is run over at the end of the book. With one or two exceptions, this sort of approach to the non-European is standard among Afrikaans writers. The protagonists of their stories are Afrikaners. All other kinds of men are part of the scenery.

No worthy South African literature can come from the authors whose starting point is a lie. White South Africa is a myth; the only reality is black-and-white South Africa. The need to face this reality is gradually becoming more widely recognised among writers, and books which try to deal with South African society as a whole are becoming more common.

Not all of these books are of equal value. It is not easy to write about the whole of South Africa's people, because there is a whole structure of racial-barriers calculated to prevent white men from getting to know black men and black men from getting to know white men. Thus the writer, be he white or black, inevitably finds himself at a disadvantage in dealing with one or other section of his fellow men. Many writers have sought the easy way out of this difficulty. The easy way is to write some violent and bizarre story, preferably in a historical setting, which enables the writer to dramatise the colour problem crudely without trying to probe the everyday realities of it. Miscegenation is the favourite topic of this kind of writer. It is a "daring" topic: the writer who tackles it can boast that he is facing reality unflinchingly. It is a topic loaded with ready made tension and tragedy: the poorest novice should be able to produce a tear or two with it. Yet it can often become nothing but a mask behind which the reality of racial problems is evaded. Miscegenation is not a major phenomenon of South African Society. It is not a factor which enters into the life of the average South African. We do not necessarily feel ourselves involved in a story of miscegenation, and it may simply titivate our race-consciousness without seriously questioning the validity of racialist attitudes.

The real future of South African literature lies with those writers who have tried to treat South African society as a whole by writing of the everyday realities of South African life. There are not many of these as yet. Perhaps the two most prominent are Peter Abrahams and Alan Paton.

Peter Abrahams has been grappling with racial problems

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ever since he started writing. His early works, though praiseworthy in their intentions, failed to overcome the difficulties which beset the realistic South African writer. In "Song of the City", there were some excellent touches of realism in the presentation of the African characters, but the European characters were most unnatural and there was almost no attempt to fit the two sets of characters into a single plot.

"Mine Boy" was also a failure in its presentation of European characters and their relationships with non-Europeans. Mr. Abrahams' two latest works, "Wild Conquest" and "The Path of Thunder" achieve a larger measure of success. "Wild Conquest" is a historical novel, dealing with the period when white and black South Africa were still to some extent separate. The problems presented by this period are a great deal less intractable than those presented by contemporary South Africa. The clash of the two pastoral societies of the nineteenth century was a simple process compared with the complexities of our industrial society of today. Mr. Abrahams has made it appear even simpler than it really was, and his history is pretty shaky in places. Like all beginners in the field of historical fiction, he endows some of his characters with a completely incredible ability to foresee the future. Yet he has succeeded in capturing something of the barbaric tragedy of nineteenth-century South Africa.

"The Path of Thunder" is the story of a coloured teacher in a platteland dorp. Isolated from the backward and uneducated coloured community, he falls in love with a white girl, and tragedy results. The story is, in parts, melodramatic and improbable and Mr. Abrahams has not altogether avoided the pitfalls of facile dramatisation. There is, nevertheless, much of value in the book, especially in its treatment of the difficult relationship between the sophisticated teacher and his uneducated family and friends.

Alan Paton's "Cry the Beloved Country" is a maturer work than any of Peter Abrahams'; it shows a judgement less clouded by emotion. Yet Mr. Paton has not entirely succeeded in portraying the realities of South African Society. He is too much concerned to draw a moral from his story, too pre-occupied with the justification of his own brand of Christian liberalism. The result is that his plot and characters are not entirely true to life.

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A third writer who deserves mention at this point is Phyllis Altman. In "Law of the Vultures", she shows a keen awareness, not only of existing racial problems, but also of the political consequences which arise from them. The ideas which she wishes to convey are valid and important. Unfortunately her technical skill as a writer is not yet equal to the tasks which she sets herself. Her characterisation is weak; the central character of the book, Thacle, seems to become a completely different person halfway through the book. While his experiences account for his changed attitude towards the Europeans, they do not explain how the self-effacing nonentity of the earlier chapters becomes the dynamic, successful demagogue of the later part. The remaining characters are flat and monochromatic. Most of the book lacks atmosphere and richness of detail. This leaves one with the impression that one has read a social worker's case book rather than a novel. Nevertheless, Mrs. Altman has undoubtedly won herself a place among our worthwhile writers and that place will become more important as she gains experience.

What South Africa still awaits, then, is a writer who will see our society clearly and whole, with feeling for its tragedy but without muddled emotion, with a positive philosophy of his own but without moralising. Though we have not yet produced such a writer, the best of our literature seems to be moving towards this ideal. South Africa has all the raw material for great literature. Perhaps it will not be long before a craftsman worthy of the material will appear.

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