

# MASHANGU'S REVERIE

## and other essays

(Published by Ravan Press)

Reviewed by NTOMBI DWANE

Professor Noel Chabani Manyanyi currently Professor of Psychology and Dean of the Faculty of Arts at the University of the Transkei has written a book in two parts. The first section of the first part of the book is called "Mashangu's Reverie". It is a fifty-two page exposition of the life of a black South African in American society. Dr Mashangu, despised and "ignored in his own country" has to make himself acceptable in a university situation in America. He realises the harm done by South African society to him, so he undergoes therapy in order to effect a kind of reconciliation with society. He knows that he harbours strong feelings of resentment and inadequacy. However, he stops the therapy sessions abruptly after receiving a letter from a Mr Potgieter, first secretary to the Consulate in New York. The letter concerns his application for renewal of his South African passport, but carries a veiled threat and the implication that his passport will be withdrawn.

Faced with this open hostility, all his earlier attempts at self-understanding and reconciliation with white society are rudely shaken. He finds himself unable to be philosophical about the black man being his gaoler anymore. On an earlier occasion he had told his Nigerian friend, Chivuso, who lives a life of apparent aimlessness in America: "You may not agree but I think we are responsible for our feeling of perpetual victimisation . . . The black man must stop feeling victimised. He must stand out straight, tall and clearly".

He now sees no point in trying to adjust to white society. There is no need to try for acceptance anymore, so he tells Dr Davies: "Something happened today . . . a kind of culmination in a long array of insults which have been heaped on me since I was born". From now on he will allow bitterness and hatred to take their course in his life, and he tells the psychoanalyst: "When I left South Africa, I was holding on tight-fistedly to compassion and tolerance, I used to think that it was always possible for 'humanism to triumph over tyranny; they have incubated the beast in me to maturity – to go out into the jungle in search of other beasts." And indeed he does. On that same evening he goes out with his mistress, Okike and spends a strange evening with a racially mixed group where the blacks try to liberate themselves by humiliating the whites. The latent racial hatred is brought out in conversation and jokes even between couples who live together.

The second section of the first part of the book is a scholarly analysis of the feelings and attitudes expressed in the first section. Here Manyanyi delves into the unconscious in literature and art. It is the literature and art of the people that conditions them to certain ways of behaviour. At the same time as indoctrinating, art and literature can arouse an oppressed group from its complacent sleep. He says: "Art, like an unconscious process, possesses the quality of shocking us out of our complacency by reflecting those contradictions and dimensions of human existence which prey on us while we sleep."

The author touches on "socialisation" – rearing children, and deals in reasonable detail with "radical positivism" in black writing.

The black writer as a "radical positivist" is engaged in the struggle to set himself free. Like the "slavish slave" depicted by Franz Fanon, who rises to manhood and murders his master, the black writer may have to write in a shocking way in order to achieve "purgation" that is essential to his development as a man. Black writers, he urges, must not shrink from the violent reverie, because it is a ritual that is essential for their liberation so that they may live as the equals of their former white masters.

This essay is a scholarly piece of work, it needs to be read by many, especially blacks. However, it presents some problems. There is rather much use of psychological and psychoanalytical technical terms and concepts. For the layman it can be discouraging to read, and this is a pity, because, like Franz Fanon's books, it is one of those that as many people as possible (blacks as well as whites) should read in order to realise the extent to which we are de-humanised (all of us), and need liberation so that we can take one another seriously, that is, as humans.

The second part of the book is divided into two essays. The first essay "The Baptism of Fire" is a study of the situation of the black man in South Africa after the coup in Mozambique. Various points are made in this essay. Some of them are:

1. There can be no genuine and honest study of black attitudes and feelings as long as the research is done by members of the superordinate group – the whites. Whites cannot articulate an experience they have not undergone, and so Prof. Manyanyi calls for encouragement of a literature of the oppressed by the oppressed.
2. The siege-culture that is emerging amongst blacks – the "black-ethnicity".
3. The "dustbin" revolt or the urban revolts of 1976.
4. He poses a question: "Can racist attitudes change? A difficult question since removal of racist legislation will not leave a vacuum. "Meta-racism" in the form of class distinction will creep in.

The last essay – "Universalism, Particularism and Africanisation" is concerned with South African universities. These are particularistic, he writes, especially the Afrikaans and black ethnic universities. The English-speaking regard themselves as being more universal, but he seriously questions this. It is a good essay in which he stresses the value of the relevance of a university. South African universities must be of Africa and concern themselves with the needs of Africa. He poses significant questions: "Is universalism as professed by the English-medium universities a realistic option for current and future South African conditions? Secondly, is the ethnocentric particularism of the Afrikaans-medium universities and those of blacks for that matter a viable option?" And his answer to both questions is "No!"

The whole book is worth reading by all those who are concerned about the present situation in Africa in general, and our country in particular. Living under siege, as the various racial groups are doing in South Africa today, we can never make a significant contribution to a South Africa of the future. We need to liberate ourselves, and in so doing, allow others to achieve their liberation. They are essays written by an articulate and sincere man of Africa and he presents several challenges of great relevance to our situation. The essay on universities is particularly important, not only for those whites who feel called to help the "poor blacks" by going to teach at the government ethnic universities but also because of the great need in this country to answer honestly the question: "What is truth?"

Manyanyi's book is well researched and painstakingly compiled. It is bound to rouse strong feelings especially among those well meaning whites who do a lot of "good work" but without reference to the "poor blacks" they mean to help.

The book is published by Ravan Press 1977 and runs into 106 pages, so one does not need to take the whole week reading it. It is not the sort of book one can describe as spell-binding, because it touches on so many important matters that are thorns in the flesh of race relations, not only in this country but throughout the world where blacks live with whites. □

# THE CELIBACY OF FELIX GREENSPAN

(Lionel Abrahams : Bateleur Press)

Reviewed by Tony Voss

Reading this book evoked in me a variety of responses: curiosity, amusement, anger, frustration, some admiration. Let me try to explain.

The book is described on the title page as "a novel in 18 stories": I don't think this device works. It leads to some narrative repetition and to one or two awkward moments when the author has to remind the reader of what has gone before. Since each story can focus only one relationship, if that's the right word, one doesn't consistently get from the book that sense of varied ongoing life, that sense of the reality of others that we get from some novelists.

But the book does have one theme, even if it doesn't have one plot: and that theme is the growth, or rather the struggle to selfhood of its hero. Felix (nobody ever calls him Mr Greenspan) is the spastic son of middle-class Jewish parents, offspring of the diaspora and the suburbs of Johannesburg. Educated at home and in homes, at special schools and at the University of the Witwatersrand, he struggles for mastery over his disabilities, for knowledge and experience. The personality of Felix Greenspan emerges as a product of achievement rather than organic growth.

This is a romantic book: the picaresque account of a sensibility rather than a character. The determinants of Felix's personality seem to have been born with him: his physical disability, his Jewishness, his South Africanness, yet, particularly in the second half of the book, but effectively from the second story ('Adventure One'), Felix is consciously voracious for experience, his sensibility taking into itself everything that his life has to offer. In my view, partly because of the nature of the subject-matter, the third-person narration was a mistake — it maintains a sense of detachment, Felix is observed throughout rather than identified with. To read constantly about Felix as 'he' when he is the only 'I' in the book is a strain, but presumably the author consciously chose this alternative.

**The Celibacy of Felix Greenspan** is an ironic and metaphorical title, since a lot of the hero's energy and time

goes into the pursuit of love and sex. What we have is a portrait of a singular young man as writer and as lover — in a way that is unusual in South African novels of this kind, there is virtually no concern with the young man as citizen. In this respect the mode of the book is lyrical rather than narrative. As far as I could tell the South Africanness of the hero is only intermittently of material significance. As Felix is emerging from the end of his first consummated love affair:

A girl walked past him . . . A hopeless pang told him that he was re-entering desire, the prison in which he had lain, and certainly would again, an incorrigible fool of a detainee, at the mercy of unreachable girl after girl. (p. 128)

Perhaps that word "detainee" betrays the South African idiom of the book, but it is used here with no consciousness of the irony of its political reference. In the story called 'London', Felix is asked for his signature as a pledge "for a boycott against apartheid". "How can I" he replies "if I'm going back?" The South African setting is most poignantly obtrusive when fear causes Felix to break off his relationship with a black woman ("he had forgotten her name!") with whom he has found "the completest lovemaking, body to body . . . that he had ever experienced."

Each of the two longest stories is concerned with Felix's relationship with one of his teachers. Skipper Ross, supervisor of the Home where Felix is an inmate, preaches the gospel of perfection:

You have to overcome the limitations of your self and supersede your passions. That is the road to perfection.

But in the story called 'Perfection' Felix admits to himself that he cannot live up to Skipper's hopes. Felix's other teacher is Johan de Waal ("wellknown South African author" — a portrait of Bosman?), who is the artist rather than the preacher — the exponent of discipline and accommodation rather than transcendence.