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Fafa by Ebou Dibba

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WORLD LITERATURE IN REVIEW: GAMBIA

Ebou Dibba. Fafa. London. Macmillan. 1989. vi + 118 pages.

With the "coming of age" of African literature, a new generation of African writers are accessing publishing avenues such as the Macmillan Publishing Company's "M" series. The second of two novels by Ebou Dibba issued in this series, Fafa is the story of a "mere" night watchman and his love for Kombeh, a "well-groomed," independent seamstress who is, by all measure, "out of his league." Much of the novel's action centers on Fafa's preoccupation with "finding a wife" and the role his cronies, a comic threesome, play in that preoccupation.

While Fafa contemplates his "wifeless" plight and the means by which he could possibly effect the miracle (higher status and money) that will help him win the heart and hand of his true love Kombeh, Sidi Masood, his carefree and fun-loving Moroccan shopkeeper boss, works desperately, with the mischievous help of his cronies, to avoid an arranged marriage to a first cousin whom he has never met. The narrative climaxes at the "Coronation Celebration" with an ironic twist. The contrived plot to frustrate Sidi's clever, no-nonsense aunt turns into a much-relished opportunity, which she seizes to teach him a much-deserved lesson for humiliating her. Little does Sidi realize that his cronies' wiliness is no match against his aunt's. "La Ceuta" (as they mockingly dub her) pulls out all the stops for a truly "musiba--calamity" revenge. Instead of returning to Morocco as all had assumed she would after Sidi saw her off, she cleverly disembarks a few miles upriver and returns to the trading post to deal a coup de grace for Sidi's "improprieties." As the intriguers revel at the Coronation Celebration, la Ceuta (whom they carelessly assume understands no English) plans and supervises the stripping of Sidi's well-stocked shop of its merchandise--property deed and all--and craftily arranges to have Fafa tricked into believing that he has won 11,716 and fourpence-half-penny through "Mettlesome & Co's" combinations and permutations.

In an "all's well that ends well" fashion, Fafa, though still a "mere night watchman," wins Kombeh's heart and learns the meaning of true love. Sidi learns through la Ceuta's scathing letter (written in English!) that he is "a fraud and a turncoat . . . a son of a dromedary" and that his cronies (except Fafa) are nothing but "scarecrows . . . idle and degenerate." The score is settled. La Ceuta has given as much as (if not more than) she got. Life goes on in this "idyllic" riverine enclave with the music of the "Peanut Vendor," because, after all, that is the natural ebullient disposition characteristic of this postcolonial trading post. For that reason, the familiar themes (colonialism, the tensions between Africa and the West, cultural conflict, et cetera) of the "Old Guard" novels are absent.

The characters are a peculiar blend of ordinariness and refinement. The unusual cronyism of a simple night watchman, a self-styled "professor," a Moroccan shopkeeper, and an eccentric but witty war veteran with a mysterious past is plausible only in an idyllic setting, given the economic and ethnic backgrounds of the characters. The mixture of Fafa's "arcadian innocence" with Sidi's "natural ebullient disposition," Professor's eccentric pedantry and peculiar addiction to Virgil's Pastoral Poems and Safer Motherhood, Guerre Quartorze's

mysterious claim to World War I-veteran status, Mary's wiliness, and Kombeh's enviable sense of propriety and self makes for a truly comic, romantic interlude. The language is lighthearted in the mouth of bombasts like the Professor, whose penchant for pedantry is paralleled only by Sidi's addiction to the "ululating syncopation of the song 'The Peanut Vendor'." However, the narrative pace becomes rather sluggish at times, especially in the scenes in which Fafa attempts to unravel the "mystery" of the three persistent, inscrutable strangers (whom only he has seen), thus sustaining the suspense (such as it is) through a weak plot construction.

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