

1991

The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar by Syl Cheney-Coker

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Recommended Citation

Smith, Pamela J. Olúbùnmi, "The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar by Syl Cheney-Coker" (1991). *Goodrich Scholarship Faculty Publications*. 32.

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Sierra Leone

Syl Cheney-Coker. *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar*. Portsmouth, N.H. Heinemann. 1990. xviii + 398 pages. \$9.95/£5.95.

A reenactment of the Edenic plunder. The setting? Anglophone Anywhere, West Africa. The time? Pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial period. The action? The brigandage and plunder of Africa, the old yet new drama of the psychological and political effects of duplicity, and the near-genocidal tendency inherent in the lack of communal cohesiveness. What follows is all too familiar.

The prologue depicts the brutal political realities of many African countries today. On the last night before his execution for an attempted coup against the corrupt government of Sanka Maru, who had agreed to have a U.S. company dump nuclear waste off his country's coast for a sum of twenty-five million dollars, General Masimiara pieces together the threads of his wife's weird dream of myriad lizards "swimming in a sea of boiling water," contemplating what it portends for his country's future. His right-hand man Colonel Lookdown Akongo's betrayal dooms the general's altruism and Malagueta's history (not unlike that of many African countries today) to another familiar political page indelibly stained by "an avalanche of social upheavals." But how did the quasi-Utopian settlement founded on the principles of human freedom give way to anarchy and the development of chronic class consciousness?

Divided into four books of four chapters each, *The Last Harmattan of Alusine Dunbar* sketches in broad historical strokes the founding of a West African settlement, the inevitable ramifications of development, and the devastating pains of growth when the idyllic is inevitably shattered by infiltration. The history of past and present "harmattans" is prefigured in the planetary movements of the visionary Alusine Dunbar's herniated testicles: the arrival of the black pioneers seeking freedom after the American Revolution; the introduction of Christianity and Western education; the arrival of the British spoilers and the beginning of the "eruscient expropriation of land" for exclusive clubs where "Africans and dogs are not allowed"; the arrival of the Arabs and their cunning entrenchment (by the British) as major players in the settlement's economy in partial payment for their "accidental" discovery of the diamond; and finally, the evil of and destruction by black despots. Alas, the pathos which circumscribes life! Unrelenting

harmattans with “the remorseless demons humans create in their lives,” which allow “the leopards to go after the goats,” will now replace the previous “harmattans” of historic and legendary kings.

Contrary to the criticism that character development is generally lacking in the African novel, Syl Cheney-Coker weds symbolism with humor and pathos to create memorable characterizations. There is Suleiman the Nubian (later Alusine Dunbar), the vagabond visionary whose herniated, optical testicles presage an age of endless bitter strife and colonial/neocolonial oppression. There are the revolutionaries—Thomas Bookerman, Sebastian Cromantine, Gustavus Martin, Emmanuel Cromantine, and Garbage—all pioneers of black freedom and witnesses to the historical force of the harmattan’s ill omen.

If the men physically built and protected the settlement, it is the women’s nurturing, ingenuity, steadfastness, and principled sense of solid sisterhood—espoused by Jeanette Cromantine, Isatu Martins, Phyllis, and Louisa—that the reader finds compelling. Their steadfast support of the “three Wars” for freedom is rivaled only by their own assault on the British administration (not unlike the famous 1929 Aba Women’s riot of Nigeria).

The language is at once intriguingly poetic and resonantly prosaic, and also rich in vivid imagery. The language of the metaphorical harmattan is sustained in the novel’s chimerical world of illusion and (familiar) present-day African political reality. Syl Cheney-Coker has uniquely combined and transcended with creative genius the themes as well as the metaphorical and symbolic forces of first-generation novels—*Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People*, *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*—in this his first novel.

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