

THE STORY OF AN AFRICAN *FEMME*

DAPHNE ROOKE:
MITTEE
Intro Ian Glenn
Chameleon Press 1987

Chameleon Press is to be congratulated on its handsome re-issue of Daphne Rooke's *Mittee*, first published to international acclaim and South African indifference in 1951. Ian Glenn's introduction argues eloquently for the novel's continued interest and power and by means of some pointed contrasts (with, for example, "the gloomy grey adolescent rural agonisings of a Schreiner" and "the pastoral versions [of South Africa] dominant in the Cape Karroo school...") offers a sense of Rooke's place in South African literature. *Mittee* should be in both public and academic libraries. It tells a terrific story and by striking a number of South Africa's mythic chords, and engaging its author at a profound psychological level, it gets a creditable grip on social reality. In the end, it comes out of history into myth, but that's fair enough. One of the intriguing questions raised by Dr Glenn's account of Rooke as a South African writer is the relationships of gender, class and exile.

The story of *Mittee*, set in the north-eastern Transvaal in the last decade of the nineteenth century, rests on elemental bases: structurally it is an old-fashioned triangle (two women, one man); thematically it rests on the right to the land. Mittee, the heroine, is white, the magistrate's niece, engaged to Paul du Plessis; Selina, the narrator, is "coloured", Mittee's maid (confidante-friend), in love with and seduced by Paul before his marriage. Selina miscarries Paul's child, as a result of being beaten by Jansie, the man whom Paul has intended her to marry, but not before Paul himself eventually kills both Jansie and Herry (Selina's English father) to hide his secret. After their marriage, Paul and Mittee trek from Plessisburg (Pietersburg, to which Rooke's grandfather, Siegfried Maré, was the first ZAR civil service appointee) into the Wolkberg, whither drought drives Selina and her husband Fanie, in the employ of Paul's elder brother Frikkie. Social, sexual, and psychological tensions mount against the background of the formation of the ZAR state, the closing of the northern (ivory) frontier and the impending war of 1899-1902. Mittee loses her child by Paul, and falls in love with an English mission doctor, Basil Castledene. In the high

colonial Gothic climax, Selina and Fanie contrive both the escape of Mittee and Basil and the death of Paul.

Mittee ends, as its narrative begins, with Selina and Fanie one of the fantasies of South African myth, in the *locus amoenus* of pastoral retreat:

We are happy in one hut on a mountaintop for here we call no man Baas and Fanie hunts with a rifle like a white man . . . We have cattle and chickens and a dog.

But the romance is tempered by commercial necessity:

When he needs cartridges he goes to the trader in the valley, who, Outlander and robber that he is, will deal with him in secret.

Thus in its opening paragraph *Mittee* proclaims the hypocrisy of *apartheid*.

Ian Glenn is right to see in Selina a real imaginative achievement. She is a lively, observant narrator, and there is no hint of condescension in Rooke's portrayal. Selina's parents are "Herry" the English pedlar who gets drunk and preaches every Christmas, and a "half Shangaan, a woman almost black". Selina observes Mittee singing "Only a pency blossom . . ." and distinguishes between Castledene's and her own pronunciation of his name, Basil/Besil. Her narrative is frank about sexuality, politics, economics and emotions.

Rooke conveys an authentic sense of the social and historical context. The details of colonial literary and material culture (Owida, the Bible, English poetry, silks from the shops in Pretoria); political events like the visit of Oom Paul to the Wolkberg; the coming of the railway; the class distinctions among whites. One of the interesting things about this reprint of *Mittee* is that Rooke's imaginative reconstruction is confirmed by both recent historiography and, in some cases, reminiscence. See, for example, the essays by Roger Wagner and Stanley Trapido in Marks and Atmore's *Economy and Society in Pre-Industrial South Africa* (London, 1980) and *Between Woodbush and Wolkberg: Googoo Thompson's Story* (Haenertsburg, 1987).□