

## Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): Les funérailles du lait by Mahi Binebine

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verse form. The refrain in "Mother Afrika's Matriots" is refreshing, but the poem contains prosaic feminist outpourings. The closing prose poem of the collection carries the same prosaic and ideological qualities of earlier poems.

In conclusion, the high expectations raised in the preface and introduction are not met by the poems themselves. Instead of expressing her experience in concrete and sensuous images, Mugo mouths ideas. For instance, Jared Angira, who is Kenyan and Marxist like Mugo, succeeds (as in *Cascades*) in better expressing socialist ideas poetically through vignettes and specific experiences rather than through abstractions. It appears that the medium of fiction as used by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o may be more apt in expressing the ideas that Mugo brings to poetry. Whatever orature exists in *My Mother's Poem and Other Songs* is minimal and not put to poetic advantage. Feminism and Marxism take control of the voice, and one hears ideas which are not adequately fleshed out into poetry.

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## Morocco

Mahi Binebine. *Les funérailles du lait*. Paris. Stock. 1994. 140 pages. 85 F. ISBN 2-234042-85-2.

*Les funérailles du lait* is Mahi Binebine's second novel.

As in his first work, *Le sommeil de l'esclave* (1992), he shows an extraordinary understanding of the depth of human emotion, particularly in his female characters.

Mamaya, an old woman considering her past, wishes to make a pilgrimage to her family tomb in Sidi Boulghmour. Haunted by a persistent dream of her mother calling to her because she is lonely in her dark tomb, she feels she must go there. She guards one of her breasts, removed during surgery, in a plastic bag underneath her chair and insists that it not be thrown away. The breast is connected with her return to Sidi Boulghmour.

The narrative shifts to Mamaya's mother's adolescence, courtship, and marriage and the birth of Mamaya. Binebine artfully blends past and present throughout the novel, sometimes in the same chapter, sometimes from one paragraph to another. This shift in time never confuses the reader; rather, it illustrates the manner in which the elderly Mamaya experiences time.

The reader encounters a number of colorful and interesting characters who in some way marked Mamaya's life: Sara, the Jew converted to Islam; her son Youssef; the clients of Le Café Bon-Repos; Adam, the adopted child saved from the plague; Pierre, Mamaya's first and real love; and Sidi Magdoul, the schoolmaster, who eventually marries her and gives his name to her first son, fathered by Pierre. These characters and their stories create a rich tapestry against which we learn the tragedy of this son, for *Les funérailles du lait* is not only the story of an old woman and her memories but also that of a political prisoner, Mamaya's beloved son, who, appropriately, remains unnamed, referred to only as "l'absent." He was imprisoned for having "mal pensé," and Mamaya has never heard from him again. His ephemeral presence in the novel is evoked through scattered details: the sound of his voice,

his gestures, his eyes, his love of books, the library that his mother had had built, and her attempt to understand him through what he read: "Lecture après lecture, Mamaya cherchait à déceler dans ces romans les personnages auxquels son fils aurait pu s'identifier. Et, lorsqu'elle les découvrait, elle se mettait à les aimer. Très fort."

The author insists not so much on the suffering of the prisoner as on the void left for his mother, who has never discovered what really became of him. In this touching description of Mamaya's most intimate thoughts, Binebine powerfully evokes the real-life suffering and anguish of a multitude of political prisoners and their families. His novel moves from a personal story to one that is universal. Mamaya's silent thoughts and cries for justice are as moving as the nonfictional expression of the same in *La parole confisquée: Textes, dessins, peintures de prisonniers politiques marocains* (1982). The mother holds "la douleur de toute l'humanité."

In a moving final scene Mamaya visits the family tomb so that she can bury her "absent one"; since the state will not allow her to do so, she instead buries her breast, a "relic" of her son. This burial symbolizes the immortality of her love for him, allowing her to consecrate his death properly and to reclaim him as a person, thus contradicting the anonymity forced upon him by the state: "Le lait maternel est immortel. . . Il m'ont volé sa vie, mais je vais les empêcher de me voler sa mort!" Mamaya's memory of her son transcends his death.

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## St. Vincent

H. Nigel Thomas. *Spirits in the Dark*. Portsmouth, N.H. Heinemann. 1994 (© 1993). 219 pages. \$9.95. ISBN 0-435-98941-3.

Like many first novels by writers from the Caribbean, *Spirits in the Dark* is a bildungsroman; however, it is far more mature than most, perhaps because Nigel Thomas left his native island, St. Vincent, somewhat before he was twenty-one and (as a professor of literature at Laval University in Québec and a well-respected scholar of West Indian and Afro-American literatures) is well read in modern and postmodern—particularly postcolonial—fiction. His novel indicates that he understands the contemporary movements in narratology, magic realism, and social realism, especially as they impinge on structure and language; and yet *Spirits in the Dark* is remarkable for its lack of signs of apprenticeship.

The protagonist of the novel, Jerome Quashee, is depicted undergoing a religious ritual that blocks—even expunges—all sensual links to the outside world of reality in order to permit him to examine his past life and thus to identify the sources of discomfort and guilt that scarify him and make him query the value of society and life itself. One morning, "just as the mountain tops began to be tinged with gold," Quashee enters a mourning house furnished only with two basalt blocks; his guide is Pointer Francis, who tells him that the purpose of his ritual journey is "to discover yo' strong points an' yo' weak points" in order to "come out a different person." He is admon-