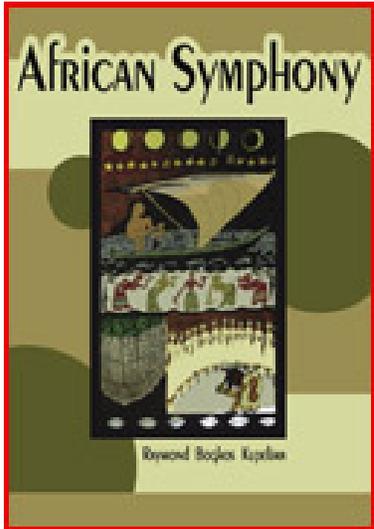


Critics' Forum

Literature

An African Journal: The Translated Stories of Raymond Boghos Kupelian

By Hovig Tchalian



The recently published collection of stories by Raymond Boghos Kupelian, *African Symphony* (AuthorHouse, 2006), marks a return of sorts, for both the author and his readers. The volume translates Kupelian's second collection of stories of the same name, originally written three decades ago in Armenian. It also chronicles the thoughts and experiences of a man who emigrated to West Africa from Lebanon, where he grew up, leaving yet again twenty years later for Southern California, where this first English-language volume now appears.

It is significant that Kupelian left Lebanon voluntarily. A recent article quotes him as saying that "the beauty of the forest, ... nature ... everything was different" in Africa than it was in Lebanon (Glendale News Press, 8/01/06). There is little or no nostalgia for Lebanon, no longing for the past, in Kupelian's statement, but a search for something new. And that same spirit of discovery is evident in the volume, which seems more concerned with what the author's biography refers to as the "immediacy" of its subject.

The tales themselves do not exhibit the structure of the classical short story—with its dramatic conflict, swift progression and equally dramatic conclusion. Kupelian's stories feel more like journal entries written on a tranquil beach, one sentence at a time, then reworked months or years later. They invite a reading that shares that same leisurely spirit.

One of the better known stories in the collection, "Surie Una Man," is written in that leisurely spirit. It tells the tale of Surie, an African servant who takes a younger second

wife and jeopardizes his manhood and his family's well-being in the process. The story is perhaps the collection's least convincingly translated. Certain passages sound awkward, almost as though they had been translated verbatim from Armenian, such as in this passage, which describes Surie's brief brush with schooling: "Next day, in the evening hours, for the first time in his life, Surie stepped into school! Sitting like a bishop in the back of the car, he entered through the gate of the establishment." (52).

Much better translated is "The Bush in the Man." In it, Bomboli, a disgraced Minister of Education now awaiting trial in jail, mourns the loss of his former glory. It begins with a description of Bomboli's recurring dream, in which a boy fishing in a boat is attacked by a crocodile, which turns out to be a man in disguise who takes the boy's body deep into the jungle. The rest of the story takes a cue from the dream, weaving in and out of the minister's thoughts and telling a kind of morality tale or fable. Along the way, we find out that the minister, a former schoolteacher, had a rapid rise to glory and an equally rapid demise, after being accused by British authorities of witchcraft and cannibalism. The story succeeds in touching on issues of culture and colonialism, without being unnecessarily didactic or preachy.

Less successful is "Despot," a story of a white Englishwoman who falls in love with an African man who later becomes his (unnamed) country's ruler. After his exile and death, she is pressured to publish her journals, which recount the torrid and well-publicized affair. But she refuses on principle. Here is where the leisurely spirit of the book goes awry. The tale seems to tie episodes loosely together, while balancing an apparent moral at the center of it. All the while, the narrator's voice intrudes too often, as in this example, where he explains the woman's actions: "It was evident. Hers was an idealized love for an absolutely great man. She needed to keep it immaculate" (70).

By far the best story in the collection is "Kookoo Sherif." It is the wrenching but subtle tale of the African girl referred to in the title, molested by a Middle Eastern shop-owner, in exchange for a pair of shoes she has spotted in his store window. The repercussions of that emblematic, brutal barter at the heart of the story—goods for people—reverberate until the end. But the tale also allows the girl's story to unfold gradually and convincingly. Kookoo grows into a woman of the streets and eventually falls in love with a young African revolutionary, who is soon imprisoned for his ideas. In the end, she manages to turn the tables on her oppressors by pretending to be the mistress of a high-ranking mulatto official (mulattos in some cases being the offspring of illegitimate unions between black Africans and white immigrants). The scandal the story creates allows her to trick him and her own past oppressors (the shop-owner chief among them), freeing her lover from prison in the process. The story develops from conflict to resolution in sure-handed and compelling fashion, using the tension of the narrative to tie the various details together. It embodies better than any other story in the collection the promise fulfilled more fully in Kupelian's later works.

The book's first story and its last tie the collection together and add the structure and cohesion sometimes missing from other individual tales. "A Diamond Tale" starts off the collection and is itself perhaps the best structured in the volume. It recounts a

conversation between the narrator and a local judge, who decries the fact that people have been killed for the sake of the precious stone in the title. The judge recounts stories of barbaric acts—such as when a young boy working as a “sen sen boy” (or “sand boy”), looking through freshly dug dirt for diamonds, rubs the sweat off of his face, only to be wrongly accused of swallowing a diamond and murdered. The story ends in a reversal of sorts, when the narrator announces that the judge has been poisoned to death, after having invited the narrator to “hear a diamond tale” by sitting in on the murder hearing at his court the following day.

The tale also includes an interesting look at middle eastern immigrants in Africa, people the locals refer to collectively as “Syrians” (the writer among them). They are portrayed as good people occasionally gone bad, under the glare of the sun and the constant temptation of riches. With the introduction of the “foreigners” into the African context, this first story acts as a fitting beginning to the book. The act is completed in the final story, “Washed by the Waves,” which tells the story of an idealistic black American woman who comes to Africa looking for peace and leaves disillusioned, never to return. The story describes her love affair with a local official, a married man. It also recounts the parallel, and sometimes strangely incongruous, story of the narrator’s short-lived affair with a Scottish woman. The tale also sounds the note of universality in the collection, of the sameness of cultures—their loves, cruelties and disappointments—that far outweigh their differences.

The volume’s cover art and original illustrations, drawn by Armen Minassian and the writer’s son, Roger Kupelian, complement the volume well and represent perhaps its most pleasant surprise. The collection could have benefited as well from a longer introduction, placing the stories in the writer’s larger body of work and its original Armenian-language context. The volume currently includes a good but brief biography that gets lost at the very back of the book.

All in all, Raymond Boghos Kupelian’s *African Symphony* is an interesting look at a different diasporan existence—not the forced exile of the immigrant but the voluntary travels of a man in search of something greater.

Additional information about the writer and his works may be found at www.raymondkupelian.com.

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