

From The Zimbabwean

'This September Sun' a worthy read

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BRYONY Rheam may sound an unfamiliar name to some readers, but those who follow the trends in contemporary Zimbabwean literature will appreciate that she's no newcomer in the local literary circles. Some of her stories have appeared in the 'Short Writings from Bulawayo' series. The Zambian-based Zimbabwean teacher-cum-writer had just had her debut novel – 'This September Sun' – published by amaBooks.

The book tells the story of Ellie, intertwined with the tales of her loved ones, and how fate often interferes with people's well-laid plans.

Over the past 10 years, many Zimbabweans have fled socio-economic hardships precipitated by an unstable political environment, in pursuit of the proverbial greener pastures and, as an icing to the cake, a better life.

But Rheam successfully punctures the romantic illusions that many locals have about the European Diaspora –especially in the UK – showing that London is, after all, not the paradise of our dreams, as those fleeing a collapsing nation would quickly admit. When the protagonist, Ellie, gets a chance to go to the UK, she's overjoyed, but her stay there gives her a rare opportunity of introspection. What I found striking was the fact that despite her joy at leaving Zimbabwe, when she gets to the UK, she felt "a dislocation" from her "surroundings" and learns that life "was unreal there" (pp125).

The general assumption is that white Zimbabweans who go to the UK are better off and can fit in better than their black counterparts, but Rheam successfully enables the reader to disabuse themselves of this notion.

It would appear that dislocation from a familiar environment forces people to hold on to anything that keeps them firmly attached to their roots and this comes out strongly as Ellie begins to think so much about her home. She confesses: "I found myself reading African novels more and more: Nadine Gordimer, André Brink, Doris Lessing..." (pp135).

Rheam also poignantly captures what I would call the terror of the abortive land "reform" in Zimbabwe. Ellie's return from the UK coincides with the people's attempts at an artificial escape of the horror on the ground through turning to foreign news and locking themselves up in their homes.

The book is littered with deeply-felt, moving scenes such as Ellie's last encounter with Miles, when she receives the sad news of her grandmother's murder and when she discusses the family history with her mother as well as the time she spends with Wally dying in a British hospital.

For the greater part, Rheam uses the epistolary style to narrate the story, with letters written by Ellie's late grandmother revealing a lot of details about the family history and secrets as well as the grandmother's past love affairs. It is clear that death unveils a lot of information and secrets as you rummage through a deceased person's belongings.

Although 'This September Sun' starts rather slowly, it's an engaging novel that's worth reading.