



Before the Mango Ripens

Afabwaje Kurian

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In Afabwaje Kurian's novel *Before the Mango Ripens*, Nigerians fight against white American missionaries for control over their country's future.

"Transition [is] afoot in Nigeria" in 1971, just after the nation's independence. Nigerian "nationals" assume positions of power in churches, schools, and hospitals. In Rabata, however, Reverend Jim refuses to allow Zanya to be a preacher, both because he thinks the locals aren't ready to lead and because he doubts Zanya's story that God allowed him to escape unscathed from a fire.

Zanya is further caught between Reverend Jim and the laborers who go on strike when the reverend refuses to pay fair wages. The mounting tension reaches a boiling point when Zanya and the reverend try to bring each other down by exposing each other's secrets. Meanwhile, in Rabata's clinic, one physician, Nelson, respects his colleague, Tebeya, though she remains secondary to him despite her demonstrable skills.

While some of Rabata's missionaries hold liberal views, the locals are aware that regardless of how well-meaning the foreigners may be, it is not their place to decide Nigeria's path. When Tebeya discovers an unsavory fact about Nelson, she sets out to remove him from his position. And Jummai, a servant for a missionary family and Zanya's former lover, hatches a plan to escape her squalid surroundings, rebelling against both racial and gender hierarchies.

Despite its two distinct groups of locals and foreigners and its setting amid massive changes, *Before the Mango Ripens* is a historical novel that avoids predictable oppositions. Its characters' relationships and internal qualities are complex, its locals speak in indigenous Gbagyi, and its focus is realistic throughout. It depicts an array of individual viewpoints, desires, and motivations, spotlighting the challenges of political self-determination and personal fulfillment with skill.

YELENA FURMAN (September / October 2024)

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