Title

Opal Palmer Adisa. *It Begins With Tears* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Press, 1997).

Author

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Peer reviewed

Opal Palmer Adisa. *It Begins With Tears* **(Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Press, 1997).**

Set in rural Jamaica, *It Begins With Tears*, is the first novel of Opal Palmer Adisa. She was born and raised in Kingston, Jamaica, moved to New York and studied communications, and later studied English and Drama in San Francisco, earning two M.A. degrees. She then gained her Ph.D. in Ethnic Studies Literature from the University of California, Berkeley. In addition to writing stories and novels, she has written and directed radio programs for children and is the co-founder of a children's theatre group. Her stories and poetry have been anthologized widely and include "Pina," "The Many-Eyed Fruit" (1985), and "Tamarind and Mango Women" (1995). Currently, she is the chair of the Ethnic Studies and Cultural Diversity Program at the California College of Arts and Crafts.

It Begins with Tears, is the story of the inhabitants of a village called Kristoff, a seemingly peaceful community where interdependence and mutual trust of the community members are key themes. Everyone, however, feels the change when Monica returns to the village. A former prostitute, Monica awakens the desires of the men in the village, and stirs up the jealousies of the women. When the jealousy turns to hatred, some of the women retaliate against Monica in a way that is unjust. Adisa concludes the novel by showing the healing power of women's friendships can form a sisterhood amongst those whose emotional wounds are too great to heal by themselves. In this, she exemplifies compassion and understanding between women of different ages, backgrounds, and social status.

The prologue of the novel is a Jamaican folktale that tells the story of the Devil and She-Devil. This story is reminiscent of traditional African folklore and is woven in throughout the text. It then continues to tell individual stories of each character, mostly women, and their relationships with the rest of the community and each other. The novel is divided into five chapters, and each chapter is divided with several sub-titles every few pages. For each of the five chapters, Adisa includes a poem, or saying which is relevant to the text. The title headings suggest important elements within each person's story and the events that take place. These sub-chapters give the book a feel of continuity that links each person's story to one another, and how each event is interconnected within the village and the realm of the folktale.

The first chapter is titled "How it Began" and most of the sub-
headings represent an element which has a distinct importance to the
individual story being told. The poem that begins this chapter is
particularly relevant to the idea of textiles—a theme I feel parallels
this text.

> several strands of thread
> held in a hand
> then woven
> into a pattern
> each strand
> remains distinguishable
> separate
> from the others (p. 9)

The first story, for example, is one of a dress maker, Arnella,
and the heading is entitled "Cloth." This is a suitable title for the start
of the novel, as it suggests a rich and complex tapestry that is this
story. Like a tapestry, each person represents a piece of cloth which is
woven and blended together to make a beautiful creation. While the
headings give a depth and complexity to the novel, it does not
necessarily speak again of the element. It is more of a subtle
suggestion to the feeling that the element inspires. The second heading
is "Clay and Indigo" and it continues to tell of how Angel, an African-
American who had believed she was white until age eleven, first
comes to her new home in Jamaica with her husband, a native to
Kristoff Village. We learn of her story, and how she comes to find her
place, and her identity, within this tightly woven community. In this
passage, it is night, and she has just arrived to Jamaica:

> Angel looked out and confronted the night afresh. It
> was just a little deeper, denser than Rupert. She had
> instantly fallen in love with him, with the even purple-
> black sheen of his skin. It reminded her of love. Angel
> looked at the darkness and knew night, and fell in love
> with it. She realized she would have to grow new eyes,
> and learn other ways of seeing. (p. 22)

The novel is well written and Adisa has the ability to breathe life into her work. It engages the emotions and the senses. Her descriptions of Jamaica and Jamaican life are tucked in throughout the novel, and are made more lively with the use of the Jamaican accent when using the first person.

The novel centers around twenty main characters, including those in the folktale, and without the description of the characters it might have been difficult to keep track of some of them. While the novel flowed continuously throughout, I would have enjoyed a more thorough look into some of the characters she incorporates into the novel, but does not quite bring fully to life until the end. Some of the characters remain two-dimensional, while others, like Monica and Angel, flourish. In fact, she brings such depth to Angel that I was left feeling as though I wanted the novel to focus on her and her new life in Jamaica. The ending pulls together the loose ends and shows the relationships of the women to one another, but a few of the characters lack the depth of others.

This novel is a wonderful look at not only life in rural Jamaica, but also the complexities of the relationships between women. While I think it is a good selection to read just for pleasure, it might also add richness to a class in Women's Studies or in Caribbean Literature.

Leslie Devlin