

Times London

Samurai
By Hisako Matsubara
(The Bodley Head, £5.95)

Because of the necessarily exotic nature of the traditions and way of life described in *Samurai*, some readers might find themselves a little way into the novel, wondering whether they would be receiving it with as much sympathy if it were set in, say, Aldershot.

As the story unfolds, the samurai Hayato emerges as a monster of vanity whose measured assurance and elaborate rituals not only "clothe his inflexibility in benevolence", but also dress up his consuming selfishness in archaic dignity which is as futile as one of his bright kimonos in a canning factory.

Set in the early years of the present century, *Samurai* reveals the way in which Hayato's blind adherence to a spent code ruins the lives of his wife, his daughter and her husband. Having no legitimate son of his own, Hayato takes a boy from a good and sophisticated family who are temporarily embarrassed as his *yoshi* or adopted son, who will in due course become his son-in-law, to be brought up in the samurai tradition. When Hayato's contemptuous mismanagement of his finances brings him to the verge of bankruptcy, the *yoshi* must go to America to restore the family fortunes. As a samurai, he must go alone, without his already pregnant wife; he must stand alone, rejecting good offers from commercial organisations which his high academic qualifications have earned him.

In simple, unadorned, but remarkably evocative language Hisako Matsubara shows the increasing misery and frustration of Hayato's daughter and, with astonishing vividness (since the focus remains with her and her father) the humiliation of the *yoshi* as an itinerant labourer in America.

Although the resolution of the novel happens rather suddenly and, even allowing for Hayato's record, is not entirely convincing, *Samurai* is an effective, bitterly ironical exposure of the vacuity of elaborate, purposeless tradition for its own sake and of the suffering (especially among women) in patriarchal systems of the victims of mindless personal pride.

Stuart Evans