

Book Reviews

The Lotus People

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by Aziz Hassim

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Aziz Hassim's debut novel *The Lotus People* earned him the prestigious Sanlam Literary Award for Fiction of an unpublished work in 2001. This novel encapsulates a Durban family saga in the context of political struggle and recalls Pepetela's novel, *Yaka*, which charts in rich detail Angolan history through the saga of the Semedo family. Hassim uses as his literary backcloth the experiences of a family of indentured Indians, creating an eclectic mixture of politics, romance, the underworld of gangsters, merchants and the lifestyle that prevailed in Durban from the turn of the century to the late 1980s with particular emphasis on the Casbah area.

The story traces the experiences of the Suleiman family, commencing with the arrival of Yahya Ali Suleiman—a Pathan—in Durban from India. He forges a bond of friendship with the Naran family that sustains itself through succeeding generations:

Famed for their fierce independence and ethnic pride, they subscribed to one law only: Paktunwali—the way of the Pathan. The

chief obligation of this code of honour, its binding force, was Badal, or revenge, which stipulated an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth. In many ways it was this very quality that was so revered by all Indians, for the Pathan was the natural guardian of the Khyber Pass, the gateway through which many times in the course of history invading armies had attempted to breach its defences on their way to the conquest of the Indian subcontinent. Their success was measured only in the degree by which they failed (Hassim 2002:3).

Yahya represents not only the struggles of the Indian immigrants who - endured economic and political difficulties but also their resolute will as they diligently applied themselves to making money against great adversity. Yahya and his wife are killed during the 1949 riots. His son Dara becomes a prosperous businessman, triumphing against what seems like insurmountable odds. A major focus of the novel revolves around the lives of two of his sons, Jake and Sam. These two characters are juxtaposed. Jake chooses to join Umkhonto, the military wing of the ANC and becomes active in acts of sabotage. He is nicknamed Aza Kwela—a name which achieves legendary status amongst the oppressed—because he has escaped death many times. Sam becomes a successful capitalist and it is only at the end that his character undergoes a political metamorphosis when he realizes that every person of colour has to make a meaningful contribution in the fight against apartheid. Characters like Nithin Vania and Karan Naran, friends of the Suleiman family, also feature prominently. The novel spans four generations, accentuating the differing perspectives of each and highlighting the way in which the younger Indian generation has absorbed the culture of Africa, its lifestyle and its struggle.

Hassim foregrounds politics, blending truth and art, and evaluates the Indian community and their stance in the struggle for liberation. In this regard, Nithin Vania, one of the central characters, states:

There are three types of Indians: there are those that openly defy the system, to the point of losing everything they possess. They deserve our admiration. There is a second group that is so completely intimidated into servitude that all they have left to fall back on is their dignity. Old man Soobiah in the Postal Department is a very

good example. He stoically accepts the reality of his existence and, denying himself even the simplest of pleasures, commits himself to providing the best education for his children. He forfeits his own future comforts to the realization of an all consuming dream—that his offspring will, hopefully, escape the miserable existence to which he himself has been relegated. He deserves our sympathy. Then there is the third kind, the despicable wretch who energetically reduces himself to the level where he resembles a clone that not only imitates his oppressors but actually outclasses them in his effort to emulate their behaviour. His every action, even his private thoughts, are solely devoted to obtaining his master's approval. It is by his behaviour that the rest of us are judged. To treat him with contempt is not enough. He should be completely ostracized from our ranks (Hassim 2002:364).

Fiction is woven with rousing speeches by activists such as Kesavaloo Goonam, Yusuf Dadoo, Monty Naicker and Fatima Meer. The following is an extract of a speech by Fatima Meer:

Who do these people in government think they are? They have the nerve to tell the African that he cannot exercise the franchise because he belongs to a barbarous, uncivilized people. Then they have the bloody cheek to tell the Coloured that he has no place in the human race. And now these arrogant idiots tell us that our culture is a threat to them. Smuts, that supreme hypocrite, argues that the purpose of the Bill [Ghetto Bill] is justified to maintain European culture (Hassim 2002:87).

Hassim also juxtaposes the two options confronting Indians with regard to political resistance: continue to engage in Passive Resistance as purported by the great Mohandas Gandhi or participate in the armed struggle. This dialectic is encapsulated in the following dialogue:

'The alternative is to blow the State to hell', Jake said coldly. 'Give those bastards a taste of their own medicine'.

'Violence is not our way -'.

'Bulldust!' Jake said bluntly. 'You, Uncle Lou, are like my father and my grandfather. You're all dreamers. Your way has failed. It's time you accepted it and stood aside' (Hassim 2002:387).

At a time when the Indian community is complaining about being marginalized and there is frantic lobbying by various political parties to secure the Indian vote, Hassim offers the following via his characters:

'I'll answer that for you, Karan', the doctor said, 'and I guarantee your kids won't be a problem after that'.

'Ya? You have a magic wand?'

'No. Just a magic phrase', the doctor said with a smile, 'four simple words'.

'I suppose you'll get around to telling us what they are', Sandy said.

'Just tell them this: "We've joined the A.N.C."' (Hassim 2002:525).

The Indian community was predominantly a patriarchal society in the time warp of the novel and feminists will welcome Hassim's emphasis on the pivotal role played by women in the politics of resistance. This is succinctly conveyed by the activist Zainub Asvat:

Throughout the country Indian women are mobilizing. Our men, leaders such as Doctor Dadoo and Doctor Naicker, are already marked men. They are not deterred by the threat to their lives. We women, and that includes each of you, are made of equally stern stuff (Hassim 2002:83).

The Lotus People documents the Inanda riots and the destruction of the Gandhi settlement with all its historic archives and documents, curfew laws governing non-whites, the unfair taxes imposed on Indians, the Asiatic Land Tenure, Indian Representation Bill and the Riotous Assemblies Act. Hassim engages the reader by detailing how these laws affected not only the upper echelons of the Indian community but ordinary people. Like Mongane Wally Serote in *Hyenas*, he is critical of the immoral stance adopted by the white South African media who failed to give adequate coverage to the massive resistance of the oppressed. However, Hassim lauds the *Leader* newspaper which openly defied the government.

Whilst Hassim succeeds in enamouring readers with a colourful metropolis, fiery politics and romantic interludes, *The Lotus People*, whilst beginning with a great promise of a challenging story-line, lapses into mediocrity. This can be attributed to the predictability of the plot. There is a transient moment when the reader is treated to an element of the unexpected when Jake who is expected to be freed from detention is delivered home in a casket. This episode does offer the promise of a garnered complexity but soon thins into predictability. Melodramatic dialogue has the power to enrich a novel and captivate the reader, but overuse can lead to incredulity:

‘You see what I mean’, Nithin said, his voice frustrated. ‘I try to be everything to everybody. And for who? Damn! If God’s rules are demanding, women’s leave them in the shade’.

‘I’m going to hit you, Nithin Vania!’

‘I’m married to a bloody thug -’

‘Whoa’, Sandy quickly intervened, ‘Hold on. Sit down, Kathy. Please’.

‘Whoa yourself, Sandy Murugen! You tell your friend there to stop swearing or I’ll break this bottle on his head’ (Hassim 2002:356f).

Perhaps the value of the novel is embodied in the truism voiced by Yahya Ali Suleiman: ‘You must remember your past before you can build a future’ (Hassim 2002:140).

