

Apartheid's everyday insults in relief

By Shauna Westcott

COOLIE LOCATION, by Jay Naidoo, S A Writers and Taurus, 228 pages. R34,99.

I PROBABLY would not have read this book had I not been asked to review it. (I certainly would not have bought it at such an outrageous price.) I grudgingly squeezed it in on a lazy Easter weekend between some superb science fiction – C J Cherryh's "Cyteen" – and Marion Foster's wonderful whodunit, "The Monarchs are Flying". The interesting thing is that while "Coolie Location" is vulnerable to criticism on many levels, while it may be described as a "slight" work, while it suffered unfairly next to Cherryh and Foster, it nevertheless lingers on in memory, exerting a great and insidious charm.

An indicator of that charm is that despite the compulsory nature of my appointment with it, and despite the lure of "Monarchs", I was disappointed when the book came to an abrupt end – with the author about to leave the country for what he believes will be the joys of England. I wanted to know what happened to young Jay Naidoo (not the Jay Naidoo of Cosatu fame, apparently). I still do.

The "blurb" on the back cover describes "Coolie Location" as a "finely wrought portrait of boyhood and youth in the Pretoria Indian Location... fashioned with a gentle humour and an elegant pen". It is.

Naidoo has a wonderful eye for detail and an unusual ability to convey atmosphere and feeling. Part of the charm of his narrative is what can only be described as an innocence – a literary equivalent of the naive mode of painting. He draws scenes and people in simplicity and vivid colour. He infuses the ordinary with a kind of luminosity. Above all he is unselfconscious and wry about himself. He does not shrink from showing himself in a ridiculous or shameful light. He is not beset by the grandiosity of ego that tramps through more portentous works.

He observes with the eyes of a child and it is this that lends an unusual (in these days of the political cliché) power to his descriptions of what the "blurb" calls "the ordinary insults and the easy cruelties of Fifties and Sixties apartheid". Embedded as they are in his guileless accounts of goings-on at home, on the street, at dreaded and despised Tamil school (the equivalent of the ghastly Scripture lessons I had to endure twice a week, every week, for 10 years), the fortunes of the Swaraj football team and the weekly feature at the Royal cinema – his descriptions of these "easy cruelties" become stunning indictments of our local evil empire.

For instance, Naidoo describes his first day in standard six with mundane impressions that will be familiar to anyone who has survived



school – the friend he shared a desk with, how the classroom looked, the fact that boys and girls were studying together for the first time, the excitement of having new teachers. Enter the principal, a "thin, bespectacled figure" called Mr Caulinek, to introduce the class to the new subject of "race studies". Mr Caulinek reads the children the following extract from a work by "one of South Africa's foremost historians":

"SCIENCE is only now gradually discovering the remarkable physiological differences between the brain of the white man of European descent and that of the Bantu – differences which are innate and constitute the measure of their respective intellectual capacities ...

"Today science brings us proofs that the cerebral capacities of what we conveniently call 'native', are, when he has reached the age of puberty, distinctly inferior in comparison with those of white children of a civilisation of 2 000 years. We know now that many of the ganglion cells of the native's brain remain undeveloped; and we know, with some degree of certainty, that his intellectual development – which before the age of puberty is more or less comparable with that of a normal white child – comes to a standstill, as if it were not capable of further development."

Jay tries to relate this to some racist behaviour of his own described earlier in the book, but his meditation is interrupted as the race studies teacher maunders on about "the head measurements of the different races". The incident – reminiscent of what Hannah Arendt calls "the banality of evil" – ends not with any incantatory condemnations but with this:

"Later he went on to mention someone called

Mendel but it was the last period of the day: my concentration flagged and the heat of the past-noon sun made me feel drowsy – I had to fight off sleep until I was saved by the bell.

"Race studies, however, didn't last long; for Mr Freen became ill and he wasn't replaced. The last period on Tuesday afternoons became a library hour."

But if Naidoo brings the insights of a naïf to bear on racism with moving effect, he remains lamentably and disappointingly unconscious of the sexism that exerts an equally poisonous influence. Women – with the exception of his mother – feature in "Coolie Location" purely as objects of titillation. That this is par for the course from so many male writers does not make it any less objectionable.

A MITIGATING factor, however – and one that gives rise to some hope that the next instalment of the life and times of Jay Naidoo will be more enlightened – is that the brutality which so often characterises the sexual relations described by male writers is entirely absent in Naidoo. So, however deformed his interactions with women are, they are at least capable of transformation. He is willing to be vulnerable. He is open to the erotic rather than bent on domination. And he retains the charm of a naïf.

This is how he describes his first encounter with girlfriend-to-be Soobathie, for instance:

"I looked into her eyes and at her lips and then reached quietly and cautiously for her hand. She touched my arm and, with the other hand, played with a button on my cardigan. I wondered how Patrick in my place would have behaved. He'd ask her for a kiss. Yes, that's it, I'll ask her for a kiss – that'll break the ice.

"Can I – may I kiss you?"

"She smiled and demurely nodded assent. I bent forward; a wisp of her hair brushed softly past my temple. A warm tremor ran through my body. I sensed the joy and fragrance of her body and the pristine promise of flesh: soft, inviting, mysterious. I closed my eyes, pursed my lips and plunged. Our lips touched, my thoughts and intelligence blacked out. A soft delicious vibration skipped and jumped through my flesh and blood. I opened my eyes and drew back.

"I wasn't sure if I was waking from a dream or if I was really doing what I had done. I suddenly felt a desperate need to be away, to be alone, to pinch myself and to convince myself that I had really done what I did – that my kiss was deed and not dream, that I had received the gift of flesh and desire, that I was, indeed, awake."

So, here's hoping for more from Jay Naidoo. Someone should turn the book into a TV series in the meantime. □

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