

THE HAJJI AND OTHER STORIES

by Ahmed Essop

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Reviewed by Tony Voss.

The South African short story like most South African fictions, was for a long time dominated by rural, pastoral settings; the bushveldt or the farm. In Jean Marquard's recently published **A Century of South African Short Stories**, which opens with a story first published in 1895, Peter Abraham's "One of the Three" (from **Dark Testament** – 1942), is the earliest story with an urban setting. Since then, as one might have expected given the history of the country, South African stories tend to be urban and suburban. Our frontier is a peri-urban zone rather than the great outdoors.

Ahmed Essop's stories in this volume, like those of Barney Simon, who, in **Jo'burg Sis**, produced the only volume equal to **The Hajji** among recent South African collections of short fiction, are city and suburban stories. They centre, as Lionel Abrahams describes it, in his laudatory but hardly over-stated foreword, "on the vivid aromatic world of Johannesburg's Indian community in Fordsburg." The greenest spot for miles around is Jamal's fruitshop: the landmarks are the Broadway Cinema and Orient House. It is a landscape of streets, yards, balconies and doorways: no gardens, no river, no kopjes, no mealie-fields. The closest it gets to the rural is the blue-gum plantation of a mine.

Socially the community itself is tightly-knit: there are no anonymous characters. This is partly a South African phenomenon. We are all minorities, and our various racial communities live isolated from one another. But within Ahmed Essop's Fordsburg/Newtown/Lenasia, as in Bosman's Marico, every character can be identified by function or relationship:

Shireen was the daughter of the widow, Wadia.
(*"Black and White"*)

... a waiter of distinction.
(*"Mr Moonreddy"*)

Within the community, social distinction and gradation can be very fine and very harsh: teachers vs. waiters, muslim vs. hindu. In the story "Red Beard's Daughter", Julie refuses to marry "a shopkeeper in a distant country town" as soon as she sees him, even though the bride price has been paid:

Ben Areff, who was wearing sun-glasses, now took them off. He was a man of average height and looked very diffident. He wasn't the sort of man to be envied. At home neither in an Indian world nor an African world, he was a derelict socially.

Mr Abrahams may be right that the interests of these stories is not "defined by a racial line". But very often the mainspring of a story is an action, even an emotion, that comes from deep within the individual but reaches outside the community. Hajji Husen, of the title story, suffers horribly for refusing recognition to his dying brother, who wishes to be buried with Moslem rites, although he has lived for 10 years with a white women in Hillbrow. Shireen, the central character of "Black and White" has a white boy-friend but ends up crying, with "blood on her mouth". Moses, an African servant, hangs himself rather than accept "repatriation" to the Transkei. All these are sombre examples of Mr Essop's art.

But there is rich humour too. Mahmood, "The Target" of the story of that title, trying to keep his end up in the world of Gool the gangster, claims to be "practising integration" when he employs "a tribal warrior" as a guard. In "The Notice" the Group Areas official who comes to serve notice of removal from Fordsburg to Lenasia on Mr Effendi, a commercial traveller, tries to seduce Mrs Effendi and offers to extend the Effendis' time in Fordsburg by saying that Mr Effendi is on a visit to India. The husband's sudden return home brings the story to a very funny ending, with all the archtypes of this kind of story ironically reversed.

Part of Ahmed Essop's art is to search out and highlight individuals and individuality in the community. This enterprise ranges from the deep ironic humour of "Aziz Khan":

I first met Aziz Khan – described in various Muslim journals as the 'author of the renowned pamphlets "Muslim in Decay" and the "Decline and Fall of the Morality of Muslims" and is the 'illustrious modern Saracen' – the day he handed me a cyclostyled copy of his pamphlet 'The Degeneracy of Muslim Marriages' at a wedding reception.

to the sad ending of the friendship between Hussein and the white boy, Riekie:

Riekie shook the barred gate and called for Hussein over and over again, and his voice was smothered by the croaks of the old man. . . . I returned to my landlady's with the hackles of revolt rising within me.
(*"Gerty's Brother"*)

"Mr Moon Reddy" brings us to the centre of a lonely man, "a self-made man, not educated like you, not belonging to intellectual class . . ." who takes his revenge on a condescending world through his Alsatian dog, which he lets loose one night to kill the little dog of a richer and perhaps happier neighbour. But

Early next morning he went into the yard and was stunned – the dog was dead. There was a scarlet band of congealed blood near the dog's ear. An involuntary scream escaped from his lips, a scream that brought the widow and her daughter running from the house.

The most profound individuality, however, is that of Mr Essop himself, although he usually adopts a shadowy, almost anonymous persona as narrator. We learn something of his friendship with Omar, of his love-affairs with the "Two Sisters", that Mahmood is his relative, that he carried messages from Mr Rajah to "certain well-nourished women in Fordsburg". But the writer's individual note is struck in every one of these compelling stories. He is able to speak for Fordsburg, and is yet somehow independent of it and thus able to speak to all of us.

Olive Schreiner's karroo, like Bosman's Marico, is gone forever from history. It is ironic and sobering that Ahmed Essop's Fordsburg is changing even more rapidly – most of it is now the Oriental Plaza, most of its citizens have moved to Lenasia. But in the fictive, re-creative world of these stories, Mr Effendi, the commercial traveller, will live in Fordsburg forever. The notice of removal will never take effect.

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