

The Short Stories of Ahmed Essop

by

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Declaration:

I hereby declare that this dissertation is entirely my own work and that it has not been previously submitted for a degree at any other university .

This dissertation is submitted to the faculty of Arts, Centre for the study of Southern African Literature and Languages (CSSALL), University of Durban- Westville in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts.

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INTRODUCTION

During the course of this dissertation, an attempt is made to map the historical, political, aesthetic and cultural essence of Ahmed Essop's short fiction, a genre Essop has developed and mastered together with other famous Southern African Short Fiction authors such as Nadine Gordimer, Doris Lessing, Ezekiel Mphahlele and Njabulo Ndebele who has made the following statement in the introduction of a short story collection called 'Being Here', compiled by Robin Malan :

I have learned, in the craft of fiction for example, that the difference between writers is not so much in the subjects of their writings: the range of subject matter is relatively limited. Rather, it is in the inventiveness of treatment, in the sharpening of insight, and in the deepening of consciousness. (1995:xiii)

The Short Story Genre is perhaps the most demanding of an author's skills if a story is to work successfully. All the components of character, structure, narrative voice and background must contribute to create a single effect to which events and incidents are decidedly subordinate. There must be a preconceived singularity of design and the writer must be cautious to avoid extraneous details, easily buried in a novel, which stand out immediately in the short story and weaken the story as a whole. Using this as a basis for evaluation , a criterion which is still the most clear-sighted summary of the distinct craft of the short story, one can conclude that Essop has a mastery of this genre.

One of the major reasons for this rich heritage in short fiction is the social situation. Since apartheid has informed many of Essop's stories and his oeuvre clearly displays a strong connection to the liberation struggle, this presentation will focus on the development of the Indian Community in the South African socio-political terrain.

In 'The Hajji and Other Stories' (1978), Ahmed Essop captures in a clear, concise and flowing style the variety and fertility of the Fordsburg Community, a microcosm for the larger social issues of the country and the still larger issues of human nature—its strengths and weaknesses, follies and tragedies. Here he displays a multifarious treatment of issues which could be considered ethnic such as class prejudices in the community, superstition, arranged marriages and religious fanaticism. Essop's skill as a writer, creative talent in anatomising the Fordsburg Indian Community with precision, humour and sympathetic insight and mastery of dialogue and local idiom has earned him critical acclaim by being awarded the prestigious Olive Schreiner Prize by the English Literary Academy.

Essop's second anthology of short fiction, 'Noorjehan and Other Stories' (1990), shifts from community life to cultural and personal dilemmas and political atrocities such as political riots and forced removals. The value of these stories lies in their truthfulness where nothing is extenuated or set down in malice. We see people in their natural perspective. 'Noorjehan and Other Stories', writes Cherry Clayton in the foreword to the book,

moves more strongly into the politicised decades of the seventies and eighties, showing in its more extreme moods the violence that has marked these years.

The charm in Essop's third collection 'The King of Hearts and Other Stories' (1997), is his ability to satirise similar issues in dramatic prose and fables thereby revealing once more his creative and imaginative prowess as an author. In many of the stories in this collection Essop makes a very effective mockery of the bizarre divisions of South African society by using satire to expose the absurdities of the political system. In an interview with Robyn English on the BBC programme 'Good Books' in September 1993, Christopher Hope made the following comment:

I think that he is very brave because what Essop does -he is quite unafraid- is to gently satirise all the major ethnic groups. He is unabashed by the fact that in the first place he is an Asian , which is a small minority group within a series of minorities in South Africa. He is , if you like, as disenchanted with his own community as with others, black, white, mixed-race, and others. Over all of them a kind of gentle ruefulness plays, and that is so rare in South African writing and so singular that I really can't think of anybody else who does it in quite this way.

(English in Africa 25 No. 1: May 1998: p.103)

The first chapter outlines the history of the Indian community in South Africa from as far back as the Indentured Indians. Chapter Two gives a brief overview of Essop's life and places his writing in its context. Chapter Three provides a detailed analysis of his short stories from all three collections under various themes.

Although Essop's fiction has excited much controversy, we must be reminded that what we see, or rather, what we tell ourselves we see , is never the whole picture as George Santayana had said:

The same battle in the clouds will be known to the deaf
only as lightning and to the blind only as thunder.

(Sunday Times Magazine: 8 December 2002: p.10)

With this powerful quote in mind I invite you to engage in my study of Ahmed Essop's short stories.

CHAPTER ONE

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF THE INDIAN PEOPLE IN SOUTH AFRICA

The major portion of the Indian community in South Africa were introduced into Natal from 1860 to 1914, under the labour contract with the Indian Government. They were known as the Indentured Labourers. The system of indenture was created mainly in response to the labour crisis experienced in sugar-producing areas after the abolition of slavery. Labour became a huge commodity. With reference to the Indians that came to Natal, more than two-thirds came from southern India, the rest from the north of India. The immigrants had a predominantly rural background. British Imperial policies, compounded by natural disasters were responsible for uprooting thousands of Indians from their native country and enlisting themselves as indentured labourers.

Another group of Indians settled in South Africa. These were the traders that came from India and the Island of Mauritius. They were known as 'free' or 'passenger' Indians. They came because of their desire to expand their horizons in their sphere of trade and commerce. They first came to Natal since it was the nearest and closest neighbour and it also offered climatic conditions and commercial features similar to those in Mauritius.

Many Indians came as families but most came as single young men. The caste system was an all-pervasive force in their lives. How did they adapt in a new setting without village elders, friends, and family? How did they react to being thrown together with strangers without reference to caste distinctions? Some disorientation no doubt occurred. Leadership emerged; attitudes changed; old habits gave way to new ones. The feeling of togetherness generated brotherhood and caste consciousness weakened because the village structures were not there to enforce it.

But the Indian heritage and culture was recreated in some fashion. For instance, religion manifested itself as is apparent from the numerous shrines and temples that were erected. Although the indentured Indians came from a predominantly agrarian background they showed great industrial capability. The Indian trader became a competitive rival of the European traders.

The Indian showed strong conviction and political militancy as evident when fifteen to twenty thousand individuals went on strike and participated in the Satyagraha campaign (1906-14) inspired by Mohanlal K. Gandhi.

At a time when the country was verging upon ruin because of a lack of efficient labour supply, Indians were brought from India to fulfil this labour supply. When the contracts were entered into between the Natal authorities and Indian Government, the former bound themselves to respect the rights of the immigrant labourers, to safeguard their interests, to mete out just treatment during indenture, to educate their children, and after the expiry of the indentures, inducement was given in the shape of free land to the labourers and their descendants to settle down.

These terms of contract were faithfully carried out during the Crown Colony government but thereafter conditions became extremely unfavourable for the indentured labourers where legislation and regulations governing indenture became more like slavery. They were subject to a poll tax and other annual taxes which imposed great hardship on them. Defaulters of payment of these taxes were imprisoned. The Indians were deprived of municipal franchise.

At a time when the country was fast declining in prosperity, the Indian traders, like the immigrant labourers, worked for the expansion of commerce in the colony. It was the Indians who have been pioneers in introducing and extending trade amongst the aboriginal natives of Natal. The existence of the Indian as trader proved of invaluable benefit to the whole colony. The Indian trader by thrifty, honest and industrious habits proved himself a useful agent in the trading industry.

But as the Anglo-Boer War had brought into the country a large number of European traders, the trading industry of the Indians came under the spotlight. Being moved by trading rivalry, these European traders urged that the Indian traders be deprived of their civil rights. The government in order to satisfy the demands of the electorate, yielded to these demands and this resulted in the ruin of the Indian traders.

Adding further to this commercial ruin of the Indian traders were the licensing officers who were entrusted with the granting of trade licenses. Possessing unlimited discretionary powers in the granting of licenses, many of these prejudiced officials contributed to the gradual elimination of the Indian traders.

Other forms of abuse were meted out to the Indians in the hope of repatriation. They were excluded from government service and debarred from competing in the civil service. Indian children were removed from the government schools and placed into separate schools where the quality of education was very inferior.

The Indians irrespective of class, creed and intellect were subject to regulations concerning vagrancy- all Indians were to be indoors by nine o' clock at night unless they possessed a special permit. Apparently this legislation was to protect them from molestation at the hands of 'Native' policemen.

The Income and Land Assessment Act of 1908, deprived the Indians from land ownership. The only land that could be occupied by the Indians was land that was not suitable for European occupation.

These were just some of the grievances of the indentured labourers who were ready to share the colony both in peace and in war. They were prepared to build their homes, raise their families, invest their capital and establish themselves in this country but in exchange they were completely exploited.

TRANSVAAL INDIANS

The first Indian settlers found their way into the Transvaal in the early 1880s. Some Indians came from Natal and others direct from India, and they formed three groups. The first group comprised the 'free' Indians who, after completing their period of indenture, elected to remain in Natal under the terms of their contract. They were soon followed by the second group, called 'passenger' Indians, who had, in the first instance, followed the indentured Indians into Natal. Passenger Indians were mainly traders who supplied condiments, cloth and commodities for the Indian market; and they also established a lucrative trade with local Africans and European farmers. A small number of Portuguese Indians came from Mozambique and made up a third group. The free Indians became petty traders, hawkers, domestic servants, waiters and generally speaking, secured employment as menial workers, while the passenger Indians and Portuguese Indians set up business houses and were the merchant traders. In 1885 these business houses were concentrated in Pretoria and Johannesburg.

In the beginning Indian traders had heard that they could trade with the Boers, who, being simple, frank and unassuming, would not think it below their dignity to deal with Indian traders. Several traders therefore proceeded to the Transvaal and opened shops there. As there were no railways there at the time, they earned large profits. The expectations of the Indian traders were fulfilled and they carried on a considerate trade with the Boers and the Blacks as customers.

The traders and hawkers spread out into the villages, where they attracted attention and provided inconvenient competition for the European traders. Moreover, they were a conspicuous group, because of their colour and distinctive dress. European traders called meetings and discussed the 'flood' of Indians; 'swarm', 'influx' and 'horde' were the words most often used to describe their numbers.

Initially these Indians were free from restrictions of any kind. But by their successful enterprise, they aroused the jealousy of white traders and soon there sprang up an

anti-Indian agitation initiated by chambers of commerce. The European traders protested against the unrestricted entry of the Indians into Transvaal. Their protests took the form of petitions which were addressed to the President and Volksraad and contained appeals for the expulsion of Indians. Others suggested that the Indians be confined to special areas where their trading activities would not interfere with the established business pattern of the European trader.

The petitioners also claimed that the Indians, in particular, the Muslims were posing a threat to the Christian religion by propagating the Mohammadan religion among the native races. Another grievance that was levelled against the Indians was that they were posing a danger to the health of the British subjects. They claimed that the Indians would spread epidemic diseases like smallpox and bubonic plague if they were permitted to live amongst the whites.

The bill controlling Indians became Law three of 1885. This prevented them from owning fixed property and compelled them to a registration fee. This law also empowered the government to specify special streets, wards or locations where Indians were to reside or trade.

A 1905 Transvaal municipal ordinance allowed municipalities to establish and maintain areas for Indian occupation and to eject illegal occupants in accordance with regulations made by the lieutenant governor. This important enactment has been described as 'the first Group Areas Act'. But even this law did not effectively compel Indians to reside in the areas set aside for them. In some cases there was indirect pressure in the form of a ban on the issuing of a trading licence for premises outside such designated localities. As many Indians continued to occupy land elsewhere illegally, segregation measures became harsher.

Later the Asiatic Land Tenure Act was introduced in 1946 which imposed further restrictions on the Indians by subjecting the Indians to the deprivation of land

ownership for business and for residential purposes. This Act also known as the 'Ghetto Act' imposed grave consequences for the Indians by providing restricted areas for their trade and residence. This Act prevented Indians from owning or occupying 'white' premises without a special permit and they were forbidden to live in their trading premises if these premises were outside the scheduled area. They were also taxed with registration fees. Indians in Pretoria and Johannesburg were prohibited by law from walking on foot-paths and from using tram-cars. And finally the Peace Preservation Ordinance was passed to prevent Indians from entering the Transvaal and the movements of Indians from Transvaal was made equally difficult by this ordinance.

All this was done in the hope of inducing the repatriation of the Indians to India. In spite of all these adversities the Indians remained. When the South African government realised that the Indians were here to stay, as a last resort it passed the Group Areas Act of 1950 which ensured compulsory racial segregation. This Act did not introduce a new concept, it provided for unprecedented state intervention in property rights and empowered the authorities to impose a nation-wide system of control which attempted to ensure that all South Africans could live and trade only in the segregated areas. To ensure that segregation would be enforceable the Population Registration Act of 1950, introducing compulsory race classification, was enacted. It was followed shortly afterwards by the Group Areas Act, which the prime minister, Dr. D. F. Malan, described as 'the essence of apartheid'.

The Act was a response to a variety of pressures, white demands for 'protection' against economic competition was clearly crucial but residential segregation cannot be explained by economic factors alone, for a host of white fears and ideological motives also lie behind the law. Malan claimed that this Act would preserve European civilisation. He supported this with the logic that the different races were at varying stages of cultural and political development and that conflict could be prevented by removing contact between them.

Contrary to this belief is the argument that segregation has reinforced other forms of discrimination by preventing normal contacts through which race prejudice might be overcome. Despite the official view that contact between the various races breeds friction, the general consensus amongst the disadvantaged is that this Act contributed to racial ill-feelings by preventing the breaking down of stereotypes. This together with the fact that the Act was applied unequally- whites were barely affected by forced removals (if at all they were advantaged) while hundreds of thousands of Coloured and Indian people were subjected to a sense of 'rooflessness'. All this led to great hostility and evoked feelings of rebellion amongst these people.

A new form of resistance emerged from the struggle of the Indians from as early as 1890. This was the Passive Resistance Campaign better known as Satyagraha meaning 'the non-violent but powerful force that is born from truth'. This movement was initiated by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi as a new weapon in the Indians' campaign for justice. On June 13, 1996, President Nelson Mandela inaugurated a year-long observance of the Indian Passive Resistance in South Africa. Speaking at the University of Natal in Durban, he described the campaign as 'an epic of our struggle for liberation' and paid tribute to Dr. G. M. Naicker, Dr. Yusuf Dadoo and other leaders of resistance.

The Indian movement set an example to all black people of South Africa, and gave them confidence that the monster of racism could be defeated. It helped prepare the way for an entirely new stage in the struggle against racism- away from mere petitions and compromises with racism, and towards confrontation with the system of white domination to eradicate racism and secure full equality for all the people in a democratic society.

CHAPTER TWO

CONTEXTUALIZATION

Although the conditions improved through the efforts and sacrifices of many Indian martyrs, their situation was not favourable. They were constantly targeted from different perspectives and many Indians realised that there was no escape from the South African political system. Whilst some have embraced their plight, others continued to resist.

In a racially divided South Africa, the Indian community suffered an identity crisis because of its very ambiguous position. Never completely and sincerely accepted by the powerful white enclave, the Indians enjoyed a slightly more privileged position than the oppressed black majority then subjected to pass laws, curfews, economic dispossession and Bantu Education.

Although many left wing Indian intellectuals played a very instrumental and sacrificial role in the freedom struggle and the formulation of the African National Congress (ANC), the bourgeois elite class of the Indian Community was most often seduced and enticed to collaborate with the white overlords enjoying a 2nd class status over the downtrodden and oppressed 3rd class citizens.

Essop's works deals with the conflicting loyalties and threats to this self-contained Indian community during the apartheid era. Most of his stories focus on the Indian enclave of Fordsburg and their sustained cultural values. These stories show the steady intrusion of South African politics into the lives of his characters. Inhabiting the middle ground between the powerless black majority and the all-powerful white minority, the Indian population has been constantly wooed by the apartheid regime as a middle class buffer between the two races. The Indian Community was sometimes persecuted and victimised for an identification with the black anti-racist

cause. At other times they were seen as collaborators of the apartheid regime. Thus this community became a vulnerable target.

Essop's stories depict both Indian collaborators and victims of the white power structure. Even when not themselves directly affected by the degradation of apartheid, some of his apolitical characters, whose main interests are domestic are shown to be inevitably diminished and tainted by the injustices done to those around them.

The traditionally cacooned and bypassed Indian enclave is shown to be unavoidably involved in the larger South African struggle, even when it is apparently most self-contained. At the same time Essop pursues his particular symbolism throughout his fiction, integrating images and concepts from India and Islamic belief into the personal moral of the tales.

"The Haji and other stories"(1978) deals with the Indian enclave of Fordsburg during apartheid South Africa. These tales evoke the vitality of that inner-city melting pot in Johannesburg.

The mood of Essop's fiction changes with their change in locale from downtown Fordsburg to distant segregated Lenasia - a district erected from barren veld.

"The Visitation"(1980) ironically depicts the mutual corruption of a landlord and gangster in Fordsburg just before the enforced community removal to Lenasia.

"The Emperor"(1984) bitterly denounces the attempts of an autocratic Indian headmaster to collaborate with the 'correct' educational policies of his white overlords.

In some of the tales in 'Noorjehan and other stories'(1990) Essop returns to old Fordsburg, but the underlying element associated with a bleaker life in Lenasia informs all the other stories.

And finally in 'The King of Hearts and other stories'(1997) Essop attempts to satirise political currents of the postapartheid South Africa in many of the stories, including the title piece, in a fable-like style.

LIFE STORY

Ahmed Essop was born in the village of Dabhel, Surat, in the state of Gujarat in India on 1 September 1931. He was the eldest of seven children . In 1934 he came to South Africa with his parents. They settled in the Transvaal. His father worked as a shop assistant and later owned a shop near the town of Heidelberg in Transvaal.

Essop attended a school at the Waterval Islamic Institute, north of Johannesburg where he was motivated by two of his teachers Krishna Pillay and Rajoo Pillay , both very interested in literature. They introduced him to books of Charles Dickens and Joseph Conrad early in his schooling career.

Thereafter he attended the Johannesburg Indian school in Fordsburg where he graduated in 1950. He started his BA degree at the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg and completed it through distance learning at the University of South Africa in 1956. In 1960 he married Farida Karim, a shop assistant and they had four children.

In 1963, after teaching in various private schools in Fordsburg , he and his family settled in the state-ordained Indian settlement called Lenasia- a district on the outskirts of Johannesburg. He began teaching at Nirvana High School in Lenasia . During this time he was elected secretary of the Indian Teachers Association. In 1964 he was awarded a BA degree with honours in English by the University of South Africa.

From 1973 onward, due to his very troubled relationship with the education authorities, he was transferred to various schools for short duration and finally in 1975 he resigned. Essop by then had instituted legal action against the Department of Indian Affairs. In 1977 his case against the Department was effectively thrown out of court. He was told that the Director of Indian Education was empowered in terms of the Indian Education Act to transfer and dismiss teachers without having to give reasons for such action.

Essop's predicament becomes comprehensible when seen against the background of South Africa's apartheid educational system. Essop, who was trained as a teacher, found himself having to work within this extremely unsatisfactory system. His independence of thought was clearly not a quality to endear him to his educational superiors and he suffered a series of transfers for this. Essop's second novel 'The Emperor' offers a poignant satire of the Apartheid South Africa's corrupt educational system and of the bureaucrats who supported it.

Many of his stories from his short story collection are narrated from the perspective of a teacher. One story in particular 'The Concrete Fountain' reflects the frustrations of a teacher employed by the Department of Indian Education. In this story, Nazir's services are terminated by the Department after his refusal to accept a transfer for the fourth time. The intervention by the Chief Inspector of Education exposes Essop's wry sense of humour. The Inspector's philosophy being : 'a good pupil obeys his teacher and a good teacher obeys his superior' (1990:92). The gist of his message is servility to one's authorities - a phenomenon Essop could not get used to.

The cold treatment of human beings towards other human beings marked this emotionally volatile apartheid period. People desecrated each other on the basis of colour, status and gender. This is one of the many stories of an author who reflects these observations and experiences in the employment sector during the apartheid era riddled with oppression and corruption.

From 1978 to 1979 he worked as an assistant manager at the Decor Decorations in Fairview, Johannesburg. All this while Essop began cultivating a strong interest in putting his thoughts and experiences to paper - thus began a promising writing career. His short fiction began to appear in Purple Renoster, Contrast and Staffrider.

His writing career blossomed when he won critical acclaim for 'The Hajji' 1978 by being awarded the Olive Schreiner Prize for his first short story collection by the English Academy of South Africa. Although he returned to teaching in 1980 at Silver Oaks High School in Eldorado Park, Johannesburg, it was short lived. In 1986 he left many years of teaching to become a full time writer.

After his first task of success as a recognised author, he wrote and published two novels 'The Visitation' (1980) and 'The Emperor' (1984) and two more short fiction collections 'Noorjehan and other stories' (1990) and 'The King of Hearts and other stories' (1998).

CHAPTER THREE

ANALYSIS OF STORIES

The stories in 'The Hajji' reflect the world of the 1950's and 1960's, an era of community life and a low-key opposition to apartheid. 'Noorjehan' Essop's second collection marks a relatively more politically turbulent period during the 70's and 80's and Essop's third collection is also quite politicised but the style is more developed and refined. Essop expanded his range to include elements of symbolism, allegory and parallelism.

Ahmed Essop's chief strength as a writer lies in his unerring ability to capture a character or a situation in a few simple but bold strokes. He writes with a disturbing insight into a level of society not previously reflected in either English or Afrikaans fiction. Knowing the South African way of life well enough, he is able to lay bare the comedy and tragedy of the South African Indian community in his stories.

This fresh approach to the local racial scene along a road not mapped before, encompasses the South African Indian's persistent struggle for recognition of his cultural identity and historical achievements. He focuses on the South African Indian's attempts to find his 'niche' in the apartheid and post-apartheid era.

The setting of Essop's fiction is closely related to his own domestic world and the politics of apartheid in the mid-twentieth century. The inner-city districts of Newtown and Fordsburg were predominantly of Indian inhabitants. Fordsburg was known as the Indian section of Johannesburg, a place of smell and colour, teeming with life and vitality.

Having lived in Fordsburg, essentially an Indian suburb for fifteen years, Essop was very influenced by the way of life of this close knit community where people visited

each other without formal invitations, chattered in corridors and street corners and in general lived a very communal (Casbah) existence.

Inevitably the system intervened. 'Group Areas Act of 1950' proclaimed the destruction of Fordsburg and the Indian inhabitants were moved out of town. Houses were demolished, businessmen and traders were forced into new premises and residents were removed to Lenasia, a large, dreary township bordering Soweto, twenty miles from central Johannesburg.

The Group Areas Act was designed to restrict the black or coloured race to its own residential area, and to control the purchase or occupation of land. The Separate Amenities Act of 1950, allowed the government and business to establish separate but unequal facilities for non-whites. Beaches, government buildings, hospitals, schools, universities, colleges, public transport, parks, sports facilities, shops, etc. all had separate entrances and or entities. All amenities provided for the coloureds or blacks were sub-standard, while the amenities for whites were of high standard. Law segregated all public areas.

The Group Areas Act of 1950 was a product of the National Party and it embodied the apartheid policy tenfold. The National Party policy on Indians was different from the other non-white races because the party treated the Indians as foreign, alien and outlandish. The NP policy proposed that the Indian people be expatriated and this was contested by the Indians in the form of appeals and protests. Eventually by Proclamation 73 issued on the 30th of March, 1957, the Indian group was created as a sub-division of the Coloured group and then subjected to the segregation policy.

The apartheid regime in South Africa consistently 'resettled' members of non-white groups throughout more than forty years in power. These were symbols of an attempt to stifle the burgeoning cultures of those groups who were producing a modern musical, artistic and literary identity in racially distinctive areas. The removal of

these non-white inhabitants from these familiar established territories, scheduled to become white areas, was a result of the imposing threat to the white minority. History reveals similar practices of forced removals of other oppressed races - District Six in Cape Town and Sophiatown in Johannesburg. These forced removals were particularly traumatic and although people attempted to resist, they were practically bulldozed out of their homes.

In relation to the Indian community, it is clear that the real motives behind the Group Areas Act were:

- ◆ To deprive the Indian people of their long established ownership of land and homes
- ◆ To facilitate the uprooting and expatriation of South African citizens of Indian origin;
- ◆ To ruin the Indian people economically; and
- ◆ To confine them to ghettos as a source of cheap labour.

Most of the residents of Fordsburg and Newtown were re-settled in a relatively unattractive patch of countryside some eight or so miles outside of Johannesburg. This 'Indian' ghetto is called Lenasia. Essop has lived there since 1963 and his mixed feelings about the area are apparent in certain of his stories and in his novels. At the end of Essop's first novel 'The Visitation', he wryly calls Lenasia, Elysia - a kind of false or fools' paradise.

Essop creates a light mood and atmosphere of a very serious issue by engaging in a humorous encounter that mocks the people implementing the system. However the wretchedness of the experience of forced removals still prevails. When the land of the Indians of Fordsburg was expropriated, they were forced out of their world of rich oriental culture and traditions, a world of familiarity and warmth, a world that they called their home. They were forced out of their world-

of noise - the raucous noise of the vendors, the eternal voices of children in streets and backyards, the variety of people, the spicy odours of Oriental Foods, the bonhomie of communal life in Fordsburg (1978:99)

and forced to live in a distant suburb of solitary houses with walls and boundaries. A tale entitled 'Jericho Again' from this collection of short stories bemoans the government programme that broke apart Fordsburg and exiled its inhabitants to Lenasia.

With the destruction of their homes a treasury that constituted the living tissue of communal existence had been devastated : joy in marriage and births, sharing of food, clothing and shelter, sociability in conversation, help in times of need, sorrow in death. Then there had been the pleasure of existence in a time-hallowed suburb where every brick, finger-stained pillar and wall, arched doorway, creaking window, court and balcony had become part of the mellow aura of urban definition and familiarity. That sort of life was not possible in government ordained Lenasia where stereotyped houses were separated by concrete walls, hedges, gardens and open spaces, where each family was thrown back upon its sterile individuality. (1990:44-45)

In this story as in many of his other stories, Essop confirms the significance of ordinary day-to-day life and ordinary human relationships. 'Jericho Again' reveals the painful experience of an elderly couple's eviction from a place they called their

home for as long as they could remember. 'All his life he had lived there-in fact his parents lived there during Gandhi's time, as traders.'(1990:42)

Whilst Layla, the wife, depicts the typical passive and domesticated woman concerned about worldly issues like starvation and diseases, Khalid 'saw events with such a comprehensive inclusive vision.'(1990:44) He had been a member of the Orient Front, sent to jail twice and had been in the forefront of those who had opposed the forced removals. He was involved in protests and mass meetings. In spite of all his efforts there was a mass exodus of Indians. But Khalid and Layla remained. Their protest gained wide publicity and then the department of Replanning decided to take legal action by charging them for residing illegally in an area reserved for whites. Then at last everything was in ruins, homes were destroyed and roads were closed. There was nothing left and for the first time Layla realised :

that her husband's stoic spirit was not impregnable. For
Khalid, the shattered glass lotus had become in that instant
emblematically related to a flaw within man.' (1990:46)

Thus it seems that the penniless, homeless Arthur was better off than them-

it is best not to have a home or anything.
Then there is nothing for anyone to break
or take away. (1990:47)

But Fordsburg is not altogether non-existent since it is reconstructed and brought to life in these vivid tales by Ahmed Essop, a former resident of that inner-city melting pot of Johannesburg. Here is an author who understands the value of the fictional moment, who knows that to rise above mere sociology, a writer must transform his experience by locating it in an imaginative dimension.. At the same time the social milieu is specific and authentic - the real Fordsburg being contained in its fictional reconstruction.

LIFE IN THE INDIAN COMMUNITY

As Herman Charles Bosman once created in Mafeking Road a stage for his portraits of rural Afrikaners, so Essop has constructed Terrace Road and peopled it with waiters, philosophers, shopkeepers, tenants, landlords, servants, gangsters and neighbours. In his stories Essop's Terrace Road comes to life with exuberance, humour and warmth. He creates inhabitants of Terrace Road as authentic beings like Aziz Khan- arch reformer and hypocrite, determined to clean up the morals of erring Muslims; Gool- living dangerously as leader of a street gang; Molvi Haroon- the holy man; Haji Musa- the quack; Mr. Rajespery- dedicated student of the Fine Arts and hater of his fellow Indians; and so on. These characters populate many of the stories.

Alan Ryan, in a review in St. Petersburg Times (March 5, 1989), praised Essop's ability to bring this population and its characters to life in 'The Hajji'. Ryan described Essop's style as a combination of V.S. Naipaul and Sherwood Anderson. Ryan concluded, 'His stories are easy to read and hard to forget.' (p.7D)

Essop registers the vitality of a closely knit community where the neighbours are constantly aware of what goes on in the next yard. When the Hindu fire-walker came to town in 'Haji Musa and the fire-walker', everyone was present to witness the fun. When the 'sweet-time girls' in 'Two Sisters' moved in, the neighbours observe, decide and comment. Essop recreates the 'door-way life' of a modern urban ghetto with accuracy and flair.

The community gossip presented as dialogue in 'The Yogi' helps to convey the physical and psychological intimacy of community life which is so characteristic of 'Dolly', 'Two Sisters', 'Father and Son', 'Haji Musa and the Hindu Fire-Walker' and 'Gladiators'. This kind of intimacy is hinted at very early in 'The Hajji' when Hassen criticises his wife's weaker points:

She was either across the road confabulating with her sister, or gossiping with the neighbours, (1978:1)

In the yards of Essop's Fordsburg, a strong sense of cultural and ethnic identity together with the absence of class distinctions transforms the physical proximity into psychological unity. Festinger describes the nature of the relationship between physical and non-physical factors for unity as follows :

In a community of people who are homogeneous with respect to many of the factors which determine the development of friendship, the physical factors arising from the arrangement of houses are major determinants of what friendships will develop and what social groups will be formed. (1996: 13)

All the stories set in or around a yard are narrated by a first-person narrator, who remains throughout as part of a collective -communal 'we'. He is not characterised and plays a passive role in the tales. In many of the yard stories the community rather than one or more individuals is the central character. In 'Two Sisters', 'Father and Son' and 'Gladiators' it is the community that takes action by forcing the two sisters out of the yard, passing judgement on the relationship between Maimuna Mayet; the son and the father and by witnessing the mental collapse of Mr. Rajespery.

In his stories, Essop shows how a community which is still bound together by place and culture disintegrates because of political pressure like in 'The Commandment' and in 'Gerty's Brother'. These stories reveal the real horror of political Acts which regiment people into groupings under the guise of ethnicity.

'The Commandment' runs on similar racial lines when an elderly Black servant who

has lived among the Indians in Fordsburg inner-city enclave for as long as all the others and without incident is ordered to vacate the area and to move to a distant tribal area. The Indians of this area are powerless to help this poor black victim of apartheid South Africa.

The central figure of the story is Moses, a black labourer and a victim of a political system that determines where he may live. For many years Moses has been a servant in an Indian household; he spoke Gujarati and was virtually a member of the Rehman family for whom he worked. Faced with a banishment order, Moses becomes tormented and the Indian community share his anguish. The law or instruction by the apartheid government is symbolic of the commandment made by God to Moses in the bible story.

The ironically named Moses reacts with terrible emotional violence to the threat of removal, night after night disturbing the yard with his incessant noise. The community which initially undertakes to protect him, feels increasingly threatened until, as the narrator states :

And then a queer thing happened to us. We began to hate him. Vague fears were aroused in us, as though he were exposing us to somebody or something, involving us in a conspiracy- he spoke our language- threatening our existence. Indefinable feelings began to trouble us. Of guilt? Of cowardice? We wanted to be rid of him as of some unclean thing. (1978:71)

Moses becomes the community's victim just as the two sisters were, but in his situation it was not of his own making.

By writing of these areas and the attractive Indian community life they once supported, Essop offers a protest in the form of his fiction against the political programmes that set out to break the spirit of Indian community life.

EFFECTS OF APARTHEID ON INDIANS

Individuals are always the first to feel the pangs of any change that is associated with adverse effects, and they in turn affect other institutions in the larger society. Factors such as poverty, inadequate schooling, racial and other discrimination provide a handicap to individuals in whom feelings of uncertainty and inferiority, envy and resentment are aroused and persons doubt their worth in the wider social milieu. Where individuals lack the ability to make adjustments and adapt themselves to changing conditions they steadily develop other ways of meeting these challenges. Essop exposes these traits in many of his characters who are ill-equipped in their inner resources to deal with the harsh realities of South African politics. Hence they resorted to a life of make-believe, failing which they submitted themselves to constant frustrations, anxiety and tensions which eventually erupt in seeking avenues such as aggression and violence.

In many of the stories in Essop's debut collection, 'The Hajji', whilst composing unique portraits of Indian life in South Africa with amused irony, Essop retains the political perspective by highlighting the violence and injustice of South African life. The constant factor in South African life is race and the author does not flinch from this harsh truth as evident in most stories in this collection. Hatred of this apartheid system is implicit and succinctly demonstrated in 'The Hajji' (the title-piece. This story contains many of Essop's recurrent themes, drawing them together in a skilful and poignant manner as Clare Mitchell stated in her essay:

In the title story, where Essop enters one man's spiritual conflict with that compassionate flow and intensity which is the mark of truly good writing, the conflict between religious conviction and racial resentment is caught in a realistic context which becomes progressively more nightmarish. (1998: p.2)

This story reflects the hatred one brother (Hassen) feels for his younger brother (Karim) who had rejected his 'Indianness' by cohabiting with a white woman. But now the younger brother wishes to spend his dying days with his 'own' people after having 'cut himself off from his family and friends ten years ago;' (1978:2).

By going over to the white Herrenvolk, his brother had trampled on something that was vitally part of him, his dignity and self respect. (1978:2)

Hassen confuses self-respect with self-importance since it is his self-importance that continually overrides his better nature. This brings him tremendous suffering and regret by disregarding his own morality and the morality of his religion.

A 'hajji' is a Muslim who has been on pilgrimage to Mecca. One would expect the 'hajji' in this story to be a very religious man who embodies the same religious principles. But instead we find the hajji to be very unsympathetic to the plight of his dying brother. The title is therefore very ironic, because the hajji is a hajji in name only and not in his deepest self or in the way he lives his life. The irony which Essop exposes here is that many of the Muslims who appear the most devout in observing the formal trappings of their religion fall furthest short in conducting their daily lives according to the tenets of that religion. This is a universal human weakness, which applies to the followers of many religions.

It is also noted with interest that the hajji has become increasingly more irritable and impatient ever since his return from the holy land, Mecca. This is blatant when at the very beginning of the story the hajji stubbornly refuses to answer the telephone even though he was sitting close to it. Hassen has also become more critical of and less considerate towards his wife as he: 'discovered novel inadequacies in her, or perhaps saw the old ones in a more revealing light' (1978:1).

The Muslim community is seen as a contrast to the Hajji's character. By trying to

persuade Hassen to fulfil his brotherly obligations and by eventually taking care of Karim themselves, the Muslim Community is seen as a strong opposition. Even Salima, Hassen's wife is far more sympathetic to her brother-in-law's predicament than her husband is. This is evident when she calls on 'Allah' in her distress at hearing her husband's unforgiving harshness in his telephonic conversation with Catherine. The Hajji's reaction to Karim's mistress's plea to grant his brother's dying wish is vehement :

'Let the Christians bury him.. His last wish means nothing
to me ... Madam, it's impossible ... No ...Let him die...
Brother? Pig! Pig! Bastard!' (1978: 2)

The Hajji is enraged further when he finally decides to visit Karim in a white area and is ridiculed by three white youths for using a 'white' lift. As he takes the stairs his dignity causes him to reject his brother anew for past and present injury to his pride :

Because of him he had come there and because of him he had
been insulted. The enormity of the insult bridged the gap of ten
years when Karim had spurned him, and diminished his being.
Now he was diminished again. (1978:5)

The Hajji's manner of return to Newtown amply indicates the elements in his own character that prevent reconciliation with Karim. He returns by train because on it he feels comfortable and whole, amongst blacks 'who respect him' (1978:6). But although Hassen is able to return literally to Newtown, he cannot return to his former state of confidence and well-being in the community. The struggle that follows, although caused by politics, is then divorced from political considerations and is instead characterised by conflicting personal emotions of grief, hate and rage.

His rage includes scorn for himself, for his brother and for the Islamic congregation for taking care of Karim. When Hassen finally decides to call a truce, it is too late

and he is denied the act of reconciliation with his brother, with his family, with his community and with himself. As the funeral procession passed 'no-one saw him'(13). This is an expression of the real tragedy of physical exclusion that Hassen experiences. Hence we see how the Hajji becomes alienated even from his own Islamic principles of compassion and understanding - sadly all become the product of the indignities and diminution of the apartheid system.

Similar to the Hajji encompassing the theme of human betrayal induced by politics is the story of 'The Betrayal' in which a respectable, well-known Indian community - leader of the left-wing Orient Front, Dr. Kamal, sells his soul to the devil by forming an alliance with the Chairman of the youth league, Salim Rashid, in the hope of annihilating a new left-wing political organisation, the People's Movement. Like all pacts with the devil, Dr. Kamal becomes a sorry victim of this cruel system of politics during the apartheid era when his plan backfired.

By the end of the story Kamal, who has much in common with Hajji Hassen as a character, is confronted with a mental image of the 'storm of reproach and stigma that would engulf him'(1978:19). When he feels his position to be threatened by the emergence of the new political organisation, his pride brings him into conflict with his own ideals and those of his community.

In committing himself to a cause of political violence he is betraying the principles of humanity in the same way that Hajji Hassen had in refusing to forgive Karim. Both Hassen and Kamal are torn by impulses that place them in conflict with their vision of themselves in relation to their community and its heritage. There are similarities in the nature and role of cultural and community pressure and the dilemmas of the central characters in the two stories.

Prejudice and discrimination are crucial factors that affect personality development. Such effects are felt mainly by adolescents who experience a sense of identity.

Constant exposure to social discrimination shocks their sense of trust, incites feelings of shame and doubt. The reaction can be seen in young people breaking off from old standards and trying to form a synthetic equivalent of the personality patterns of the dominant group such as peculiar attire and behaviour - symbols they feel will guarantee self-worth and dignity.

This premise is depicted in 'Two Worlds' when a rift arises between Henry Levin, when he came to live in Fordsburg, and his parents who lived in Sandown. He began to identify and gravitate towards joining the Capricorn society and distanced himself from the elite Sandowners where:

the atmosphere of the suburb with its avenues of trees and solitary mansions amid acres of gardens, was chilling. (1978:99)

When the narrator urged Henry to communicate with his parents, Henry replied:

‘I cannot go on talking about freedom and at the same time go on living among the whites.’ (1978:99)

Just as Hassen from 'The Hajji' felt that he would breach a contract and betray his heritage and himself if he accepted his dying brother, Henry also feels that he will betray the cause and himself if he rekindles his relationship with his wealthy parents. Both characters become distraught and suffer severe emotional turmoil and inner-conflict because of their choices. Both men are products of historical, cultural and political forces against which an individual may struggle but by which he is also tied.

Henry could not serve the two worlds and choices had to be made. Hence we see how individuals once again experience the onslaught of the apartheid system with emotional anguish and thus family relationships are destroyed due to racial boundaries erected by the apartheid government. Ultimately, however, Henry is

rejected by the Movement on account of his participation in the Israeli War :

He has, by identifying with a national state, displayed the spirit of a partisan for a racial group. In our organisation there are neither Jews nor Gentiles, Asians nor Coloureds, Whites nor Blacks. There are only people. (1978:101)

The disruption of harmonious family relations in South Africa because of politics is a recurring theme in Essop's stories as in 'The Hajji', 'Two Worlds' and in 'Ten Years' when a father meets his eldest son after the conviction of his youngest son for political crimes. His attempt to effect a reconciliation fails:

Mr. Adam Suleiman wilted under the blast of accusatory words. He felt defeated and humbled, his life crumbling within him. He would have definitely preferred a spell in prison to the venomous tongue of his son. At a time when he ardently needed commiseration, the futility of his whole political life was forced on him. (1978:97)

Just as Hassen failed to effect a reconciliation so too does Adam and all because of the pressure of their political beliefs. Both finally realise the futility of this when it is too late.

Like Hassen, Kamal and Henry Levin, the Yogi from the same title has betrayed the principles from which he, in the eyes of the community, derives his identity. Through the discussion by the community of the yogi's conduct, his arrest for having had sexual relations with a white woman, and his trial, the story provides an analysis of the community's response to what it perceives as hypocrisy. In this story as in the other stories Essop stresses how individuals feel themselves scrutinised and trapped by the community. Yet there are invariable tensions between individual impulses and communal sensibilities and values.

This story also exposes the superficial character of a man who has fallen short of the ideals he claims to represent. His sexual relationships with white women is a mockery of his pious image and an insult to the Indians as spelt out by Mr. Das Patel:

‘I tell you he no like black women. He black but he don’t like black. He like wite goose meat.’ (1978:22)

Many endured serious psychological effects caused by the loss of human dignity entrenched in apartheid laws. The inhumane treatment of people of colour was blatant and cruel as evident in ‘In the Train’. This story traces the development of a tender friendship between a young man and a woman who meet each other on the commuter train between Lenasia and Johannesburg.

Their carriage became their alcove of love, a mobile alcove untouched by the constantly receding world beyond the windows. (1978:114)

Their idyll however is destroyed when they are forced to witness an obscene love parody enacted in the train by two white soldiers from the neighbouring military establishment. This is a brief shattering experience which embraces social and human ills. The tender courtship is shattered by the two white soldiers choosing a compartment where the people watching don’t count. Thus for one couple the frail blossoming of love is crushed by the insolence of another. The military camp itself functions as an implied contrast to the lover’s compartment in the train and constitutes a symbol of entrenched tyranny.

Essop uses the train in two other stories. The train could be symbolic of the individual’s place in a society created by racial and cultural divisions. For Hassen Hajji, the train was a ‘getaway’ from white Hillbrow. It was also a refuge where

he felt safe and comfortable amongst the blacks who respected him. To Mr. Moonreddy, 'a waiter of distinction' it provided the opportunity of maintaining his aloofness by making a point of not mixing with the other waiters.

Another story where the protagonist places himself on a rung higher than the people around him is in 'Gladiators'. 'Gladiators', is a story about a ridiculously snobbish school principal Mr. Rajespery 'a pure-Dravidian'. This story exposes his contempt for his 'inferior Indian neighbours':

The words 'Thank you', 'Please' and 'Pardon me' do not appear in the vocabulary of Indians. You are a mob of unruly Yahoos. I find your manners odious and crude. (1978:61)

INTER-RACIAL RELATIONSHIPS

A number of the stories deal with relationships which transgress the Immorality Act. In 1949 mixed marriages were banned. Mixed marriages and the Immorality Act became the first apartheid legislation. In 1950 the act was followed up with a ban on sexual relations between white and non-white. The police tracked down mixed couples suspected of having a relationship. Homes were invaded and doors were smashed down in the process. Mixed couples caught together were arrested and the non-whites were given the harsher sentence.

In the court the yogi's shortcoming is politically defined as immorality, a crime punishable by law. Since the yogi is tried on a charge of immorality because of his sexual relations across the colour bar, the story highlights a particular South African reality during the apartheid governance thereby continuing the political themes raised in 'The Hajji' and in 'The Betrayal'.

A story with a similar racial issue informed by the Immorality Act is

‘ Gerty’s Brother’ , chosen from this collection by the Academy for publication in its Annual Review . This is about two Indian males, the narrator and his friend Hussein ‘ who became interested in a white girl who was easy and would not give much trouble in removing her undergarments to anyone’(89) and also because the risk of having sex across the colourline under the Immorality Act added spice to an affair.

The two gestures of lust (when Hussein embraced the white girl in the bushes) and the other of compassion (when the narrator lifts the white child into the boat at the Zoo Lake) marks the point of difference between an Immorality Act and a moral action.

Gerty and her little brother, Riekie, move in with Hussein and enjoy a short-lived unity. Little Riekie stands as the innocent foil to the consciousness of risk on the part of Hussein and Gerty. When Hussein fears the threat of being watched by police he brings this illicit affair to an abrupt end and leaves for Durban. The cold callous arms of the law destroys all sense of happiness for little Riekie who had formed a close bond with Hussein.

The pathos and tragedy of this story arises from the fact that it is Gerty’s eight year old brother, Riekie, who emerges as the only casualty of the illicit love affair. The narrator’s indifference was shattered when he watched with helplessness, Riekie, the little white boy, shaking the gates and calling for Hussein, the man who had been kind to him. In grotesque dismay the narrator reflects:

I returned to my landlady’s with the hackles of revolt rising
within me. (1978:93)

Essop’s powerful imagery implies that Riekie finds himself trapped within a prison

ironically created by his own race for his own protection.

Similarly, 'The Target' just like 'Gerty's Brother' pursues a theme already presented in the relationship between Karim and Catherine in 'The Hajji': relationships across the South African colour bar .

In 'The Target' Mahmood forms a brief relationship with a white girl 'Najma' who was a frequenter at the night-club Mahmood became one of the directors of. Mahmood succeeded in producing a rather superficial transformation in 'Najma' by shredding off her skimpy night-club clothes and covering up in traditional garments and eating spicy curries. All this was accomplished under the expert supervision of Aziz Khan, of course.

This relationship was brief as it was ludicrous. Once again Mahmood became a target of a white gang that was determined to uphold the law constituting the 'Immorality Act' and returned Najma to her original self of men and night-clubs.

Another instance of white manipulation is in 'Two Dimension' from 'Noorjehan and other short stories'. Ismet a young Indian student fell hopelessly in love with a white girl, Caroline. Being blinded by infatuation Ismet foolishly does everything to please her until he realises he was being used.

In an instant he saw her as a part of a white liberal caste that indulged in ritual protest because it was expected of them only to leave the university later to take their place in a privileged society for which they had been prepared. (1990:56)

The title 'Two Dimensional' is very apt since it conveys the idea of duplicity. Eventually Ismet decided that the only way he could be totally free of the

‘Herenvolk dogs and their syphilitic women’ (1990:58), was by leaving the country and going abroad.

In ‘Black and White’ Essop reveals the more dangerous tendency, in a system which values individual lives according to a racial spectrum, to use people as objects or status symbols. Harold, a Mayfair ‘poor white’ boosts his ego by displaying his motorbike:

His motor-cycle was a powerful gleaming machine that seemed to compensate in some way for his lack of personality. (1978:67)

but his coloured girlfriend who needs compensation as well is also playing a status game where he has been temporarily the object on display:

Jealous? Of course I met him in Mayfair and what’s wrong with that? A Mayfair white is as good as any other white. He’s got white skin, hasn’t he? (1978:67)

Shireen and Harold are clearly victims of a political system in which Harold’s crossings from white Mayfair to Black Fordsburg constitute a contravention of racial laws. This gives Shireen, legally an inferior citizen, her social triumph thus placing her in an enviable position. This is a case where enforced segregation is a factor that helps to breed resentment and aggression.

Although the story of ‘The Notice’ in which a white government official whilst issuing notices to the Indians of Fordsburg, takes advantage of the situation by making sexual advances towards an Indian housewife, is funny and entertaining, it also depicts the harsh realities of the forced removals- a bitter experience endured by many non-white races during the apartheid era.

POLITICAL VIOLENCE

Essop's second collection of short fiction, 'Noorjehan and other short stories' (1990) has stronger undertones of political crisis. This period represents the more recent decades of the seventies and eighties when more extremes moods of violence and unrest prevailed. The key stories deal with moments of political issues, the people who implement the apartheid laws and the people who have to endure the workings of an often corrupt social system. His focus here writes Cherry Clayton in the foreword of the book, 'is often on the young, both as victims of social and political wrongs and those who may seek extreme solutions to them' - like in 'Penelope' and 'The Nightingale and the Dove'.

Both stories revolve around the political violence and brutality that marked this decade. In the Sharpsville Massacre of 1960 where over twenty thousand people marched to the police station in protest against the carrying of passes, 67 were killed and 186 wounded when police opened fire. Amongst those that were killed and wounded were women and children. Many young lives were also lost during the Students' uprising in Soweto in 1976. These two incidents out of many during this volatile decade expose the harsh realities that prevailed in the lives of the: 'children whose hearts the soldiers had riven- they were dead too.' (1990:108)

These two stories deal with the discontent and resistance in black schools during the late seventies and early eighties, which culminated in widespread protests throughout the country. With reference to 'poorly equipped schools', the differentiated racial educational system' and 'the withholding of opportunities' (81) the appalling conditions that prevailed in the blacks schools were emphasised.

Since the early 1950's, with the advent of the Afrikaner Nationalist Party to political government, education authorities were split between the different colour groups in the country. There were different educational authorities for black, white, Indian and

coloured children. Amenities were unequally distributed among the various 'population groups', with white schools getting the lion's share of advantages. Black children have come out the worst in the apartheid education system. The 1976 Student's Uprising is one vivid indication of the massive dissatisfaction with racially divided education in South Africa.

In the story 'Penelope', a young coloured girl suffers isolation because of her parent's decision for her to remain uninvolved in any form of protest as it was against their religious principles. Penelope was caught in a difficult situation considering the mounting feelings of rebellion surrounding her :

... troop carriers suddenly appeared from all directions.
Soldiers, wielding batons and truncheons, jumped out
and attacked them. (1990:83)

The innocent, sensitive Penelope can be seen as a foil against the looming presence of state brutality and the tragic consequences of it. But this was a high price to pay even for the sanctity of her religious faith as Essop points out: ' Penelope remained there most of the time , a lonely girl, reading the gospels.' (1990:82). Finally, the pressure was too great and Penelope succumbed: ' As I picked her up and held her in my arms, a small stone fell out of her outstretched hand.' (1990:83)

Similarly, in the story 'The Nightingale and the Dove' which deals with the aftermath of the 1997 Soweto uprisings, Essop continues with the theme of political unrest in schools. In this story the narrator -protagonist is a school teacher who, impelled by curiosity, visits a school in Soweto. Once again the story is informed by the pitiful conditions prevalent in township schools - the laboratory is: 'a poorly equipped room with bottles of chemicals on shelves, two old cupboards, a table for conducting experimenting, old desks', (1990:106) and the classrooms he visits 'are overcrowded' (1990:106)

Yet, amidst the squalor and deprivation, the children are being taught Keats' 'Ode to a Nightingale'. It must be noted that this is a stylish, lyrical poem by a Romantic poet about a beautiful bird associated with music and harmony. The poem can be seen as a foil against the discord of the educational system and its blatant inequalities. The nightingale is symbolic of beauty, harmony and a world that transcends the physical. The passionate and dynamic dramatisation by the township teacher is reflective of the healing spirit of the nightingale during the turbulent times. Although one may question the relevance of the teaching of such a poem because of its Eurocentric background, to a class of children from a trouble-torn township, enroute back home the narrator comes upon a dying dove and realises the significance between the two dead birds (the Nightingale and the Dove) and the innocent victims in:

the children whose hearts the soldiers bullets had riven -
they were dead too. (1990:108)

The theme of political violence and its effects on young children continues in 'Aletta's Diary' from Essop's third collection of short stories. This story is a record by a standard nine pupil from Soweto, attending an Eldorado Park High School. She catalogued the daily lives of township folk who were forced to live dangerously. The 'necklacing' deaths compelled Aletta's family to leave the township - a township marred with crime, violence and destruction. As a young victim of pain and suffering, Aletta was forced to ponder over such disturbing issues:

Crime in the community is endemic and there is no strong authority that can control it. Gangs of thugs roam the streets, pedestrians are robbed, women and girls are raped. Bodies are found in the morning and thieves break into homes at will. I suppose the whites living in their safe suburbs never felt we needed protection. What has brought about this anarchy and disrespect for life? Is it the violence

of Apartheid that has dehumanised so many in the townships?
(1997:59)

Although alive, David in 'Initiation' is another innocent victim of isolation and alienation just like Penelope. David, an abandoned black child is found by the narrator in an Indian area - perhaps, homeless due to riots, neglect or possibly abandonment. The narrator is filled with compassion and concern for the lost boy. He takes him home and then to the police who treat the matter very casually. David too, responds rather complacently to the shoddy treatment as if he was used to such treatment and expected no better. When David walks away 'as though drawn by a leash'(10), the narrator is filled with the same feelings that he experienced as he held Penelope in his arms and when he held the dove in his hand. He felt sad and empty.

The macabre scene of ritual violence enacted by the police in 'Initiation' is symbolic of the diabolical nature of the legal system. The fact that the narrator and David were present did not dispel them from engaging in such barbaric behaviour, instead 'They took no notice of us'(1990:9). This behaviour is very similar to the behaviour of the two white soldiers in 'In the Train', where the people watching don't count because of the colour of their skin.

CORRUPTION IN BUREAUCRACY

In many of his stories the South African legal system and the people enforcing the law - the police - are collectively portrayed as a symbol of entrenched tyranny. 'East-West' is one such story. The story starts when Borg was sent by his superiors to question Ranjit's alleged involvement with a terrorist. But when Borg goes to visit him, he is most captivated by Ranjit's aura of peace and tranquillity. During a guided tour of Tolstoy Farm, Borg is informed that the farm was established by Mahatma Gandhi as a commune for Indians.

Borg is deeply touched by Ranjit's mannerisms and the peace and calm that prevailed in Tolstoy Farm. It was unlike the tension and stuffiness that existed in Rosevale. Incidentally Tolstoy Farm -also known as the Satyagraha Farm- was launched in this spirit in 1910. The farm about 1100 acres including extensive orchards, was a gift from an adherent of the satyagraha movement which was intended as a base for satyagrahis and their families, providing sustenance while breadwinners were in jail or unemployed as a result of political activism.

Tolstoy Farm was not only an operational base for the Satyagraha struggle but also the scene of an experiment in community living which reflected the unique philosophy and morality of Gandhi. At Tolstoy Farm, which housed families of varied religions and tongues, the accommodation of these differences was pursued through respect for dietary principles, sharing of religious rituals and prayers and multi-lingual education. Fundamental to the lifestyle at the farm was material simplicity and stringent self-discipline. Keeping all this information in mind it is quite understandable why this place would appeal to a person like Borg.

Being the kind of person he was, Borg did not find it difficult to quit the police force and reject his white heritage since he identified with the principles of Gandhi. To show his solidarity with the oppressive minority he not only converted to Hinduism but also became a yogi.

Captain Van Dyck and Colonel Zeitsman from Rosevale, the police headquarters, epitomise bureaucratic officials and tyrannical enforcers of the apartheid law. This is evident when Borg was reprimanded by his authorities for associating with Ranjit.

Now this may seem to you perfectly harmless activity,
but to security any person who mixes socially or in any
other way with people of a different race is suspect.
(1990:62)

And when Borg converts to Hinduism, the security authorities become so angered they arrested Borg for this. Ironically the brutal security department was extremely intimidated by the peaceful protests of the Indians. In an attempt to pacify the protesters and dissuade them from continuing, the police authorities decided to release Borg. The protest had already caused widespread sensation and the fear of them mobilising more support was a daunting probability. This had to be stopped so the hypocritical Colonel Zietsman addressed the gathering:

Ladies and gentlemen, in pursuance of my government's relations among the various races that make up the people of our beautiful country, I am proud to be given the opportunity of handing over the prisoner to you. It has always been the government's policy to grant every race complete religious freedom and to offer every possible assistance, whether moral, material or technological. It should always be remembered that since our country is part of the great Christian, democratic free world ... (1990:72)

The theme of corrupt bureaucracy is a common feature in Essop's stories. This theme continues in 'Full Circle' with Captain Mason being the two-faced hypocrite determined to enforce the unjust law at any costs as long as he stands to gain. A story with a similar theme is 'Civilisation' that once more focuses on the absurdity of the bureaucracy running the country during the apartheid years. The irony of the title is demonstrated in the plot about an over-zealous traffic officer, who went to great lengths to protect the interests of two wealthy traffic offenders at the expense of the insignificant people in a corrupt, apartheid country. The traffic officer's efforts were commended by an equally corrupt major.

Divine justice is however restored when a fire-engine crushes into the

building killing the two wealthy men and destroying their expensive vehicles.

‘The Burial’ however, exposes the inefficiency of the municipality and the bureaucracy governing it. The municipal authorities under the apartheid regime came under attack once again for their unreasonable laws like not allowing Sikander ‘to scatter a spadeful of earth as a last rite’ (1990:100). This is evidence of the lack of tolerance that exists among the white bureaucracy. Similarly when Borg converts to Hinduism this unfortunately does not meet with passive acceptance. The security authorities become infuriated and they react with anger and vengeance and arrest Borg for practising a religious belief contrary to theirs. This story highlights a very important theme, the theme of religious non-tolerance and the suppression of freedom and rights to individual choices.

Corruption and idiocracy of the bureaucracy in the municipality also features in another story. A humorous and cynical account is given in ‘The Trial’ where an Indian woman is summoned to court on a charge of tampering with and abusing municipal property. The irony of this is demonstrated when the municipality is ridiculed for having processed address changes and expecting to be informed by the residents of these addresses. Another instance of irony is the municipality’s blatant abuse of public funds in sending four men to Mrs. Parvena’s house to put one lock on the meter-box.

The story ‘Chess’ from Essop’s third collection has deep symbolic significance to the theme of bureaucratic injustice. It deals with an autocratic and pedantic headmaster and a teacher who was an astute chess player. They had an extremely conflicting relationship as the principal perceived Zenobia Hansa to be a serious threat to his dictatorship. The outspoken Zenobia represents the liberated women concerned with justice and equality. To Mr. Duma, Zenobia posed a serious threat to his autocratic

power. Even before having any confrontations with her he was determined to ‘put her in her place’. He had come to know of her because of her reputation for challenging authority. She had been reported to the education departmental authority by the previous principal for insubordination.

Whilst Mr. Duma who constantly claimed that the buck stopped with him, turned to inspector De Wit to get rid of Zenobia, Zenobia fought her own battles with dignity and self-respect. Even the inspector remarked: ‘She seems to be playing chess with you and beating you everytime.’ Hence the title ‘Chess’ is very appropriate since the relationship between Mr. Duma and Zenobia could be compared to a game of chess. They were like two opponents, both headstrong and determined to win.

Chess! Chess! Chess! The word began to lacerate his consciousness. The pawns, the bishops, the knights were converging on him- all manipulated by that woman in exotic clothing stretching out her hand to destroy him.
(1997:37)

When Zenobia was dismissed:

Both teachers and pupils were incensed by the bureaucratic action of the Educational Department that gave no reason for Zenobia’s dismissal nor had cared to investigate what was going on at that school.
(1997:39)

Zenobia’s dismissal was met with widespread objection from pupils, parents and teachers. Parents confronted him, teachers demanded Zenobia’s reinstatement, pupils held placard demonstrations and there were newspaper reports. Not only had his power waned but he was completely crushed.

When Mr. Duma contacted De Wit and asked him to intervene, De Wit was far from co-operative. He blamed Mr. Duma for getting him involved in his mess and bringing the Educational Department to disrepute. The final verdict was to reinstate Mrs. Zenobia Hansa. Hence Mr. Zuma was defeated at his own game.

‘The Councillor’ is a portrayal of a very corrupt and shrewd businessman Mr. Khamsin who like many bourgeois Indians exploited their working class employees. He used his position as a member of the South African Indian Council for personal gain. He used to associate with important delegates and thereby establish strong ties with them - all for his own gain. Instead of protecting the interests of the Indian people, he ‘sold’ them. At one of his lavish dinner parties that he was accustomed to having, he agreed:

‘Yes, we Indians must develop separately,’ he told the guests across a table laden with delicacies. ‘Any people, in fact any entity with a culture of its own must preserve it in its untarnished purity. Integration can only lead to pollution.’ (1997:107)

Soon after the apartheid era terminated and the new era was inaugurated, Mr. Khamsin crossed over his allegiance to the democratic government, pledging his total support in favour of integration and democracy. This change is evident in ‘The Banquet’: What we blacks have been fighting for, since we were born is Afro-democracy.’ (1997:114)

‘The Banquet’ exposes the corruption in a so called ‘democratic’ government. The story centres around the egocentric, ambitious, opulent politicians living in elite Houghton, outside Johannesburg. One such pretender is the same wealthy merchant, Mr. Khamsin. He hosts a banquet at his home and invites many parliamentarians. At the banquet, their ostentatious, pretentious display of their egotism, their lust for

power, wealth and pompous pursuits and their false notion of democracy and 'rainbow nation' is exemplified. What surfaces as the banquet continues is their intellectual poverty and moral bankruptcy.

Not only did the theme of hypocrisy and duplicity feature in the public sector but in other sectors as well. The shrewdness of the elite aristocrats resurfaces in the character of Don Carlyle in 'Shakespeare's Image'. Don Carlyle projected the facade of being a liberal, knowledgeable man of great integrity but underlying that finesse of a paragon of civilised culture was a superficial, power-hungry opportunist. The narrator is left with a profound sense of disappointment after he had read the letter written by Don Carlyle in which he reflects his suspicions about the tea-girl stealing sugar. He was deeply perplexed by this and wondered: 'Would Don Carlyle have written that about a white tea-girl?' Once again an innocent black girl becomes the unsuspecting victim of white aristocracy.

INDIAN RESISTANCE

1946 was a landmark in the development of unity in the struggle of Africans and Indians in South Africa. Africans and Indians have, of course, struggled for the rights for decades before 1946 but their struggles have been parallel rather than united. The first modern mass movement in South Africa was the Indian movement led by Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi from 1894 to 1913. It was confined to the Indian Community and had hardly any contact with the Africans.

The Indians were indentured labourers or freed labourers or immigrants in South Africa. They were a small and vulnerable minority. Even some liberal whites who espoused African rights were not sympathetic to the settlement of the Indians in South Africa. The Indian community included Hindus, Muslims, Christians and Parsis. Most of the Indians knew little English and spoke, Telugu, Gujarati, Marathi and other languages. To unite them in one movement was an enormous task and Gandhi

deserves great credit for his leadership and organisational skill.

The legacy of Mahatma Gandhi and the experience of the Indian passive resistance movement of 1946-1948 had a significant impact on the course of the liberation struggle. Even when the ANC decided on armed struggle, it took great care to avoid loss of life. Non-violent resistance continued in new forms despite intense repression. The influence of Gandhi may also be discerned in the spirit of reconciliation which followed the release of Mandela in 1990 and the establishment of a democratic government in 1994. The thought of Mahatma Gandhi was tested and enriched in South Africa's struggle for liberation.

Whilst the peaceful mass demonstration for Yogi Satyananda's release in 'East-West' illustrates a continuity with a tradition of protest established by Gandhi, the bombing of a military arsenal in 'The Home-coming' suggests a contradiction to the Gandhian philosophy of Satyagraha (non-violence). The militant nature of some of the resistance movements are illustrated in Essop's stories as he traces the development of Indian resistance from the Orient Front Movement to the Indian Congress to the African National Congress. What is glaring from this transition is the progressive militancy in the protests. The extreme scenario of Indian resistance is demonstrated in 'Jihad' a story from Essop's third collection.

'Jihad' meaning holy war, represents the violent and destructive development of resistance that prevailed especially under the banner of the ANC. Some of these terrorist acts were inhumane as portrayed in this story. This is a riveting story from Essop's third collection. It is about a Muslim freedom fighter from Lenasia, Zaid, with three heavily armed guerrilla companions, set out on midnight mission to attack the farms of the 'hated Herrenvolk'. The four men belonged to the Democratic Union, a political organisation that had been operating secretly to overthrow the white aristocracy. They had their guerrilla training abroad and were all geared to

attack. All four men were given their instructions and were set to execute the attacks until Zaid refused to proceed saying that it was against his religion to kill women, children and animals. He claimed that:

Islam regards war as legitimate when it is a struggle against persecution and oppression. It is a disciplined struggle as the aim is to establish a just society.

Women and children and old people cannot be killed, nor animals, nor the environment damaged. The term 'Jihad' embraces this. (1997:55)

The drastic punishment meted out to those who did not comply with some anti-apartheid activist organisations were as cruel and immoral as apartheid itself. Zaid was ironically killed by his own comrades as they believed that he was guilty of betraying the struggle against injustice.

Another facet of Indian resistance explored in 'The Home-coming' is the betrayal of the struggle by the educated and the entrepreneurial elite represented here by Chinsamy (school principal) and Abdul Rehman (business executive). Being lured by money and power, both these characters abandon their conscience and responsibilities as leaders and intellectuals of the Indian community.

Within the Indian community itself, there existed the element of corruption. Many bourgeois Indians collaborated with white government officials and white overlords. It was still the same even after all these years in spite of all the sacrifices people like Pravin had made. Pravin who was in exile for twelve years on Robben Island, returns home. He was disappointed with his welcome - he expected a glorious reception with many friends and relatives. He was further disillusioned when he was treated rather shabbily by the principal and the deputy principal of his old school - his Alma Mater. And when he went to visit Abdul Rehman, his mentor,

Pravin was totally disappointed. He could not believe the transformation of the man who was once an ardent communist .

The school principal's betrayal is evident when he rejects the former inmate of Robben Island in favour of a white school inspector. Chinsamy's devotion to a bureaucratic official is typical of the corruption that some Indians succumbed to. The headmaster's desire to please the inspector at any cost prevents Pravin from meeting the teachers and children. Thus the disillusionment Pravin experienced on the very first day he returned when only his immediate family was there to welcome him, is further intensified. Ironically now Pravin feels just as alienated as he had been on Robben Island. What disturbed Pravin the most was that: 'His part in the liberation struggle meant nothing to them. (1990:128)

When Pravin learns of his mentor's (Abdul Rehman's) wealth, he is unable to reconcile the image of his friend as a capitalist with that of his earlier conception of the man as a communist and as 'champion of the proletariat'(126). When Abdul Rehman invites him to his plush residence in an elite area, Pravin is filled with contempt for him as evident in:

You must come to visit my home in Westville. Bring your wife too. There is a swimming pool and tennis -court. Come there and enjoy yourself every weekend. I have parties every weekend. You will meet some very interesting people... (1990:128)

Pravin was no longer listening. He seemed to see the skull of the man behind the flesh that covered his face. (1990:128)

Pravin's rejection of the bourgeois elite is demonstrated when he decides to join the people at the bus terminal in a gesture of solidarity with the working class. But to his dismay, his isolation and estrangement from the people around him is intensified when he notices:

they all seemed like aliens, people from another country who had invaded the city, walking with a set purpose to some place they were determined to reach. His part in the liberation struggle meant nothing to them. (1990:128)

The third story of Indian resistance is 'Gemini'. Siva's working class status and condition of poverty are attributed to the government's apartheid scheme to keep the Indians down. Although he accepts responsibility for his failures and lack of secondary school education, he also blames it on the system of apartheid. Thus he views education as a means of escaping his misery. By investing in his son's education, he keeps his own aspirations alive, confident that one day, Krishna would succeed where he had failed.

In a racially divided country where Indians were one of the oppressed disadvantaged races, it was a struggle for their dreams and ambitions to materialise. Fortunately hope and perseverance were their strong characteristics making possible some of their dreams to come true. Essop attempts to illustrate these qualities in many of his characters. Siva in 'Gemini' is a typical example of an optimistic father who 'slogs' so that his only child, Krishna, would have a better life. Unfortunately this is one story where dreams don't come true and Siva is jerked into accepting the reality that his son is just as unsuccessful as he had been in school, hence the title 'Gemini' -twins.

The protagonist's sense of his own exploitation as a waiter underlines his bitterness towards the people he serves since they are representative of the elite, wealthy and privileged. Siva internalises his hatred for the system and it manifests in his feelings and his attitude. He exercises his protest inwardly:

...filled him with nausea. Was he born for this- to be
at the beck and call of sirs and madams and to assist
in satisfying their appetites.(1990:73)

When Siva learns of his son's failure, he is at first shattered. But in light of the fire incident, Siva reflects on this differently. His perspective is somewhat altered, since he came so close to losing Krishna. His bitterness and anger is transformed into love and tenderness as he identifies with his son's predicament.

The acceptance of truth and reality is a major step in progressing forward. Even though the process may be a painful journey, like in 'Gemini', it is also very cleansing and purifying since there is that finality that we all need to move forward in our lives. To Siva the real truth has brought him an unconditional love for his son, a love devoid of the pressure to become successful. 'Stretched out his hand to touch him' (1990:76) suggests Siva's acceptance of his son and of himself since Krishna is a chip of the old block. Hence the title 'Gemini'- meaning identical twins. At the end, father and son are equalised victims of apartheid.

Contrary to Siva, Usha and Ravi in 'Love' harbour no hatred and bitterness towards those whom they serve. They are unaffected by the social conditions around them. They are able to transcend the material conditions of their poverty through their mutual love and commitment for each other.

Unlike many of the characters in this close-knit Indian community, Usha and Ravi do not live much of a communal existence : 'spoke little with their neighbours'(78). The only time when we are made aware of a relationship with relatives and neighbours was when Usha died. Their seclusion from the rest of the community should not be misconstrued as being aloof. Their attitudes and mannerisms were not offensive at all, in fact they had a deep respect for others :

Though they were deeply attached to each other, they never displayed their affection in public. (1990:78)

This attitude must be contrasted with the offensive behaviour of the two white soldiers in 'In the Train' who blatantly disregarded Farid and Hazel.

Although Essop paints a romantic though not passionate mood, there are instances in the story when we made aware of the drudgery of the working-class: they had to travel by a commuter bus normally overcrowded with workers; they had to leave early to work and return in the late afternoon. But this never dispirited them. In spite of this routine they made time to sit together, Ravi with his sitar and Usha listening to her husband play the most melodious music ever. Their appreciation for music, nature and their long walks together distinguishes them from Essop's yard characters. They were the epitome of love, having attained their spiritual harmony through each other. Through their love Usha and Ravi had conquered the perils around them and transformed them into peace and beauty.

But when Usha dies, everything changes, Ravi becomes depressed and lost. Eventually he decides to take his own life unable to continue living without his beloved Usha, named after the Hindu-goddess of Dawn. There seems to be great significance in this name and meaning since after Usha died, there was complete darkness -dusk had set.

On a socio-political level, Ravi's personal sacrifice can be seen as the pain and suffering of the working-class. Without love, Ravi was as vulnerable as any other working-class citizen. From this story one could conclude that love conquers all even apartheid. Although this story has a sombre tone, there is also an element of a romantic spiritual togetherness and an infinite love that transcends our shallow world, a love that can only be defined in an Utopian world of romance and beauty as in 'The Golden Dome'.

'The Golden Dome' is a passionate and emotional account of a fantasy experience of a young man in a carpet emporium. When Salim entered this paradise he felt like Adam in the Garden of Eden. Salim was not accustomed to the warmth and friendliness that exuded from the beautiful assistant neither did he expect it since he was 'a student without money' in a competitive world where people were valued according to their material wealth. But Salim left the emporium richer than when he entered - richer and better for the spiritual experience of beauty, poetry and harmony.

And the last story in this collection, 'Pilgrimage' resembles a voyage of spiritual discovery and signifies a closing statement that discrimination exists everywhere and only love will break down these man-made barriers.

REPRESENTATION OF WOMEN

In a society where the fundamental criterion for discrimination is race, it is unreal to consider the position of the one sex in isolation from the other. The enjoyment of the privileges of apartheid by white women differs only marginally from that of white men: likewise, while black women suffer more than black men from the violations of their rights, the violations are gross in respect to both. It is this reality that accounts for the very peripheral impact of feminism on South Africa.

Like African and Coloured Women, Indian women too worked as farm hands and domestics until the Second World War. Indian women were imported as indentured field labourers, and were paid five shillings a month, half the wage paid to men. Indian women in South Africa, being both non-white and female, suffered a triple oppression. As Indians- which for the most part defines their class position- they had to contend with the restrictive apartheid legislation, which ensured alien control over all facets of their lives. In addition, as women, they had to contend with the fact that

they were regarded as dependants and as inferior to men; as such, they were even further discriminated against within the framework of apartheid.

The consequences of the power struggle were as far reaching during this very volatile era. Even when not directly oppressed by politics themselves, some Indians transferred this oppression onto less powerful and more vulnerable members within the same community. Essop's second collection shows the Indian in moments of politicisation and crises of conscience where questions of identity surface. This collection marks a further development in Essop's work where issues around gender are textualized by highlighting important class divisions. An example of one such tradition is the institution of arranged marriages, explored in the title story. Caught in a situation where the tradition is understood to mean respect for culture, Noorjehan is faced with the dilemma between self sacrifice and personal happiness.

This story highlights the plight of the typical traditional role of the Indian woman in a community that expects women to be obedient and subservient. As Meer states :
'To make a good husband is but one branch of a man's duty, but it is the chief duty of a woman to make a good wife.' (1985: p.70)

Noorjehan's rights were completely infringed upon by her parents who insisted on her marrying someone she was not interested in. The issue of arranged marriages is a common practice in the Indian community. This story reveals the violation of human dignity and highlights the subordination of women in an already oppressed society.

Noorjehan, a bright and beautiful young girl tries to solicit her teacher's help in rescuing her from an intended arranged marriage. His attempts at reasoning with her father fails and Noorjehan is left to face the wrath of her parents. The narrator is incapable of affecting a change to the situation and he feels a 'trenchant sense of guilt'.

Finally we come to realise that the 'prince' in her imagination is in effect the narrator who was blind to the romantic feelings that Noorjehan had conceived of him. The harsh reality of arranged marriages and child marriages is overshadowed by the fairy-tale depiction of Noorjehan's predicament. Noorjehan is portrayed as a princess entrapped in a tower. But unfortunately there is no fairy-tale ending in this story since Noorjehan's knight in shining armour fails to rescue her.

On a similar note of arranged marriage, is the story 'Red Beard's Daughter'. Julie the girl in question, has been placed in the same predicament as Noorjehan. Julie's father has arranged that she marry a certain Ben Areff who has paid a handsome sum for his bride-to-be. This story exposes the desperate plight of daughters caught between clashing generations and the guilt of rejecting their parents' wishes. Her decision to leave home is considered a defiance towards the patriarchal tradition and an assertion of her independence.

Another story that centres around this theme is 'Divorce'. In this story Sultan marries Nadia and after just six months of marriage, he pronounces divorce. Nadia has very little say in the matter and she is duly returned to her family like an inanimate object. Although this is a rather amusing story, it exposes the plight of women in a society fighting for equality.

Although Islamic law has always protected a women's right to property, Muslim women who do not register their marriage, are subjected to the local interpretation of the Islamic divorce procedure. It is the husband's prerogative to set aside a wife by pronouncing, 'I divorce thee', three times. In such cases the women involved may only sue for seduction and for expenses incurred for the wedding. Besides the expense, divorce still continues to be regarded as a slur on the woman.

It is ironical that the egotistical and arrogant Sultan from 'Divorce' seeks religious

advice in contemplating the divorce. Sultan totally contradicts the scriptures of Islam, 'Treat your women well and be kind to them'. The procedure governing divorce and remarrying according to the Islamic law is a mockery of the sanctity of marriage.

The final outsmarting of Sultan by Nadia and her new husband can be considered as an assertion of her power just as Noorjehan's gesture of running away from home is read as an assertion of her independence.

The next story that focuses on the exploitation of women in society is one that deals with the issue of sexual harassment in the work place. In 'Violence' Sumaya, Hussein's fiancé was sexually molested by her boss, Mr. Osman. Hussein's reaction to Sumaya's ordeal though natural and understandable, compounds the theme of male domination when Sumaya recedes into the background with the 'macho' Hussein orchestrating a violent revenge on Mr. Osman. Further the gangster-like attack is suggestive of the protection of rights which reduces Sumaya once more to that of a possession.

In a multi-racial society such as the South African situation, it is a fallacy to believe that any one cultural group can exist in complete isolation from the others. Borrowing of certain features in the different cultures has always been a common practice as long as social contact exists between the different cultural groups. Even if contact is reduced to the barest minimum, the impact of one culture on another will continue to be felt. Against this background then, we witness a number of changes that have already taken place in the Indian community and the problems that many of these changes have brought about as demonstrated in the following story.

'The Stoic' which is also the final story in this segment, highlights the religious and cultural demands imposed on women in the Indian community to keep them in a subordinate and inferior position. This is about a marriage 'between a religious

instructor, Hafez Effendi , and an unconventional woman, Feroza whose:
'appearance did not match the laudatory epithets of various imaginative people.'
(1990:20)

Hafez's failure to reconcile his religious sermons on 'the depravity of women who imitate the women of the West'(22) with Feroza's extrovert behaviour and her flamboyant dressing was construed as a sign of weakness. Although he spoke to her on several occasions about her wayward, unconventional ways, he never berated her. Even when there were rumours that only one of the four children that Feroza conceived was his, he did not change his attitude towards his wife. Instead he supported his acceptance of her wayward behaviour with the statement:
' We are all God's children.' (1990:22)

Hafez's treatment of his wife is a marked contrast to the hajji's treatment of Salima as evident when he 'struck his wife in the face' (1978:10). Keeping women in their place, made Hassen feel more manly. This can be seen as a weakness or a lack of inner strength and belief in his own worth as a human being since a man who has a proper understanding of his own worth as an individual does not have to reduce others to weakness in order to feel powerful himself.

Hassen demands his wife's obedience and sees her lessening subservience to him as a failure of dutifulness on her part. Whilst he believes women are supposed to be servile, obedient and opinionless, he also resents her placidity and describes her as 'flaccid, cowlike and inadequate'(1978:4). This is indicative of his ambivalence - the conflicting feelings that has overwhelmed him. This is also evident in his feelings towards Catherine. They are a mixture of admiration and contempt for her. Hassen's admiration for strength is ironical since this is what he lacked the most.

Whilst Hassen's perception of women's behaviour typifies traditional patriarchal attitudes, it is obviously very questionable as it is Salima, who has had neither the

benefit of an education nor the opportunity of making a pilgrimage to Mecca, who ironically has the ability to forgive. She is compassionate and broad-minded to both Karim and Catherine's predicament. So although in Hassen's eyes, Salima may seem weak and meek it is quite the reserve as been pointed out.

Traditionally whilst the male was seen as the head of the family and centre of authority commanding respect and obedience from his wife and children, the mother was considered the home-maker, provider of affection, wife and mother, showing utmost loyalty to her husband and children, waiting upon them and subscribing to her husband's opinion. However there has been a progressive emancipation amongst Indian women who have been assuming new roles and greater personal independence and social rights almost equal to those enjoyed by men.

The redefining of roles according to gender is illustrated in the next story- 'The Trial'. Essop's portrayal of Mrs. Parvena in 'The Trial' is a deviation from the 'normal' representation of Indian women. Her challenging of the municipality during the apartheid regime is a significant shift from the depiction of Indian women as meek and passive. Although she is found guilty, her defiance is illustrated when she confidently announces: 'I will not pay the fine.'(98). Hence Mrs. Parvena can be considered an emancipated, liberated woman of the modern generation.

WOMEN IN THE STRUGGLE FOR LIBERATION

Women in South Africa have emerged as primary catalysts for protests against, and as challengers of, the apartheid regime. With all the devastating effects of apartheid on the status of women that have already been described, women have never lost sight of the fact that meaningful change for them could not come through reform but only through the total destruction of the apartheid system. Thus the common exploitation and oppression of men and women on the basis of colour has led to a combined fight

against the system instead of a battle of women against men for women's rights.

In South Africa, women have frequently been the ones to raise the primary issues and to organise and involve the people around those issues. In almost all cases, women were first brought into the struggle when they saw the attempt by the Government to destroy their family structure and with it the basic fabric of their respective societies. Thus, in South Africa, women reacted most vigorously to the introduction of passes in the 1950's and the consequent restrictions on families; to the mass killings of their children two decades later in Soweto; and to the attempt to destroy urban family life as epitomised by the women of Crossroads when over two hundred women gathered together and demonstrated at the Bantu Affairs Administration Board. They protested against the forced removals. Women were very active in trade unions and in women's federations and in the Black Consciousness Movement. .

Although there were a few white women in solidarity with the anti-apartheid liberation, the majority of them were on the side of the oppressors. Essop, in the character of Naomi exposes the trials and tribulations of a white woman fighting for the rights of the oppressed in an apartheid country. Contrary to the theme of subordination and oppression of women is the power of women depicted in 'The Metamorphosis' which tells the story of an old Jewish lady who makes a very significant contribution to the liberation struggle. Naomi became a very active member of the Pharos, 'a women's organisation devoted to social justice'(24).

Naomi, the central protagonist of 'The Metamorphosis' undergoes a profound transformation in her life and in her political outlook. Her transformation from suburban housewife to political activist comes from reading an article about a black detainee being mauled to death by a police dog. She becomes very sensitised and disturbed by such brutal aggression and she is determined to act on her feelings. By identifying with the oppressed through her own experiences as a Jew in Germany, Naomi was able to share the burdens of prejudice in a way not otherwise possible for a white South African.

As a white South African Naomi faces many challenges in pursuing her new commitment in encouraging social justice. In an apartheid country where the white government was rarely challenged, any opposition especially from their own race was not seen lightly. Naomi also experienced resistance from her children who found it a bit difficult to come to terms with her transformation since they had grown up : ‘as part of the larger patrician white class. Their upbringing forbade them to think of others, still less to be concerned about their welfare.’(1990:27-28)

Although her children were divided in their support for her, she lacked neither the conviction nor the determination to pursue the fight for justice. Thus she and Tarasita represented the emerging sector of empowered women rising in revolt against the system.

‘ What you are trying to do,’ Tarasita said to Naomi
and a group of Pharos women , ‘is the highest form
of action spoken of in the Gita.’
(1990: 34)

The protests against the Republic Day celebrations and the Soweto Uprisings marks the significance of a new decade of political awakening , and with this emerged a surge of power and tenacity in women in their new role in the liberation struggle.

That the women have had a significant impact in South Africa is beyond question. Women have participated in ever-increasing numbers both within their countries and in exile, always at risk to themselves and to the groups they represent. The level of risk is reflected in the severity of government repression against women. In South Africa, one can hardly think of a prominent organiser who has not been detained, banned or imprisoned. By eliminating the leadership, the authorities destroyed the Federation of South African Women.

At the beginning of the century, Indian women in Natal and the Transvaal promoted Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha. It initially had an elitist membership, until the women from the ashrams in Transvaal and from Natal, Tolstoy Farm and the Phoenix Settlement converted it into a mass movement. In 1913, they defied the anti-Asiatic law, crossed the border from both ends and provoked the miners of Newcastle to lay down their picks and strike. Two thousand workers thereafter began the epic march, led by Gandhi, across the Natal border into the Transvaal. Arrests and imprisonment followed, and the government was forced to modify some of the hardships against the Indians. The great figure of that struggle was not Gandhi, but the emancipated young Valliamma who died in the struggle.

In 1946, the Indian women again took the lead in launching the second passive resistance campaign against the anti-Indian Land Act: at the end of that campaign, almost two thousand Indians had been imprisoned for defying segregatory laws.

Because women suffered the consequences of apartheid in a way men never could, they became a fundamental part of the liberation struggle. They are trained to care, and bear responsibility and guilt and when they cannot care and cannot be responsible, then the guilt is too overwhelming to be locked within themselves. That guilt explodes, it is externalised, and placed where it rightly belongs, in the system that suppresses and oppresses. The liberated women become the driving force for societal liberation. And as long as racism continues and a people, not a particular sex, is the object of oppression, the women will continue to overlook their own discrimination and dedicate themselves to the liberation of the people. As the former ANC President and Nobel Peace Prize winner Albert Luthuli later stated about the women's actions in 'The Role of Women in the Struggle against Apartheid':

Among us Africans, the weight of resistance has been greatly increased in last few years by the emergence

of our women. It may be true that, had the women hung back, resistance would still have been faltering and uncertain... The demonstration made a great impact, and gave strong impetus... Furthermore, women of all races have had far less hesitation than men in making common cause about things basic to them. (1980)

Naomi's total commitment to the liberation struggle contrasts with Jason's from 'Fossil'. Whilst Naomi embraced the revolutionary winds of change sweeping through South Africa, hence the title 'The Metamorphosis', Jason rooted himself in ideas that were old fashioned and antiquated. This plot centres around a conventional white lecturer of literature and the effect the political interference had on him.

During the seventies and eighties academic institutions, particularly universities, were the hive of political uprisings and other rebellious protests. The difficulties that Jason experiences in coming to terms with a revolutionary South Africa are clearly reflected in his denial of reality and his inability to align himself with progressive forces. This is evident when he rejects a student's choice of Peter Abrahams's work as the subject of a dissertation but strongly advocates the study of Eurocentric authors like D.H. Lawrence and Jane Austen. Familiarity with these Eurocentric characters offers Jason a sense of security. Thus any form of change and transformation poses a threat to his stability, hence the title 'Fossil'. Inevitably Jason becomes consumed with paranoia and struggles to maintain his sanity.

BLACK CONSCIOUSNESS

The emergence of the black consciousness movement in South Africa in the late 1970s had generated some misunderstanding and confusion. The historic significance

was in forging a firmer unity among the oppressed people in fighting the collaborators- the chiefs and others in the black community who tried to take advantage of the repression against the liberation movement by accepting the apartheid caste system and the crumbs from the oppressors- and in facilitating the revival of the liberation struggle with greater force.

Successive racist regimes had tried to maintain their domination by dividing the black people by a sort of caste system. The Indians were, however, in a peculiar position- on the one hand as a class between the Coloured people and the African majority and on the other as a totally insecure community since the regime did not accept the permanence of the community until the 1960s.

After the National Party came to power in 1948 with its apartheid policy, it enforced stricter segregation among the racial groups by humiliating the Coloured people and the Indians, as well as the African majority and facilitated a greater unity of the oppressed people.

There has been some confusion about the term 'Black' to denote all the oppressed people of South Africa- and the regime has tried to compound the confusion by changing the official designation of the African majority from 'Native' to 'Bantu' and then 'Black'.

But 'Black' is not meant to define the colour of the skin any more than 'red' defines the skin colour of Communists or 'yellow' the colour of stoolpigeons. 'Black' today denotes those fighting against colonialism and racism. Thus the concept of 'Black' denotes all the oppressed people in South Africa and it has had an international impact.

Black Consciousness means to develop the awareness in people, to develop their pride, and it does not confine itself to blacks only. Black people include all the

oppressed peoples of this country whatever the shade of their skin.

The issue of colour in a racist country is an underlying force that controls many facets of life. The psychological stigma attached to 'black' and 'white' is overwhelming. Throughout the apartheid era these two colours determined the way people lived, the treatment they got and the way others reacted to this limited colour spectrum as is evident in 'Black Cell'.

TRANSITION

'Transition' is a cynical but realistic account of the political situation in our country when the anti-apartheid government took over from the apartheid government. Just as expected there was a complete turn-about of events. The old files represent the old order and the new files the new order and Colonel Abdul-Aziz the executor of the transition.

After the new era was inaugurated, there were many changes in the country. One major change was the attitudes of people. A typical example is narrated in 'The Silk Scarf'. This story deals with an explosive confrontation in a clothing shop between a dauntless merchant, Mr. Sakur and Mrs. Nebo, the wife of an important official in the African Front. Mrs. Nebo pulls rank when she virtually demands to be granted preferential treatment and 'throws her toys out of the cot' when Mr. Sakur refuses to accept her cheque because of policy. Whilst he represents the few morally upright people in a progressively corrupt society, Mrs. Nebo represents the sector that wheels and deals with no conscience whatsoever. In this sad state of affairs we begin a new chapter with the old theme.

FABLES

Essop's third collection of short fiction, 'The King of Hearts and other stories' is the most recent of his books. Many of the stories in this collection contain strong undertones of racism. The title story is a fable told in calm prose. Its central character is a heart surgeon living under a racist regime in a country that itself requires heart surgery.

They were part of a social system that had become bloated and diseased. It seemed that the entire heart of Saturnia needed surgery- especially as its main artery had been poisoned by a social evil committed several centuries earlier. (1997: 2)

The paradox, the story turns on - the heart of the ailing white president replaced by a black - may seem a little far fetched - but it hits at the irony of racism.

The indigenous Sircon people were the oppressed slaves in Saturnia ruled by the colonist master race, the Saturnians, similar to our South African system during the apartheid regime. The Saturnians conquered the country of the Sircon people and subjected them (the Sircons) to helotry, slavery and exploitation. Over the years the Sircons rebelled but were suppressed. Although the Sircons were disadvantaged in most respects there was one advantage the Sircons enjoyed above their conquerors: 'they were very strong and healthy compared to their masters whose intemperate life-styles were enervating them'. (1997:3)

Essop also focuses on the violence and brutality that marred the apartheid period. In the story he portrayed the oppressors as cruel, barbaric and unsympathetic people. He narrates an incident that left an indelible impression on the protagonist.

...he saw a group of Sircon protesters. They were holding placards which read: 'Racism is irrational', 'Give us human rights', 'God does not love oppressors', 'We can all live together'. It was a peaceful demonstration of men and women marching in an orderly way. Suddenly a posse of police officers arrived in a convertible black limousine. It stopped. The officers jumped out and lifting their automatic weapons, fired. The Sircons were all killed, even those who tried to escape. (1997:3)

The Sircons were ruthlessly mowed down by Saturnian police, they were jailed and tortured. There was just no way for them to free themselves from this oppression until Dr. Alexandra King came along.

Essop brings hope and mercy to the plight of the oppressed in the form of a saviour - a Doctor Alexander King. Although a Saturian, he was kind and considerate. He wanted to make the world a better place for all. His incentive came from his overwhelming but forbidden love for a beautiful, emerald-eyed Sircon nurse, Tasreen. Finally reason and peace is restored when the racist politicians including the president have been implanted with Sircon hearts by Dr. Alexander King. This brought racialism to an end and happiness was restored.

Another short fiction of a similar fable-style is 'The Protest'. This is a symbolic representation of the protest against a discriminative government. The story revolves around animals protesting against the human race. They sent a delegation to the world conference to voice their grievance against the master race for ridiculing and humiliating them. They complained about their names being maligned by human beings.

Once again Essop draws parallels to the South African Political situation by creating a situation of discrimination, oppression and tension. The animals endured enough trauma and victimisation and they wanted this to end. The humans have violated their rights, injured their dignity and desecrated them totally with their insensitive attitudes. The animals demanded recourse and redress and an end to all the derogatory comparisons concerning them.

The world body was prepared to listen to them provided that it was not to be construed by the animals as being equal to the human beings. This is ironical since the animals claim:

we do not rebel against what Nature has ordained for us and as a consequence we are beautiful. We seldom suffer from deformities, we do not consult psychologists and psychiatrists, nor do we annihilate millions of our fellows in internecine warfare. We do not indulge in mass rapes, incarcerate women and children in concentration camps, nor wilfully wreck the environment. We do not indulge in perverse acts such as homosexuality, nor do we damage our bodies with liquor and drugs. (1997:63)

‘The Sacrifice’ is another moral story that hints at the hypocrisy of some religious beliefs and practices like the act of sacrifice in the name of God. Essop makes us search our conscience and re-examine our philosophy of life.

CONCLUSION

Ahmed Essop has written a diverse and interesting range of stories and novels. His style and fictional approach often recalls two of his most admired fellow twentieth century writers, V.S. Naipaul and R.K. Narayan. Essop's fine eye for personal detail and idiosyncrasy, and his penchant for the satirical, align his prose with these two writers. Yet Essop's oeuvre is comparatively small. One hopes to the following years will see the appearance of more stories and novels from one of South Africa's most accomplished writers. As Jean Marquard comments on Essop's work in the Prolific Imagination:

The source of Ahmed Essop's inspiration is a vivid sense of the adventure of living with no trace of the morbid pre-occupation with literature as a means of exposing and cleaning up a morbid society, so prevalent in contemporary South African fiction.
(Contrast: June 1979: 93)

I conclude this dissertation with a message from Essop himself:

But a time may come when... the work of writers may come to be seen not only as a testimony of the times and revelation of the human condition with its potentials and possibilities, but as an important contribution to the metamorphosis of society into a rational, humane and compassionate one. (Interview with Ahmed Essop by Andrew van Zyl: Book Selection: 1994)

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