Book review: Ahmed Essop, *The Third Prophecy*. Picador Africa, 2004.

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The Third Prophecy is Ahmed Essop's uncharacteristically pessimistic appraisal of the post-apartheid South African political landscape. As one would expect from Essop, South Africa's Indian community is at the centre of the narrative, but the scope of the novel extends well beyond specific cultural preoccupations and encompasses a wide range of voices. Like other recent South African fiction (one thinks of Njabulo Ndebele's *The Cry of Winnie Mandela*, or Ivan Vladislavic's *The Restless Supermarket*), *The Third Prophecy* contains a curious mixture of real and fictional landscapes, of realism and satire, and is driven by incessant self-reflexivity. Essop has never written typical "struggle literature", but this is certainly the furthest he has yet strayed from conventional realism, political commitment and ideological dogmatism.

The novel tells the story of exiled Dr Salman Khan, who was educated at Cambridge but has returned only to be progressively demoted; first from the prestigious portfolio of Minister of Education to the less impressive position of Minister of Prisons, and finally to an ordinary Member of Parliament. **It is a characteristic of this rather formal, ineffectual character that the delusion that he is destined to become the president grows in inverse proportion to his fortunes.** His belief is based largely on the prophecy of a charismatic African prophet called Mr Roma, who makes three predictions: "a star will soon set in the political firmament", the country will "pass through a dark phase" and there will be a period of recuperation, during which a Muslim will become president. When the president unexpectedly resigns, Salman believes that the first part of the prophecy has been realised, and interprets his own waning prosperity and the increasing turmoil in the country as the fulfillment of the second part of the prophecy. Although he is an intransigent Marxist, who believes that religion is "a delusion imposed on humanity by impostors", he starts attending mosque at the behest of his good friend, Mr Khamsin. While the novel leaves the question open, there is something rather self-serving and secretive about Salman's "conversion" that questions its authenticity. He also becomes increasingly drawn into the politics of the rather sinister Shaykh Sayid, the President of an organisation called the "Unity Movement Against Crime". His increasing moral torpor and dejection are evidenced by his affair with his secretary (which he justifies by imagining he will ask her to become his second wife), and his sense of impotent longing when confronted by the contented, fulfilling lives of his less ambitious friends. Finally, the president drops Salman from the cabinet altogether, and appoints Mr Khamsin as Minister of Trade and Industry. It becomes clear to Salman that if Mr Roma's "third prophecy" is going to be fulfilled at all, it will be with Mr Khamsin as the "Muslim leader".

Shakespeare's *Macbeth* is constantly intertwined with the text, and like the play, the novel contains portentous prophecies (it even has its own three witches in a gypsy caravan next to the road from the airport), ruthless ambition, betrayal, and an ominous sexual undercurrent. Salman's own obsession with Shakespeare's play, which he remembers from school, and his increasing identification with Macbeth, suggests that he

is cognisant, at some level, of the tragic futility of his endeavours. Nonetheless, he cannot manage to free himself from the chains of his longing for power. Although the novel sometimes seems to suggest that spirituality offers a form of respite from the viciousness of politics, the spiritual does not seem to present a real possibility for transcendence.

Salman's loss of influence is paralleled by the first president's decline. Midway through the novel he is revealed as a sad, paranoid figure who believes he is imprisoned in his residence in East London, and more broadly by a sense of national and perhaps even global entropy. Essop's world is a world that is winding down, a street carnival progressing towards decay and disintegration, attended by madmen and prophets.

The style of the novel is curiously flat and lugubrious, but nonetheless quite evocative of a particular time and atmosphere. At its best, the novel is reminiscent of Elias Canetti's *Auto-da-Fe*. **It has the same stripped prose, the claustrophobic sense of being constrained by the consciousness of an increasingly unreliable narrator, and a similar dark satirical tone. However, the style is often simply pedantic and the characterization lifeless.** While the reference to *Macbeth* has its productive and illuminating moments, the analogy also intermittently feels a bit strained and artificial, as if Essop picked a Shakespeare play almost at random, and tried to weave it into the texture of his novel. One feels it could just as well have been *Richard III*, or *Titus Andronicus*, or *Julius Caesar*, or even *Hamlet*. There is no real intuitive, unpreventable resonance with *Macbeth*, except for the obvious – and sometimes rather laboured – plot similarities. The representation of women is problematic: on the one hand, the narrative is inflected through Salman's eyes, and he is obviously a sexually frustrated, rather misogynistic man, so the descriptions of the female characters are consonant with his characterisation. On the other, one would have hoped to see at least *some* sign that the women are desiring, complex people, that Salman is misrepresenting them in some way. As things stand, they seem merely to answer the whims of the male characters in the novel in an entirely facile, wooden way.

The novel's real strength lies in the way it handles *ideas*. In an exceptionally complex way, it deals with the future of religion in a secular society, the fate of South African Indians after apartheid, the volatile language of race and ethnicity and more generally the nature of happiness in an imperfect world. Essop uses the capacity of fiction to refuse clear resolutions in order to write his philosophy, and one is left intellectually stimulated by his latest, rather disturbing book. There is no doubt that it is an uneven novel, but it is also important in that it clears new ground for South African fiction and expands this interesting writer's repertoire considerably. A discussion of contemporary South African fiction would be impoverished without reference to Essop's newest offering.

Pull Quotes:

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