

The moving finger writes ...

An analysis of *Dear Ahmedbhai, Dear Zuleikhabhen – The Letters of Zuleikha Mayat and Ahmed Kathrada 1979-1989*

Devarakshanam Govinden

“The moving finger writes and having writ”, writes again ... and again ... and again ...

This adaptation of Omar Khayam [who is quoted in the book under review, p.34], is an appropriate description of the sustained exchange of letters between Ahmed Kathrada and Zuleikha Mayat. The recently published book, *Dear Ahmedbhai, Dear Zuleikhabhen – The Letters of Zuleikha Mayat and Ahmed Kathrada*, edited by Goolam Vahed and Thembisa Waetjen, and published by Jacana Press, is a deeply engrossing collection of letters between two eminent South Africans. No ordinary correspondence, these letters are between one of South Africa’s best-known political prisoners after Nelson Mandela and a notable personality passionately involved in a wide range of interests.

Ahmed Kathrada has been described as a “veteran” in the South African liberation struggle. Born in 1929, he has had a prolonged engagement in resistance politics. He was tried in 1952 after his involvement in the Defiance Campaigns of the African National Congress [ANC] and the South African Indian Congress. He was one of the 156 trialists in the Treason Trial

that took place between 1956 to 1961. He was also one of the Rivonia Trialists from 1963-1964, together with Nelson Mandela, Walter Sisulu and others, after which he was imprisoned on Robben Island and at Pollsmoor Maximum Security Prison for 26 years. He was released in 1989, a year before Nelson Mandela. These letters were written during the period when Kathrada was on Robben Island and at Pollsmoor.

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Zuleikha Mayat, whose family name was Bismillah, is a community activist, who founded the Women’s Cultural Group. She spearheaded the publication of *Quranic Lights*, a book of quotations from the Qur’an, *Indian Delights*, a

well-known book of recipes on Indian cuisine, and *Nanima’s Chest*, published in 1981, which depicts 500 years of Indian textile history. Her family narrative, *A Treasure Trove of Memories – A reflection on the Experiences of the Peoples of Potchefstroom* [1990] is an important contribution to autobiographical fiction in this country [see Govinden 2000]. She has also been a columnist and radio commentator. Both Zuleikha Mayat and Ahmed Kathrada share a common Islamic background. While she is an observant Muslim, with a deep and profound faith in Islam, he wishes to practise a broad ecumenism.

The correspondence begins by chance when Kathrada writes a letter of condolence to Mayat, after a family tragedy which claimed the lives of Mayat's husband, Dr Mohamed Mayat and her sister, Sakina Bibi Mall.

“Interweaving Work”

Partly prison memoir, auto/biography, personal reflections, and socio-cultural history, *The Letters* provides valuable insights into the South Africa of the 1970's and 1980s, when Kathrada and Mayat entered into this letter-writing friendship.

The compilers are aware of the value of these letters which “bear witness to a changing South Africa” [Vahed and Waetjen 2009:3]. Kathrada's comments on another book, *Engaging Shades of Robben Island* [Khan 2002], which he describes as an “interweaving work”, aptly describes this collection of letters as well: “The shadows of history, of voices, people, places and communities that echo from the past, is captured with resonance...” [2002:11].

Although Kathrada writes to many persons while in prison, as may be gleaned from his *Memoirs* [2004], Mayat readily fills in certain gaps that Kathrada invariably develops. Much intimate knowledge of shared circuits of families and friends, of newspapers, magazines, radio and TV programmes, of current events, all tacitly provide a telling contrast to the monochrome existence of prison life. In one of his letters Kathrada notes:

I think I mentioned to you before that we prisoners have a predilection for transporting ourselves into the past. Your letter not only contained valuable bits of information of which I was totally ignorant, but it invariably evoked a host of memories of people, incidents, places and events. [57]

On another occasion, Mayat's reference to “the community's senior citizens, [and] Transvaal hospitality”, among other things, “revived many old memories and experiences” [112]. Both Kathrada and Mayat share a common Transvaal background, as he was born in Schweizer-

Reneke and she in Potchefstroom. After reading one of her letters, it is perfectly understandable when Kathrada replies: “And, as prisoners through the ages have been wont to do, I reveled in a veritable orgy of nostalgia” [112].

Mayat is well positioned to be a worthy partner in this exchange, as she was close to political activists such as IC Meer and Fatima Meer [see Meer 2002:230], and is informed about the professional and political groupings in the country. She is also well acquainted with the

goings on in the city of Durban, with the local Indian medical fraternity, and with stories of families in the Transvaal; she consequently proves to be a reliable informant and political commentator. She gives information on marriages and deaths, of family and

community events, and all this fills in the picture for one removed from community life. The death of Yusuf Dadoo, for example, makes a deep impression on Kathrada and he writes to Mayat: “His death has been a great blow. I wish I could describe to you what he meant to me. He was father, brother, guardian, colleague, mentor, confidante – and much more” [105].

Both make references, among others, to Moosa Essop Mia, Krishna Somers, Saira Essa, Prof Ramfol, Revd Michael Scott and Advocate Berrange. There are many instances of “Do you remember...?” [46]. They know the same coterie of friends and acquaintances and are able to exchange mutual information. There are many references to Flat 13, Kholvad House, which was Kathrada's apartment in downtown Johannesburg; it was a great meeting place for all the political activists.¹ Kathrada does have adequate access in prison to various newspapers to form opinions and Mayat acts as a sounding board. He keeps abreast of events taking place in the wider world. They are also able to share their criticism of newspapers and magazines such as *Fiat Lux*, *Graphic*, and *The Leader*. They cover much of the political and socio-cultural landscape of South Africa of the 1970's and 1980's, and refer frequently to Tricameral politics and Group

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areas removals. Of the participation of Indians in the Tricameral government Mayat observes, "The quality of leadership that can take a people to great heights is no longer around" [111].

We have to remember that the correspondence is between one who is a political prisoner and one who is living in close connection with the world outside. There is a clear sense of responsibility that Mayat assumes, and she is an appropriate conduit of information to Kathrada in his incarceration. The replies reflect different, sometimes diverse, viewpoints, but each takes the correspondence and the questions posed seriously and with great respect for the other. Indeed, they are well matched as "co-respondents", being able to engage in ordinary as well as deeply insightful exchanges.

The letters have the feel of call and response, where the replies from both sides are constantly maintained, to support the epistolary relationship. The act of replying, of reciprocating, is important to keep the chain alive. There is a sense of ready willingness from both sides in sustaining the exchange, and there is no hint whatsoever of flagging interest.

The very act of writing to a political prisoner, tried for treason, is itself a commendable show of solidarity. Mayat speaks of it as being a "compassionate act", in keeping with the tenets of Islam that one cares for those in prison. This is similar to the Christian view which exhorts one to "minister" to those in prison², and to show the hospitality of God. Another Robben Island prisoner, Michael Dingake³, has drawn attention to the pernicious nature of the prison system: "...prisons denature, dehumanize, depersonalize, decivilise and de-everything their victims" [Dingake 1987: 121]. Mayat's letters to a prisoner must be seen as a valiant attempt to undo the negative impact of prison life.

The Letters covers a wide range of topics. Space, for example, is important in the collection. From Mayat's replies, Kathrada reads of different

places that she has travelled to. He notes that she has visited exotic, "out of the way places like Samarkhand and Bukhara" [28]. One becomes aware of his confined condition, which makes travel possible only in dreams. We appreciate that the prisoner is living vicariously through the letters. Kathrada states, not without comic irony, that he would love to visit these places but "there is the little impediment of a life sentence"! [28].

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Then, what is noteworthy is the way food dominates their letters. There is constant reference to Christmas, Easter, Deepavali and Eid parcels, to samoosas, chevda, sweet

meats, mince curry, and Packo breyani. This is in tacit contrast to the plain fare that is invariably served in prison. As Kathrada writes: "...Packo's mango pickles, and believe me, they actually taste nice in jail. Also the chilli sauce" [36].

The recurrent reference to *Indian Delights* is interesting, almost poignant, and the repeated attempts by Mayat to get the book sent to Kathrada dominates the correspondence. What good is a recipe book in prison, one may ask. However, it is worth remembering that this book conjures up an exciting, imaginary world around food and the many memories associated with it [see Govinden 2000]. Apart from food, there are many ordinary sensual memories that are contemplated, which contrast with the starkness of prison life. Kathrada does not complain endlessly about prison life. In fact, his letters show that it is not unrelieved gloom; Mayat, however, rightly refers to it as "immolation".

Many of the letters touch on religion, in its different aspects. Kathrada shows great respect for Islam, but makes it clear that he is not deeply religious, and that he believes in equal reverence for all faiths. Mayat writes from the vantage point of deep faith, and presents her views unapologetically and with great conviction. As she notes in one of her letters: "I smiled when you assured me that you are not religious... your respect for others' beliefs is very Islamic" [37]. She makes reference to Jalaluddin (Jalal al Din) Rumi, the Sufi mystical poet, and the deep

insights that this tradition of Islamic spirituality offers. She speaks of the vast expanse of the spiritual realm, as espoused by someone like Rumi, and even berates the maulanas (Muslim clerics) who reproduce a narrow, parochial faith. Like travel, claiming the infinitude of religion and of God breaks through the prison walls. The prayers that Mayat sometimes concludes her letters with are clearly a sincere attempt to assist a prisoner of conscience deal with his condition of incarceration: "May Allah's Grace fill our Lives and thoughts wherever we are. May He continue to give us the strength to retain our principles and to bear our burdens" [95].

There is frequent reference to the religious festivals especially the ones that mark the Islamic calendar, and they become a way of measuring time and its passing of time. The letters are punctuated with many references to Ramadan, Eid, Bakri Eid, Muharram, and Christmas [see p. 39] Remembrance and commemoration are important, given the circumstances of Kathrada's arrest. He recalls in one of his letters, "Tonight, nineteen years ago, was my last night of freedom; we were arrested on 11th July 1963. So I can't help but think back"[72].

One particular Muslim practice that Kathrada is moved by is Mayat's efforts to send him "eidy", a token gift during the time of Eid. This immediately evokes memories of his childhood, and he writes:

... no matter how old one may be chronologically, he almost invariably retains something of the child in him. Some little bits of childlike responses, emotions, interests, expectations. Perhaps I am more guilty of this and am projecting my own feelings by generalizing. Be that as it may, but I must confess to experiencing a delightful, albeit childish, feeling of joy on receipt of the 'eidy'. I suppose being in jail has something to do with it. Escape into the

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past is part and parcel of a prisoner's life. Pleasures of reminiscence take the place of the uninviting and disagreeable features of the present. And what can be nicer than childhood! [52]

Mayat studied Urdu at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London, and is competent to deal with questions of language and the Islamic faith. They speak of the elegance of Urdu which, for them, surpasses French and Persian [30]. Though Kathrada is not a strong believer, his letters arguably reveal a substratum of questing on his side. Beneath the image of the hard-nosed politician is one who reveals an emotional longing, and a mind that roams free; this is also well-illustrated in the recently published *A Simple*

Freedom [2008]. The letters are rich in references to Muslim and Islamic culture, local poets, Sufism and different strands of Islam [65]. They also make frequent references to the famous Islamic institution, Deoband University in India. There is reference to the "Rushdie affair" which flared up during the time when Kathrada was in prison. Interestingly, Kathrada is castigated for his political bent, when Mayat tells him that he is criticized by some Muslims for having "chosen an ism rather than Islam" [100].

Mayat makes several references to her other book, *Nanima's Chest*, another publication of the Durban-based Women's Cultural Group. This is a collection of stories of heirlooms passed on in families, and Mayat writes about the enthusiasm this project generated:

Suddenly everyone remembered similar chests belonging to their grannies. We have been able to collect sufficient material, that is old embroideries, jurtas, sadaryas [keek embroidered velvet waistcoat, and matching topees little boys and girls used to wear on Eid days. [37]

Repeatedly, in his letters, Kathrada expresses his longing to see children. Children remind one of

the cycles of life rather than the static existence of prison life. In one of his letters he notes, "In December I had the thrilling and unforgettable experience of seeing a baby just the other side of the glass for the first time in 20 years!" [87]. As Kathrada writes elsewhere, "Every prisoner would agree that of all the numerous deprivations of prison life the very worst would be the absence of children" [Kathrada 2009: 65]. He also expresses a deep longing to have pets. "What I would like is a kitten, and lots of flowers and greenery. You know it is terrible, so unnatural, to be surrounded for so many hours at night by cement" [80].

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The letters gradually move from a formal tone to one of increasing informality. The early letters begin with "Dear Mrs Mayat" [34], but become more intimate. When one of the letters begins with the appellation, "Dear Zuleikhabehn", Mayat responds with, "How lovely to be addressed as behn by you" [56]. Mayat, for her part, also adopts a formal tone initially: "Dear Kathrada Sahib", she writes, to which Kathrada immediately replies: "Not 'sahib' please but Kathy" [29].

There is an amusing reference to ordinary objects, such as a "godra", which is seen as reflecting Indian identity. Kathrada states that if he had taken the godra, or padded quilt, to prison it would have been seen as being "too obviously Indian":

But I was going into a new kind of life, a completely different environment. I was expected to undergo a metamorphosis, a change of customs, habits and ethnic grouping, and assume a new identity. The godra would have been a giveaway. It was too obviously Indian...On many a cold winter's night in my cell I think of that godra. [40]

And we are given an interesting bit of information that the godra has an old history in China as well as in India.

There is a balance between a common South African identity, and the references to Indian culture. There is a merging of the two with no self-consciousness about being partisan or ethnocentric. Kathrada notes that "I believe in the promotion of the ideals of a common South African culture; while at the same time allowing "minority cultures" to flourish freely" [97]. When Kathrada asks Mayat about the Potchefstroom project, for example, where she is writing about the biography of the family and community he says, "Try not to make too much of the "gaam" aspect, and I hope you will not be confining it to Moslems" [98].

What is interesting is the way small things assume a significance when one is in prison. There is much reference

to ephemerera, but we appreciate how sustaining this might be for one in prison. As Kathrada notes in one of his letters, "You will be surprised how relatively small things assume such importance for prisoners. It's almost unavoidable and cannot be otherwise" [79]. And as he elaborates more poignantly:

I once read somewhere that the years roll by quickly in jail, but it is the minutes and the hours that drag on at a dreary pace. It is a very apt description of our lives. Ours is a very small world and it is mostly the small things that help fill the minutes and hours. Small talk, small events, small interests – these combine to make up a big share of our days and weeks and months. [79]

David Schalkwyk, in his essay on prison writing in South Africa, observes that "however deprived or anguished its circumstances" we are constantly reminded in the genre of prison writing of the "inescapable importance of the ordinary, of culture as ordinary" [Schalkwyk 2002:280]. In his Memoirs, Kathrada writes of "the trivia and tragedy, the pettiness and prejudice, the

boredom and bad food” [Kathrada 2004:237] of prison life. Taken together, The Letters reveal that the ephemeral can be potent and resonant, that memory within memory – indeed, the collection is a veritable palimpsest of memory – with their dispersed and refracted moments of truth, can be deeply revealing.

All along we are aware that this correspondence is being scrutinized by the censors and prison police. We note that portions of the texts have sometimes been removed.

Dates are important, and there is constant reference to the dates when the letters are written, posted or received. There is much reference to the registering of the letters and the experiences of dealing with the postal service. Kathrada

remarks in mock tones, “I must confess I find it very strange that the ‘inefficiency of the post office’ coincided with my arrival here!” [96].

Mayat makes repeated attempts to get a copy of the innocuous Indian Delights to Kathrada, but with little success. The authorities are unrelenting, and in their obdurateness in this small, simple matter we are constantly aware of the larger illogicalities of the apartheid state, and of the precarious edifice that the “fortress state” [Coetzee 2009] was.

We are continually reminded, too, of the prison regulations that surround the correspondence, of the penal regime that mirrors the police state. This is expressed succinctly by Kathrada when he says, “...we are dealing with civil servants, and almost all their actions are governed by regulations... Tolstoy can be forgiven when in desperation he exclaimed that civil servants had regulations instead of hearts” [35].

Conclusion

Mayat is deeply aware of the significance of the letters, and of their historical and symbolic value [she meticulously kept copies of the correspondence, making carbon copies of her own letters]. In one of her letters she writes with prescience: “Your letters too are being filed away since some day someone will want to conduct a

research of the age of long long detentions” [147]. On another occasion she writes that the letters would be “good memorabilia someday when a student will want to do a pen sketch of Ahmed Kathrada” [155]. Yet her letters remain personally focused, unself-conscious and natural; they are affable and readable, and there is no sense of her writing being contrived for the benefit of an impersonal audience or for posterity.

Indeed, reading *Dear Ahmedbhai, Dear Zuleikhabhen – The Letters of Zuleikha Mayat and Ahmed Kathrada* we feel that we are eavesdropping on a uniquely private exchange between two persons, deeply aware of the circumscribed condition of the one and the largesse and magnanimity of the other. And

reading *The Letters* in this new moment of freedom in South Africa is a great vindication of the many small, and hitherto unknown, acts of heroism that sustained those who suffered during the dark days of apartheid. In his philosophical tract, *I and Thou*, Martin Buber [1937] has expounded on the inestimable value of dynamic, interpersonal dialogue. *The Letters* is an admirable testimony to the mutuality and reciprocity that should define our entire human existence; it is all the more valuable given the circumstances in which it was undertaken. As Kathrada notes in his Memoirs, quoting Hobsbawm, “Men can live without justice, and generally must, but they cannot live without hope” [In Kathrada 2004: 229].

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Notes

1. Zarina Maharaj has recently produced an interesting documentary, *Flat 13*, on this history.
2. See Matthew 25:42-44; Hebrews 13:3.
3. Dingake was on Robben Island between 1966-1981, and was a fellow prisoner with Kathrada during those years; he was deported to Botswana on his release.