Essop's Stories: A Mirror of Life[1]

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Ahmed Essop believes in the complexity of life and of art. If you visit him in his small house in Lenasia, where the systematic streets have the names of birds, to talk to him about his books, it is this theme that he will use to explain the essence of his writing.

Essop's stories work on more levels than one; they appeal to many things in a reader – to a sense of humour and a knowledge of humanity, to love of story and loyalty of place, and also to an ability to sense the abstract in the concrete and the large in the small.

It is impossible to separate body from spirit, and it is impossible to read Essop's prose and separate idea from narrative, realism from allegory, or comedy from pathos. Essop feels no need to choose a way of writing and he resists attempts to pigeonhole his work.

"There are many dimensions to life", he insists when urged to characterise his style. "I try to portray these dimensions. Meanings are multi-layered".

His stories manifest themselves most immediately as mirrors on the life of a specific community: the South African Indian community and in a larger sense, South Africa as a whole. He puts himself somewhat in the position of a community bard, taking up the responsibility for recording individual histories.

In their reverence for character and their translucent language, the tales could bear a resemblance to oral history were they not artistically balanced. Many of his characters re-appear from story to story, and the impression one gets by reading the books in succession is of a vast, complex and intricate edifice slowly taking form.

A tale entitled *Jericho Again* from his volume *Noorjehan And Other Stories*, describes Essop's vision of community; the passage bemoans the government

programme that broke apart Fordsburg and exiled its inhabitants to Lenasia, but essentially speaks of the richness of human society.

With the destruction of the homes a treasury of human relationships that had constituted the living tissue of communal existence had been devastated: joy in marriages and births, sharing of food, clothing and shelter, sociability in conversation, help in times of need, sorrow in death. Here, as throughout his work, Essop is affirming the significance of ordinary day-to-day life.

It is because he sees ordinary human relationships and activities as significant that Essop can give his meticulous portrait of communal life a larger philosophical resonance. He would have been a joy to Matthew Arnold, who asserted so earnestly, to the critics, that "the elements with which the creative power works are ideas".

Ideas are everywhere in Essop's work – in the imaginary and the allusions – and if, as you sit in his Lenasia living room, you are so unthinking as to have missed them, he will point them out to you. The short story *Labyrinth*, he observes, from his first anthology *The Haji and Other Stories* (Olive Schreiner Award for Prose 1979) centres on the theory of historical cycles, and the inevitable seizure of power by advancing peoples from peoples whose influence is on the wane.

This kind of subtext is not the easiest thing to pick up. A few of the ideas in Essop's tales assume specialised knowledge on the part of the reader as the author freely acknowledges, for example, that optimal appreciation of his novel *The Visitation* requires a more than passing acquaintance with Sufism.

Similarly, the meaning of the later novel *The Emperor,* about a high school principal turned tyrant, will be more apparent to the reader more familiar with Indian and Middle Eastern history. Nevertheless, the reader needs no advance preparation to detect, in these moments of thematic depth when allusions congregate, that something is happening apart from the obvious.

The *Noorjehan* collection is particularly full of these moments; the characters have sudden visions, when the complexity of the world breaks through their own self-

created boundaries. Compared to the first book of stories, the tales in *Noorjehan* have less dramatic but more artistic closure, a difference that Essop explains by remarking that his writing has relied increasingly on symbolism.

He points by way of illustration, to a three page sketch called *The Golden Dome*, in which the student Salim visits a shop selling Eastern carpets. As Essop observes, the carpets, with their luxurious colours and elegant design symbolise beauty. By looking at them Salim is transported from the material plane and in a moment of mystical perception, he sees that the world of the senses can lead to the world of the spirit: "His finite consciousness then evanesced and he experienced that sublime ineffable illumination that only beauty can bestow – the vision of the oneness of all being".

This tale addresses directly a theme that pervades Essop's work in more subtle ways, namely the power of beauty. As Salim learns, beauty – and by this word Essop means not merely physical beauty, but the beauty that an individual can find in his own life when he is in harmony with himself and with others – is force that can liberate an individual from his own limitations. Beauty is not a quality but a force, and in Essop's work it is a force that can teach people truths.

Often in his stories beauty offers a chance for a character to escape from a net of his own devising. From the protagonist of *The Haji,* who refuses to forgive his dying brother for fear of demeaning himself, to the rich merchant of *The Visitation* whose wealth and self-indulgence precipitates his downfall, to the unnamed and ridiculous individuals of the story *Civilization,* who refuse to notice what is lovely, his characters build their own prisons and spruce them up regularly.

Actions are never empty in Essop's tales; the monthly electricity bill presents a choice as fundamentally moral as the more blatant dilemmas to which apartheid forces its victims. Despite the moral dimension of his stories, and the abundance of characters who have selected their own shortcomings, Essop's overall tone is one of compassion. No matter what foolishness characters indulge in, the narrator refrains from judging them.

"I don't think it's the business of a writer to judge", he commented while serving a visiting reporter a cup of tea. This is a noteworthy statement from a writer whose

works have often been praised for their elements of satire; once again, Essop declines to limit the scope of his art. This, as he observes, is why he does not restrict his writing to the obvious, hackneyed themes of more traditional committed art.

"They are moral insofar as they deal with human life", he says of his stories. "They are moral insofar as they deal with beauty, with the values that we should all cherish. Literary values, or any other values that enhance life rather that destruction. That's the reason why my stories are not a clash between two worlds. It's not that people come into conflict. A number of South African novels deal with social realism. I'm not really interested in that clash. The socio-political reality does of course affect one's life, but I'm not going for that. The socio-political system is part of life, part of the total I wish to present."

Ravan Press published another collection of Essop's short stories entitled "The King of Hearts" in 1997. The same publishers are due to release his latest collection "Narcissus and Other Stories" some time next year. He has recently completed a non-fiction work on the life of Suleiman Nana (d. 1944), past secretary of the Transvaal Indian Congress, entitled "S. M. Nana – A Biographical and Historical Record of His Life and Times". The book will be published by the Nana Memorial Trust and is going to press soon. He has also completed a study on Salman Rushdie's "The Satanic Verses" entitled "History, Satire and Symbolism in The Satanic Verses – A Literary Critique of the Sections on Mahound and Return to Jahilliyah". The last work is in manuscript form and Essop is currently negotiating its publication (Ed).

[1] This is an Edited version of an article that appeared in the *Weekly Mail*, August 31 to September 2, 1992 (Ed.).