# Aziz Hassim's *The Lotus People*[1]

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On reading The Lotus People, by Aziz Hassim, who won the 2001 Sanlam Literary Award for the unpublished manuscript, I could not help pondering again on how *place* is an inescapable denominator in South African writing. It was Es'kia Mphahlele who observed that our literature is marked by a *tyranny of place*. In the South Africa of the past, living in a particular place was the result of who you were in racial terms, and also determined your experience and identity as a person. If character is fate – how might we think of "place as fate"?

In Hassim's compelling narrative, we are confronted again with the geographical dividedness of apartheid South Africa. We are taken swiftly and deftly into the labyrinthine world of Durban's Grey Street, as important in the literary-political imagination of South Africa as is Soweto, or District Six. The novel is festooned with references to the various streets and arcades in the vibrant business district and its periphery - Victoria Street, Prince Edward Street, Queen Street, Leopold Street, Kismet and Madressa Arcades, to name but a few. Reading the novel you imagine yourself constantly walking in and out of this intricate grid of streets. It is as if the very pavements speak, telling of tales that they have silently witnessed, resounding with the rousing speeches of Durban's greatest freedom fighters, Gandhi no less. This is Durban's Casbah, a vibrant and diverse socio-political, economic and cultural space.

But Hassim renders place in a new key by taking us to the subterranean jungle of gangsters and tsotsis, drawing attention to a local topography that has been hitherto occluded in our writing. The Casbah is also a social crossroads, a theatre of wheeling and dealing, gambling, Fah Fee, drug dealers, pawnbrokers, loan sharks, *uplung* [hot money], shebeens, blackmail and extortion. As Hassim writes, "The casbah is another world, another country".

*The Lotus People* chronicles the struggles of a single family from the earliest days of arrival from India. Beginning with a small-scale hawking business the grandfather, Yahya Ali Suleiman, faces many difficulties in the land of his adoption. The author balances generational continuity and difference by telling of the life of the grand old patriarch as well as that of the father, Dara and the sons, Sam and Jake, as each responds to the peculiar times and circumstances in which each lived. In spite of many handicaps the family manage to set up large emporiums in the Grey Street complex. The young men, Sam and Jake, hover on the edge of the gangster groups in their neighbourhood. While Sam still manages a successful business career, Jake is the brooding, angry young man, choosing a far more defiant and aggressive lifestyle than his sombre grandfather and father.

Hassim describes the colourful goings-on in the personal fiefdoms demarcated by the different gangs, among them the notorious Crimson League, the crime kings of the Casbah, the Victorians and the Dutchenes. These gangs, beginning as vigilante groups,

comprised Indian, Coloured and a few African youth, were determined to deal with extortionists and unscrupulous businessmen that plagued the area.

Hassim's mission is clearly about *perspective* – what we see is related to where we are looking from. With a bourgeois sensibility and decorum one is inclined to view the gangsters as the flotsam and jetsam of society. But Hassim points out that the "life in the Casbah was about politics. Children were weaned on it, as children elsewhere were weaned on mother's milk. It was the logical outcome of the politics of repression". Hassim provides an interesting angle to the gangster groups by highlighting their political activities, a dimension that is not often known or understood.

Enduring racial slurs such as "coolie" or "curry guts", seeing their families traumatised by the iniquitous Groups Areas Act, and other unjust laws, the young men are forced to develop a toughmindedness. They remind us that their heroes and heroines were not Al Capone and Dilinger, as we might have assumed, but icons of the political landscape such as Dr Kesavaloo Goonam [to whom the novel is dedicated], Dr Dadoo, Dr Monty Naicker, Zainab Asvat, M D Naidoo, and Fatima Meer. Drawing inspiration from a range of diverse sources, including scraps of poetry recalled from their school days, they march forward recklessly, "one equal temper of heroic hearts", engaged in some noble work "not unbecoming men that strove with gods".

It is not surprising that in a society that denies one one's humanity a streetwise macho culture becomes an important way of surviving and asserting one's identity. Hassim's

novel paints a vivid picture of a "brotherbond" in these back streets, where friends and comrades would lay down their lives for one another. The diverse alliances are epitomised by the friendships of young men such as Jake, Sam, Nithin, Karan and Vusi, who sidestep the bigotry of race, class, caste, and religious differences. Away from the hostile white West Street and its environs, these are kings of their underworld, where they sashay as they please, a natura "symphony in motion". Harried by the police, it is a matter of sheer survival that they should be familiar with their separate maze of streets: "When you know your way around the cops would not find you".

The novel then is an interesting study in the formation of masculinities in a racially divided society. We appreciate how oppressed black men create "psychic shelter" in a hostile and alienating dominant culture, and how "home" becomes that domain where the bruised self is restored, where the wounds inflicted by a menacing society bandaged and tendered. When one belongs to a gang the street becomes "a cocoon that's safer than a mother's womb".

Hassim paints a complex picture of virile, street-savvy men, who still show a deference to the cultural practices of arranged marriages, negotiating their way through this, a sensitivity to the role of women, the extended family or ancestral history. We are also provided with animated portrayals of the women in their lives. Ruling largely in the inner domestic space, the women are also strong and resilient, supporting their men in their refusal to cower to the indignities of apartheid society. As the men are quick to point out, the women are "the real fighters they do not pussyfoot around".

It is understandable that the men are torn between the options of violence and of non-violence as responses to their oppressive state. The noble example of Gandhi's *ahimsa* is ever before them, but the reality of their existence forces them into another direction. It is not for nothing that the two kingpins from the Suleiman family, Jake and Sam, constantly hark back to their luminous ancestry, of their being part of the lineage of the mighty Pathans, the legendary warriors who dared even the mighty Moghul overlords on the sub-continent.

They and their comrades come to the realisation, learnt in the "University of the Street", that the thuggery of apartheid can only be met with the thuggery of the street. "The only okes that don't freeze when you talk about the Special Branch are the thugs and the hustlers." It is the "gangster state" of apartheid that creates the violence of opposition.

At a time when questions of identity are bandied about Hassim's work is a sobering reminder of the varieties of self-fashioning that might occur. Where others might pursue a sober trail, looking for stories of identities or of resistance in well-worn places, Hassim breaks new ground. He takes us to a surprising and unexpected place, where a different variety of subversive behaviour against institutional power is spawned and nurtured. He writes of men who dared to take on the burden of history in their own way, on their own terms. Hassim cuts through all the rhetoric of ethnocentric identity and shows how identities are formed in a welter of diverse experiences, and that "community" is not to be understood in narrow one-dimensional terms. Written in its own distinctive voice, with

no self-consciousness, *The Lotus People* is a rich and intricately textured South African story, beyond the narrow narratives of racialisation that one might expect.

It was Breyten Breytenbach in *Dog Heart* who noted that "just as you cannot survive without dreams, you cannot move on without memory of where you come from, even if that journey is fictitious". While the novel contains the familiar historical threshold moments such as The Defiance Campaigns, 1949 Riots, Sharpeville and Soweto insurrections, the Mass Democratic Movement activities, we see a unique merging of history and fiction not just from the inside but from the underside. There is a deft interweaving of past and present, fiction and history, testimony and memory. Hassim achieves a singular sleight of hand by his juxtaposition [indeed interplay and convergence] of high and low culture, Red Square mass political rallies and cloistered backyard gatherings or barbershop meetings, formal speech-making and street slang and ghetto patois. We see the fictional characters listening with rapt attention to the different historical figures we have come to admire. Through Hassim's ingenious and delicate balancing act, we are reminded that there are multiple models of resistance, overlapping and permeable genres of struggle.

The present climate in South Africa has been described as a "cusp time", in which narratives of apartheid history are increasingly being produced, and memory itself is a site of struggle. Are these elegies of the past merely a valiant attempt to counter historical amnesia? Reading *The Lotus People*, I am haunted by the present – the changing character of the Central Business District, the many decaying and rusting

remnants of a former history – and the need to tell of the present stories of inummerable feet etching out new footprints, the new stories of struggle and survival, intrigue and disenchantment, neglect and restoration. *The Lotus People* is a bold new book dealing with a hidden past that makes you ask more questions about the present and the future. As Hassim writes: "If you don't know where you coming from how can you know where you are going".

[1] Hassim, Aziz. 2003. *The Lotus People.* Braamfontein: STE Publications.
[2] An abridged version of this article appeared in the *Mail & Guardian*, 17 January 2003.