

Book Reviews

*Muslim Portraits:
The Anti-Apartheid Struggle*

Goolam Vahed, Madiba Publishers, 2012.

Ken Chitwood
(University of Florida)

Apartheid fell and the ‘rainbow nation’ emerged, with the release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990 and the subsequent free, and open, democratic elections across South Africa in 1994; these elections followed multi-party negotiations between multiple political organizations that had recently been decriminalized. Muslims played key roles not only during the formative period of post-apartheid South Africa, but also in the struggle against the apartheid regime. Even today, in the midst of South Africa’s re-emergence onto the global scene and against the backdrop of transnational Islamic discourses Muslims – even as minorities – continue to influence the shaping of South Africa. This context provides the frame of reference for Vahed’s work, which compiles various narratives and stories of Islamic leaders in the struggle to assert non-racial politics in South Africa.

The text of his work provides a rich mosaic of various Muslim interlocutors involved in the struggle against apartheid. There are converts and immigrants, Sowetan doctors and ANC politicians, feminist activists and armed rebels, cricket players and chemists. There are significant names such as Yusuf Dadoo, IC Meer, Ebrahim Rasool, the Picasso Club, Islamic Ghandians, and Ahmed Kathrada, but also other, lesser known, biographies as well. Each biography attempts briefly

to sketch the lives of the various individuals, but focuses specifically on their contribution to the anti-apartheid struggle. The stories are gripping, each in its own way, and entail factual accounts of arrest, torture, love, protest, resistance and death. The narratives are arranged alphabetically so that the reader often encounters a whole family's set of stories together: for example, husbands and wives, sons, daughters and cousins. There is little in the way of commentary, except for momentary asides or the occasional interpretation of a disputed event (e.g. the death of Ahmed Timol) or the personal and contextual forewords provided by Ebrahim Rasool and Ahmed Kathrada. The essential aim of the book seems to be to acknowledge, commend, and remember the various individuals, institutions, and constituencies – each with their own political and religious sentiments – that contributed to the liberation of South Africa and helped shape its founding.

Vahed succeeded in bringing a very human element to his anthology. Through these portraits, the human story of the Muslim anti-apartheid struggle is retold. Vahed makes no attempt to provide a meta-narrative or story-arc to the struggle, but instead allows for the diversity of the effort to shine through in the various local embodiments of the fight against the de-humanizing system of apartheid and the subsequent 'heterotopia' of post-apartheid South Africa. Instead of pioneering one individual, or even a select faction of Islamic icons of the anti-apartheid campaign, Vahed offers up a myriad of personal voices to the effect that women's voices, those involved in the armed struggle, and many other pieces of the puzzle often relegated to the periphery are given prime attention, if only for a few pages.

If there is any great weakness in *Muslim Portraits*, it is that there is no explicit focus on the religious life of these people and their efforts, except sporadically. When the beliefs of the characters do emerge, they do so to great effect; uniting their emancipatory struggle with their personal piety. For example, the narrative of Imam Mohamed 'Moulvi' Cachalia is moving as he describes how his "political outlook was influenced by the teachings of the Islamic religion." (58) Elsewhere, Rashied Omar's story is augmented when it is understood that his effort was an attempt "to

apply religious commitment to human equality [and] not just one's own liberation." (288) It is refreshing to read how these individuals' religious consciences became the basis for their values of freedom and justice. One only wishes that there were more emphasis on the "Muslim" of *Muslim Portraits* in order to highlight how the anti-hegemonic efforts of global Islam are not isolated to attacks against 'the West,' but also against patriarchy, oppression, and systems of institutionalized race-thinking such as apartheid. Still, there are efforts made by Vahed to view walking to madrasa and studying Islam through the lens of politicization and the activation of Muslims in the anti-apartheid struggle and thus to see that these people are not only Muslim, but politically motivated, beings as well. Certainly, a greater focus on the religious elements and motivations of the anti-apartheid movement among Muslims is warranted, but perhaps Vahed avoided explicit focus on Islamizing the struggle in preference for simply chronicling the movement through Muslim eyes.

There is also the question of the politicization and problem of bias inherent in the genre of biography itself. In essence, a biography is posited to be the definitive, factual, and historical re-telling of an individual's life. Naturally, questions of objectivity arise in such accounts. Since facts are recorded by humans, who by their very nature are biased, it is truly difficult to present a wholly objective account of any event. Two people could tell the same story in two radically different ways because of their different perspectives. Concomitantly, the message and meaning would be quite divergent. Thus, Vahed could be censured for telling his side of the story from within the community, and thus not from a dispassionate or objective point of view. Surely, Vahed must possess some bias! Yet, Vahed's perspective on these portraits makes his compendium valuable. For too long, biographies of the apartheid struggle have focused on characters with a certain amount of political, social, or cultural gravitas. This may lend to interpretations of the movement as one orchestrated by a select pantheon, rather than the broad based political push that it was. Vahed's portrait of a myriad of Muslims actively engaged in the fight is a corrective to such limited conceptions.

In the final analysis, *Muslim Portraits* provides a broad introduction to

the lives of many Muslims engaged in the efforts against the apartheid government. As such, it provides a platform for further, more in-depth, and perhaps decidedly Islam-specific research into the motivations, biographies, and struggles of the myriad individuals chronicled. More work could be done to continue advancing a nuanced view of the anti-apartheid movement, but also Muslims in South Africa, to look beyond sectarian divides and instead see unity in the common call for freedom in 'the rainbow nation.' Even so, this book was a success insofar as it aspired to apprehend the legacy and to memorialize the role that Muslims played in the liberation and restitution of South Africa. Despite its multitudinous nature and lack of focus on the religious nature of many of these narratives, this collection offers genuine insight into South Africa's multifaceted political struggle and multi-cultural constituency and for that, Vahed must be commended.