Representations of Islamic Belief and Practice in a South African Context: Reflections on the Fictional Work of Ahmed Essop, Aziz Hassim, Achmat Dangor and Rayda Jacobs

Jack Kearney

Summary

This study explores the representation of Islam in the fictional work of four South African writers: Ahmed Essop, Aziz Hassim, Achmat Dangor and Rayda Jacobs. After clarifying significant principles of Islam, I follow a threefold basis of enquiry, considering how far these authors, in terms of their fiction, reveal Islamic belief as an empowering force for social justice and compassion; how far they are prompted by feminist views; and how far they feel a need to interrogate Islamic teaching and practice. Given particular attention in my enquiry are: Essop's story, "The Hajji" (1978) and novel, *The Visitation* (1980); Hassim's novel, *The Lotus Eaters* (2002); Dangor's novella, "Kafka's Curse" (1998) and novel, *Bitter Fruit* (2001); and Jacobs's novel, *Confessions of a Gambler* (2003a) together with her short story collection, *Postcards from South Africa* (2003b). To begin with I contrast Dangor's more interrogative stance towards the use of violence with Hassim's apparent readiness to countenance it. In the next section what emerges is a reluctance or refusal on the part of prominent male characters to show compassion or forgiveness, although such a response would be profoundly in keeping with the Muslim tradition. Women, on the other hand, exemplify a readiness to engage in various kinds of merciful intervention. Finally, in relation to women's rights, I reveal how male-centredness is, perhaps surprisingly, not typical of fiction by Muslim writers, although it is the one woman writer in this study who engages in a more searching interrogation of conventional Muslim gender attitudes and assumptions.

Opsomming

Hierdie studie ondersoek die verteenwoordiging van Islam in die romanliteratuur van vier Suid-Afrikaanse skrywers: Ahmed Essop, Aziz Hassim, Achmat Dangor en Rayda Jacobs. Nadat die belangrikste beginsels van Islam uiteengesit is, doen ek 'n drieledige ondersoek na die mate waartoe die gekose skrywers in terme van hulle skryfwerk die Islamgeloof as bemagtiging vir sosiale regverdiging en medelye ontbloot tot watter mate hulle aangehits word deur feministiese oortuigings, en hoe sterk hulle genoodsaak voel om die Islamitiese leerwyse en praktyke te bevraagteken. In my ondersoek skenk ek besondere aandag aan Essop se verhaal, "The Hajji" (1978), en roman, *The Visitation* (1980); Hassim se roman, *The Lotus*

Eaters (2002); Dangor se novelle, "Kafka's Curse" (1998) en die roman *Bitter Fruit* (2001); en Jacobs se roman *Confessions of a Gambler* (2003a) en haar versameling kortverhale, *Postcards from South Africa* (2003b). Ek begin deur Dangor se bevraagtekening van geweld te kontrasteer met Hassim se skynbare bereidheid om dit te ondersteun. Wat in the volgende afdeling duidelik blyk, is die prominente manlike karakters se traagheid of weiering om te vergewe of deernis te toon, alhoewel so 'n respons beslis sou stryk met gevestigde Islamitiese tradisie. Daarteenoor toon vroue 'n bereidwilligheid om hulle in te laat in verskeie ingrypings van medelye. Laastens wys ek hoe, met betrekking tot vroueregte, manlik-gesentreerdheid nie tipies van the letterkundige tekste van Muslimskrywers is nie, alhoewel dit die vroulike skrywer in hierdie ondersoek is wat the gebruiklike Muslimhoudings en -aannames oor gender bevraagteken.

Islam is at the forefront of worldwide issues and tensions because of the activities of various Islamic fundamentalist groups, most notably Al-Qaida, and more recently, because of the vehement outcry against the Danish newspaper cartoons, several of which portray the Prophet Mahomet as an Al-Qaida type of terrorist. As Bruce Lawrence explains in relation to the Afro-Eurasian area south and east of the Mediterranean:

> Islam as a pragmatic referent in organizing social or economic life was denied autonomy under colonial rule ... the subordination of Islamic ideals and values to political pragmatism continued in postcolonial polities. As a result, Islam remained a reservoir of symbolic dissent, often couched in violent terms, available to marginalized, aggrieved groups.
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> (Lawrence 1998: 24)

Even if Islamic extremist groups need to be viewed "as the enemies of the faith whose interests they claim to advance" (Nadvi 2004: 30), their activities stem from perceptions of oppression and injustice. These concerns are closely related to what is central in the Islamic faith, according to its leading exponents. Tariq Ramadan, for example, asserts that "for Muslims, the principle of justice constitutes the fundamental criterion, after their faith in the oneness of God, for their social, economic, and political activities" (2004: 98). Furthermore, "if [Muslims] are truly with God, their life must bear witness to a permanent engagement and infinite self-giving in the cause of social justice, the well-being of humankind, ecology, and solidarity in all its manifestations" (p. 77).

Akbar S. Ahmed reminds readers that "for Muslims, God's two most important and most cited titles are the Beneficent and the Merciful", a fact which is "not only forgotten by those who dislike Islam, but, more importantly, it is forgotten by Muslims themselves" (1992: 36). Similarly, the feminist Muslim writer, Fatima Mernissi, gives attention to what she regards as the "rich concept" of *rahma* in Islamic teaching, one which has

"multiple facets: sensitiveness (*al-riqa*), tenderness (*al-ta'attuf*), and also forgiveness (*al-maghfira*) (Mernissi 1993: 88). What she hears in "the clamour of the fundamentalist youth of today is, among other things, an appeal to that Islam of *rahma*, where the wealthy of the cities are sensitive to the anguish of the poor" (p. 88). It needs to be noted though that, in highlighting these Islamic virtues, I do not in any way wish to suggest that the Muslim versions are somehow more estimable than their equivalents in other religions, nor that individual Muslims are likely to be more exemplary in practising these virtues than people from other religions who also strive for justice and mercy. My concern is with a prevalent context in which non-Muslims, by and large, do not readily associate Muslims and their religion with such virtues, but rather their opposites.

The writers on Islam whom I have consulted all emphasise that this religion is not inherently violent. (In particular I note Lawrence 1998: 4; and Ahmed 1992: 47.) In several newspaper letter columns following the massive public protests against the Danish cartoons, correspondents have reminded readers that the Prophet Mahomet himself would not have resorted to violence in such circumstances. In this regard it is necessary to distinguish what is called Islamic fundamentalism (or Islamists) from Islamic belief and practice generally. "The largest number of pious, observant Muslims remain non-fundamentalist in their outlook as also in their behavior" (Lawrence 1998: 150). In *Explaining Islam* Tahar Ben Jelloun describes the Islamist fundamentalists as precisely those who are seeking

> to impose by force a way of life, of behaviour, and of dress that rejects contemporary life. They have forgotten something simple: Islam came into being more than fourteen centuries ago. Its writing contains values that are valid for all time, eternally. But there are also things that were of concern at the time of its birth but that do not fit in with modern times.
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> (Ben Jelloun 2003: 97)

At this introductory stage I would like also to have stated my agreement with Mernissi's claim that the Qur'an insists on the equality of all (1993: 110). However, the text from the Qu'ran, verse 13 of sura 49, on which she bases her claim by no means offers unequivocal support for equality: "O mankind! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that you may know one another" (p.110). No other verse is cited by her nor have I found more convincing support in the English translation of the Qu'ran by John M. Rodwell which I relied on. Indeed women's rights do not feature high, if at all, on the agendas of Islamic extremist groups in their desire for autonomy and empowerment.

What remains nevertheless significant is Mernissi's concern with the way

Muslim women are now challenging "centuries of misogyny, cultivated as tradition in the corridors of caliphal despotism" (1993: 156). Ramadan is equally intent on pointing to the contemporary movement "that clearly expresses the renewal of the place of women in Islamic societies and an affirmation of a liberation vindicated by complete fidelity to the principles of Islam" (2004: 141). What is necessary, in his view, is a return "to the scriptural sources to evaluate these practices [involving restrictions against women] (and to draw a clear distinction between customs that are culturally based and Islamic principles)" (p. 140). Nevertheless, in light of the demur I have expressed, my impression is that this distinction will not be easily achieved.[1]

As this study is not sociological, I shall not endeavour to determine what might be unique to the practice of Islam in South Africa, and where, on the other hand, it has the same characteristics as the majority of Muslim believers worldwide. My impression, however, is that for Indian, Coloured or Malay Muslims here there is little significant difference between their beliefs and what one would find in most countries where Islam is not a majority religion.[2] Shamil Jeppie argues that the organisers of the Tricentenary of Islam in South Africa became caught up, instead of celebrating the "many ways of thinking and living Islam" in South Africa (1996: 87), in "perpetuat[ing] ideas of a timeless and pure Muslim tradition and culture at the Cape" (p. 78). However, as the writers whom I discuss are from a variety of places in South Africa, I hope to have avoided a similar essentialising tendency. Indeed I would hope that the diversity of ways in which these novelists reveal Islam in the minds and lives of their characters would endorse Jeppie's viewpoint. Islam in the townships may have developed certain independent practices, as happened in West Africa where hybrid versions of Islam and Black animist religions occurred. Indeed, hostility between established and developing Muslim communities in the

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1. It is encouraging to note, for example, that prominent women in the Palestinian movement, Hamas, having helped their party to win the February 2006 election, are agreed on the need to "tackle discrimination [against women]" ("Women Vow to Change Face of Party", *Mail & Guardian,* 24 February to 2 March 2006, p. 19).

2. In countries such as Iran, on the other hand, where Islam is a majority religion, *sharia* law is applied and women are forced to lead restricted lives. If the Shi'ites were to dominate the new Iraqi government, they might be able to impose their code on the whole society. Already women in Iraq are a good deal less free in terms of dress, movement and public involvement. See, for example, the article, "Veiled Freedom for Iraqi Women", by Rory McCarthy, *Mail & Guardian,* 28 January to 3 February 2005: 16.

townships has already led to a march to the Union Buildings (Fakude 2002: 47). Such friction, however, is not dealt with in any of the fictional works I shall discuss.

This exploration of the fictional work of Ahmed Essop, Achmat Dangor, Aziz Hassim and Rayda Jacobs, four authors who either are, or have been, practising Muslims, has a threefold basis of enquiry, derived from the general principles of Islam as outlined above:[3]

1. How far does Islamic belief in the precepts of justice and mercy influence the lives of Muslims in South Africa, and empower them in humane thought and action? How far do these tenets of Islam act as a moral touchstone enabling Muslims to discern what is wise, just and caring, and to oppose the opposite (e.g. apartheid and racism generally). In what way, on the other hand, may the followers of Islam have become implicated in oppression, exploitation and violence? How far do characters reflect on such participation in redemptive ways?

2. How far do Islamic feminist concerns impinge on the lives of characters in these works? To what extent are these authors prompted by feminist views? How far, on the other hand, might these authors have become entrenched in conservative views of women's status?

3. How far do these writers venture to reveal a gap between Islamic teaching and not merely the actions of individual Muslims but widely accepted practices? In what ways do they perhaps *fail* to adopt an interrogative approach when it seems merited?

My discussion will focus first on Question 1 above (in two parts, in relation to the themes of justice and mercy separately), then on Question 2. Concern with Question 3, however, will be incorporated into the other two discussions. It will readily be seen from these questions how my enquiry differs from that of Henriette Roos's article, "Torn between Islam and the Other: South African Novelists on Cross-Cultural Relationships" (2005: 48-67). Her focus on Islam and the Other is more sociological in its concern with Muslim involvement in the wider society. My focus, on the other hand, is on Islamic belief and practice as represented largely *within* Muslim

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3. Were it not for space constraints, I should like to have included in this study Imraan Coovadia's *The Wedding* (2001), his first and only novel so far, as well as certain works of Farida Karodia, *Daughters of the Twilight* (1986) (later extended and renamed *Other Secrets* (2000)), and her story, "In the Name of Love" (in *Against an African Sky and Other Stories).*

communities (though Dangor's range is wider than the others). Although one fictional work, Dangor's *Bitter Fruit*, is common to both articles, our approaches – even in relation to the same aspects of plot – are distinct.

Concern with Justice

Aziz Hassim's *The Lotus People* (2002) and Achmat Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001)

The basis of Aziz Hassim's *The Lotus People* (2002) (hereafter abbreviated as *LP*) is the friendship between three generations of a Hindu family and a Muslim family in Durban. The novel moves through the twentieth century from the initial bond between a Hindu, Pravin Naidoo, and a Muslim, Yahya Suleiman, to the fortunes of their grandchildren: Karan Naidoo, Sam Suleiman and Jake Suleiman. However, what this fascinating but rather unwieldy novel focuses on mainly are the experiences of the Suleiman brothers, Sam and Jake, in the apartheid era. Although Gandhi is given an opportunity to preach the doctrine of passive resistance early in the novel, that belief is made to seem increasingly futile. Hassim's concerns are intensely political and he reveals the mounting bitterness and anger of the Indian population from the Smuts era, with its deliberately stirred up anti-Indian riots and infamous Ghetto Bill, right up to the full-scale onslaught of apartheid in terms of the Group Areas Act, the Immorality Act and the Internal Security Act.

Jake is originally involved in a Durban gang and Sam, the younger brother, later also operates on its fringes. Hassim's point seems to be that in a world where politicians were akin to gangsters it was inevitable that young men would resort to such activities to exercise power and agency. But Hassim compellingly reveals the solidarity and influence of the Suleimans as a leading Muslim family. When Sam's father, Dara, gives him an ultimatum concerning his involvement with Jake's gang, Sam chooses to accept the parental offer of a job in the family business. Jake, who has become a leading figure in Umkhonto we Sizwe under the name Aza Kwela, also decides to come home. And so the Suleiman Brothers enterprise comes about. In narrating its progress, Hussein enables the reader to understand the dramas that lie behind the commercial sign.

When Jake is sold out and thrown into solitary confinement, Hassim again reveals the strength of Muslim family bonds, especially in the family's fierce resistance to injustice. Sam and his friends, Sandy and Nithin, go to great lengths first to get an opportunity for access to him, and later to secure his release. However, although promised by a Special Branch agent that

Jake will be delivered to their front door, the family finds itself betrayed when what arrives is Jake's coffin.

Hassim seems to have accepted that the ruthless violence of the apartheid state must inevitably incite its opponents to similar behaviour. When the warder who was bribed into allowing access to Jake seizes the opportunity to fondle Sally (Sandy's wife), Sam makes a brutal assault on him (*LP*: 430). The duplicitous Special Branch agent who agreed to secure Jake's release is found after Jake's funeral with a bullet hole between his eyes (*LP*: 459). Hassim does not explicitly question these vengeful actions in relation to Muslim ethics, yet, as Akbar Ahmed points out: "[V]iolence and cruelty are not in the spirit of the Qur'an" (Ahmed 1992: 47). Hassim, then, finds it possible to give impassioned affirmation to the Muslim belief in justice while at the same time apparently unwilling to interrogate the use of violence by advocates of justice.[4]

Dangor's *Bitter Fruit* (2001) (hereafter abbreviated as *BF*), a novel of betrayal and estrangement, also of profound disillusionment with the "new South Africa", is the only fictional work by a South African Muslim writer that I know of which broaches the subject of fundamentalist Islam activity here and abroad. The rape of Lydia Ali by a security policeman is a major factor in the estrangement between her and her ex-activist husband, Silas, whose father was Muslim. For Silas, Lydia has never been the same since the night of the rape. The episode early in the novel when she appears to be hugging Silas but is in fact dancing on the broken pieces from her dropped beer glass, is a clear sign of how damaged her feelings are, and how unlikely it is that she will be emotionally healed, even when her feet are mended. Not surprisingly, Lydia and Silas lead increasingly separate lives.

Lydia and Silas's son, Michael, is perplexed by the parental tension. Eventually, to gain some understanding, he reads his mother's diary and discovers that he is a "child of rape" (*BF*: 114). To counteract this thought, he seeks to identify himself with his father's Muslim family, people with whom Silas himself has long since severed contact. Resisting a future like that of his parents, he retraces his childhood township sojourns, pleased especially to be getting away from the new South Africa, and to indulge in what he terms an "apartheid heritage route" (*BF*: 167).

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4. My impression is that the reviewer, Devarakshanam B. Govinden, has been too inclined to accept Hassim's point of view when she comments: "The noble example of Gandhi's *ahimsa* is ever before [the men in the novel] but the reality of their existence forces them in another direction" (*Annual Review of Islam in South Africa* 5, December 2002, p. 61). Although "forces" is certainly the option Hassim steers us towards, I wonder whether the actual outcome of events in South Africa in itself does not suggest that Gandhi's philosophy had more value after all.

From the outset the frequent references to the struggle activities of Silas and his friends create a strong implicit concern with justice in the novel. However, Michael's second goal, to get revenge on Du Boise, the rapist, and thus exact retribution on his mother's behalf, brings a concern with justice directly into the present. His two motives then become merged through the newly established contact with his Muslim cousins and their Islamic *Tariq* group. Through this group Dangor introduces the particular Muslim search for justice from oppression into the novel. Michael manages to convince himself that they are genuinely his people although he chooses to ignore what is less appealing to him: his cousin Sadrodien's humiliatingly chauvinistic attitude towards his sister; disappointment with their prayer service, and Sadrodien's ideological evasion of Michael's historical concerns.

Through the *tariq* meetings Michael becomes closely involved with the Imam, Ismail, whom he takes to visiting regularly. However, Ismail has learnt that "Michael has a unique insight into the politics of the new government" (*BF*: 175), and in the same disclosure the narrator ironically mentions that "Michael does not disappoint Ismail" (*BF*: 175). Clearly Michael is being exploited, even as he imagines that he is succeeding in achieving his goals. Only when it is already too late does his father discover that Ismail is involved with Muslim vigilantes such as Pagad, and with Afghanistan and Libya. Meanwhile Ismail has told Michael the story of his grandfather who avenged his sister after she had been raped with impunity by a British officer. Michael seems thereby to be receiving double sanction (i.e from his grandfather and from Islam). He is cunning enough to use information about government terrorism laws to bribe Ismail into giving him protection and enabling him to escape to India (a journey which will, in effect, reverse that of his grandfather).[5] Ismail's implicit support of Michael's actions is conveyed when he says: "There are certain things people do not forget, or forgive. Rape is one of them" (*BF*: 182), a moral which has been given substance through the grandfather's story.

Silas's fiftieth birthday party is the occasion at which, with most effectively vengeful timing, Lydia chooses to free herself from Silas. There she encourages the attentions of a young Mozambican to the extent of making love with him on a billiard table in the games room of their host. To her credit she does not know that Michael and Silas (from different vantage points) would both witness this scene, but she clearly does nothing, on the other hand, to ensure privacy. It is not surprising that Michael stumbles

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5. Dangor is apparently engaged with a sequel involving Michael Ali's later experiences in Afghanistan (cf. Elaine Young, "Interview with Achmat Dangor", pp. 53-54).

away from this scene "as if intoxicated" (*BF*: 240), nor that for the rest of the night he proceeds to wander aimlessly from suburb to suburb. Here Dangor's imagination is shown at its most daring and fertile. Michael comes by chance on a convoy of cars pulled up outside a house. One of them turns out to contain Nelson Mandela who asks Michael what he is doing out so late, and then – in response to the young man's stunned silence – asks: '"Are you afraid of me ... do you need help?"' (*BF*: 240). The man who had so much cause for bitterness and vengeance in the face of radical injustice but who chose reconciliation and forgiveness instead, is indeed the one who could have offered Michael help, but, without further disclosures from him, there is no way Mandela could now intervene meaningfully in the course of action Michael has chosen under very different guidance. This lost opportunity serves to make all the more tragic the enactment of Michael's main resolution the next day.

At dawn Michael ends up at the mosque where he makes a deal with Ismail for his "passage to India", and the Imam merely questions him about his course of action without any attempt to deter or dissuade him. Du Boise arrives at Killarney Mall at the expected time and Michael aims at him from above. Before he shoots, however, he finds himself thinking: "[T]hat could be my face one day, my thin body" (*BF*: 246). This moment of startled identification with the hated rapist suggests not merely an awareness of Du Boise as his father, but how far Michael has been corrupted by this choice of action. It is as if his identity has been raped by Du Boise as effectively as he raped Lydia physically. The implicit contrast between the kinds of help offered by Mandela and by Imam Ismail reveals Dangor's readiness to acknowledge the destructive potential of Islamic fundamentalism. Michael's initial revenge motive, a distorted concern with justice, makes him the unwitting pawn of a much larger-scale, and more insidiously distorted, campaign for justice. On the other hand, Dangor does not allow us to forget that it is apartheid, as well as the suffering of people in countries such as Afghanistan, which have led to the activities of Michael and Imam Ismail.

Concern with Mercy

Ahmed Essop's "The Hajji" (1978) and *The Visitation* (1980); Dangor's "Kafka's Curse" (1998) and Rayda Jacobs's *Confessions of a Gambler* (2003)

In Essop's story, "The Hajji" (1978) (hereafter abbreviated as *H*), set in the heyday of apartheid, the main character Hajji Hassen's brother, Karim, has

crossed the colour line to cohabit with a white woman. When he is dying and wishes to be buried under Muslim funeral rites, his mistress, Catherine, asks for Hassen's help. In Hassen's view, however, Karim's liaison signifies that he has "joined the white Herrenvolk" (*H*: 2) so he refuses his assistance. A further plea from Catherine causes him to agree to have Karim at home. Unfortunately when Hassen goes with Catherine to their apartment block to give Karim his agreement, his humiliation by white youths intensifies his feeling of having been humiliated by Karim. Thus he "sets his heart against forgiving Karim" (*H*: 6) even though, at the moment of decision "a painful lump [rises] in his throat" (*H*: 6).

In contrast to Hassen's stubbornness, Essop reveals the Islamic practice of forgiveness and mercy. To start with, it is Hassen's wife, Salima, who tells Catherine to see one of the Muslim leaders, Mr Mia. A deputation led by Mr Mia and the mosque priest then reminds Hassen that as a Haj, he should be eager to forgive his brother. But Hassen's resistance to their entreaty grows because he cannot let himself be seen to give in. Aware, however, that his hardness of heart is sinful, he begins to feel that his Haj was futile. So full of tense anger is he that when Salima encourages him to visit Karim, he strikes her. A second deputation when Karim is close to death urges Hassen to remember that "Allah is pleased by forgiveness" (*H*: 10), but he remains unbending. Here one remembers Akbar S. Ahmed's insistence that in Islam "God's two most important and most cited titles are the Beneficent and the Merciful" (Ahmed 1992: 36), and Mernissi's stress on the Islamic virtue of *rahma.*

When the news of Karim's death comes next morning, Hassen leaves his home to get as far away from Mr Mia and the priest as possible. His impulse grows into a wish to escape from the funeral altogether. However, in the countryside he has an overwhelming remembrance of Karim, and is impelled by a wish to embrace his brother before the burial is over. As he re-enters Newtown the hearse and mourners pass by without noticing him: his self-imposed alienation is complete. In this story, then, Essop reveals a conspicuous gap between Hassen's behaviour and authentic Muslim concern with merciful forgiveness.

In Essop's first novel, *The Visitation* (1980) (hereafter abbreviated as V), Mr Sufi, an egoistic profiteer, becomes dependent on the gangster, Gool, and thus opens himself to increasing exploitation. Mr Sufi's tenants are ruthlessly treated, and he gives little thought to religion except to reassure himself that "the bounty of Allah would always provide men with women" (*V*: 14)! However, to save money, fast disappearing through Gool's extravagant claims, Mr Sufi is forced to give up his concubines. Plagued by Gool with unsolicited boxes of (presumably stolen) electric lamps, Mr Sufi becomes convinced that he is being persecuted by supernatural evil (*V*: 74)

and – although he is a virtual stranger to the mosque – turns to the Molvi for help. However, having planned to invite the Molvi to lunch, he is forestalled by Gool who has got there first. Even more disconcerting is that the Molvi seems to have a "derisory look for Mr Sufi" (*V*: 76).

Persisting in his wish for help, Mr Sufi is given an amulet and a schedule of prayers. As a present Mr Sufi then gives the Molvi a box of Gool's lamps, and vows to make the obligatory pilgrimage to Mecca. However, he is troubled to find that the Molvi uses the lamps for the mosque chandelier: the incongruity of stolen lamps in a sacred place gives him a vision of the "glowing fires of hell" (*V*: 84)! Panic stricken when the Molvi comes with a deputation from the Crescent Charitable Trust, Mr Sufi gives them a cheque "in a mood of almost hysterical benevolence" (*V*: 85). Further duped by Gool, Mr Sufi is prompted to invest in land in Elysia, the government's new area for Indians, and sell his properties to Whites in order to raise the necessary capital. The Elysian plan has been condemned by leading Indian movements as a "racial ghetto" (*V*: 91), and poor Mr Sufi is next approached by representatives of the People's Movement for funds to promote resistance (*V*: 91). In this desperately dichotomous situation it is not surprising that he has a heart attack or stroke.

The accumulating sufferings of Mr Sufi begin to invite our sympathy rather than the disapproval which we feel earlier on. He shows a new capacity for sympathy; on his sickbed he becomes conscious at last of the "primary beauty of the beings of his wife and children" (V: 89). It seems that Gool's lamps develop a symbolic purpose the gangster could not have intended: they lead Mr Sufi to a new illumination and wisdom. Outwitted by Gool, who is even smarter than himself at taking advantage of social inequalities, Mr Sufi is ultimately led to find meaning and wisdom beyond rapacious self-gain. Slender though Mr Sufi's contact with his religion may be, it nevertheless proves crucial in his reform. While the Molvi appears to be corrupt and somehow even in league with Gool, the moral influence of the religion he represents is what has led Mr Sufi into deeper insight into himself and those closest to him.

Dangor's novella, *Kafka's Curse* (1998) (hereafter abbreviated as *KC*), focuses mainly on the theme of transgression. Initially we are presented with the transgression of the Muslim, Omar Khan. According to his brother Malik, Omar "strayed from his life's station" (*KC*: 23) by taking on a Jewish identity as Oscar Kahn in order to escape South Africa's racial barriers. No sin could be greater in Malik's view. Omar, however, dies after a mysterious illness during which he seems to become treelike – the legend of the gardener, Majnoen, who fell in love with the princess, Leila, is explicitly suggested by Omar to his wife, Anna, as an explanation. This is exactly what Malik supposes: it is sinful to aim higher than one's station; if

one does, punishment will follow.

However, despite Malik's supposedly straightforward moral perspective, he too is involved in transgression. He not only neglects but scorns his wife, Fatgiyah, and abuses his religion by creating a purportedly contemplative space for himself but which in fact enables him to read what he chooses, however irreverent, in seclusion from the family. In public he is an exemplary Muslim; indeed, he is regarded as "a symbol of simple honesty" (*KC*: 52).

When Omar dies, Malik comes immediately to his brother's house to fetch the corpse and thus ensure a proper Muslim burial for him. What seems a generous element enters into his thoughts about his dead brother, for he has to convince the Imam that the sins of the father (thinking here of the pressure put on Omar to "survive at any cost"), "should not become an obstacle in the way of a dead Muslim facing the judgement – and the consequent forgiveness" (*KC*: 42). The description of the funeral, however, is tinged with ironic suggestions that the ritual enables the participants to conceal lack of any real grief. Malik's complacent reflection during the lunch, that "[j]udgement after death was not the only punishment that God imposed on sinners" (*KC*: 51), hints at how little generosity of spirit or sense of mercy is actually involved in the elaborate funeral he has organised. The way in which the Imam conveys his approval of a luncheon invitation ("How learned" (*KC*: 47)) also hints at his concealment of baser motives beneath ritualistic rhetoric.

Perhaps it is only through the "transgression" of Malik's wife, Fatgiyah – her understandable abandonment of Malik – that Dangor finds it possible to endorse the positive side of Islam. Her return to Johannesburg to arrange for Malik's funeral has none of the ironic overtones of the funeral for Omar. We are told that there she "wept her first tears of real grief for her husband" (*KC*: 139). Dangor then reveals her prayer, one that is unmatched elsewhere in the novella, and that involves a genuine desire for the mercy of God, suggesting the kind of redress and liberation that the psychologist, Amina (of whom more later), never found. Amina herself is the second person for whom Fatgiyah intercedes:

> Allah maaf, Allah maaf, Fatgiyah prayed, asking God to forgive her for her sins of the mind and the body, mostly desires that made her body ache and her mind tired, asking God to grant Malik janat, the heavenly peace he deserved, and asking God – the most merciful – to have mercy even on the soul of Amina Mandlestam, whore and murderer.
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> (*KC*: 139)

In Jacobs's first contemporary novel, *Sachs Street* (2001) she reveals

serious flaws in relation to the way Islam is practised by its male adherents.[6] The protagonist, Khadidja, nevertheless continues to feel an unswerving loyalty to her religion. In her recent novel, *Confessions of a Gambler* (2003a) (hereafter abbreviated as *CG)*, women's predicament is more intensely portrayed, though in relation to an even more fervent commitment to Islam. The first thing that Abeeda (or Beeda as she is generally known) confesses is that "I'm a Muslim woman. I'm 49. I wear two scarves" (*CG*: 7). This association of her identity with her religion (and her age) is the outcome of a struggle which the novel goes on to disclose.

Two crises in Beeda's life, related to her gambling addiction, dominate the novel. When her youngest son, Reza, is still a child she finds herself in love with Imran, her sister's fiancé and later husband. Later, when Reza has reached early manhood he becomes ill with AIDS and dies. Although the love issue dominates the last part of the novel, only Jacobs's handling of Reza's illness and death is relevant to my purposes. Beeda has been aware since Reza was eleven that he is gay but she never discusses his sexual orientation with him until he reveals his illness. Then he tells her how he "pleaded with God. I prayed ... but every day was the same. My feelings never changed" (*CG*: 31). In a bitterly sympathetic response Beeda reflects: "If God was the Creator, the Planner, the Knower of Everything, what chance had [Reza] had?" (*CG*: 31). Braima, her ex-husband, at first resists visiting Reza till Beeda points out: "[T]here's no time to play the holies. He has Aids. That's real. I need you to help, not to make it worse" (*CG*: 35). Beeda remains resolute in her decision that Reza will come home to die, and that he will be allowed to bring his friend, Patrick, with him.

Beeda's other sons have difficulty in coming to terms with the situation. Jacobs portrays her, however, as a role model for Islam at its most wise and caring. She appears a *potential* participant, along with other Cape Town Muslim women, in challenging the male distortions of Islamic tradition in relation to issues such as access to mosques (cf. "The Eid Prayer in South Africa and Muslim Women's Struggle for Sacred Space" (Ismail 2002)). At the beginning of the novel she reveals that her sons "grew up without a father but not without the Koran" (*CG*: 7). Later, though, faced with their resistance to her plan for Reza and Patrick, she comments: "For all their modern ideas, they still went by the Book. But the Book also talks about compassion" (*CG*: 47). At the *iftaar* meal on the first Saturday night in Ramadan, Jacobs strikes an ironic chord when one of the twin sons explains to Patrick the significance of Ramadan as "a chance to make real changes in

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6. A more comprehensive treatment of Jacobs's Islamic perspective, not possible in these pages, would involve attention to *Sachs Street* as well as her second historical novel, *The Slave Book* (1998).

our lives" (*CG*: 76). The eldest son, Zena, has seemed to be the most opposed to Reza, but Beeda gradually brings him to admit: "I love Reza, even though it doesn't look that way" (*CG*: 103). When he objects to Patrick's coming to stay with Reza at his mother's house, she reflects: "Zena wanted the right thing for his brother, and the right thing by God. But the right thing by God also meant not hurting people, and Patrick had been good to my son" (*CG*: 112). Amongst the moving aspects of the way Jacobs deals with Reza's death is the glimpse of the erstwhile stubborn and resistant Braima talking to Patrick after Reza's funeral. In an effective yet simple way the Islamic concept of *rahma* is shown powerfully at work.

Women's Rights and Status

Essop's "The Hajji" (1978) and *The Visitation* (1980); Hassim's *The Lotus People* (2002); Dangor's "Kafka's Curse" (1998) and Jacobs's *Postcards from South Africa* (2003)

Although Essop's focus is mainly on male characters, he is clearly sensitive to discriminatory attitudes against women. Through Hassen Hajji's favourable comparison of his brother's white mistress to Salima, his submissive wife whom he regards as "inadequate" (*H*: 34), Essop may be hinting at a serious flaw in conventional Muslim marriage practice. Before Mr Sufi (in *The Visitation*) is shocked into a more enlightened moral awareness, he takes for granted the faithful support of his wife while indulging in a philandering lifestyle without qualms.

The Lotus People is a male-centred novel: the chief protagonists are men and it is the male line in both the Naidoo and Suleiman families which receives prominence. Certainly the mothers, wives and daughters are there and a fair amount of attention is given to particular women, notably Sam's mother, Shaida, and Jake's activist wife, Hannah. But Hussein treads an uneasy path between the traditional view of women's place and a more liberated one. Much attention is given to the way women work effectively behind the scenes, and to the admiration of their men for such action. For example, the idea of assisting Jake in getting out of the country comes from Karan Naidoo's mother. Sam reminds his friends that Jake himself had said: "Put women in the frontline" (*LP*: 450). One cannot help feeling, though, that the irony here is tinged with a patronising quality. Women's place is in the background; they can do wonderful things from that vantage point to the extent that one can jest about a reversal of roles. Hassim shows no awareness of the point raised by Lawrence: "[M]ost Muslim women still enjoy neither the educational nor professional opportunities available to

their fathers and brothers, husbands and sons" (Lawrence 1998: 109). Perhaps only in the activities of the youth at the end of the novel when they claim to their parents and uncles that they are "joint and equal partners in the struggle" (*LP*: 521), is there a hint that this includes gender as well as age equality.

Dangor, on the other hand, deals forcefully with the question of women's rights through the psychologist, Amina Mandelstam, and her counter-transgressions. The revelations about her intensify progressively through the novel. She emerges first as Oscar's counsellor after Anna leaves him, unable to cope with his mysteriously deteriorating state. Next Amina becomes involved with Malik, first as counsellor, then as lover. Crucial for an understanding of Amina, however, is her own first-person revelation in the chapter, "Their Story", of how she was tormented as a child by her stepbrother, Sarlie's voyeurism, sly groping, and worst of all, the evidence of his ejaculations on the underwear in her dresser. Dicky, her stepfather and Sarlie's father, she regarded with revulsion and contempt. Through her Dangor expresses perhaps the strongest condemnation in any of the selected texts, of the practice of polygamy in Islam. Addressing her mother in thought, Amina laments:

> He lived, this man you call your husband, with yet another woman and her children in a house up the hill, not caring that she could look down on our two-and-a-half room house at the back of a house, not caring that she suffered the indignity of seeing him saunter down to us when he wanted to fuck you, to keep his "holy covenant" alive.
>
> (*KC*: 109)

When Amina is being interrogated by the security police, she remembers she was a "willing participant in a charade of comradely promiscuity" (*KC*: 132); moreover that her reputation was that "she'd fuck anything" (*KC*: 132). Dangor seems to imply that her early exposure to licentiousness and perversion made it inevitable that she would be vulnerable to sexual transgression of some kind or other; he also reveals the inexorable development in her of a powerful wish to achieve retribution for her betrayals by men. This is presumably the explanation for the multiple murders (including the deaths of Omar, Malik, Sarlie and Dicky) which she seems to have committed.

The three stories from Jacobs's 2004 collection, *Postcards from South Africa*, which I shall focus on, "Double Storey" (hereafter abbreviated as DS), "Postcards from South Africa [the initial 'postcard']" (hereafter abbreviated as PSA) and "Sabah" (hereafter abbreviated as S), present a variety of attitudes on Jacobs's part towards Islamic polygamous marriage in South Africa, and the intimately related question of women's rights.

In "Double Storey", Nadia, unable to fall pregnant, suggests to her faithful, caring husband, Sedick, that he should take her friend, Soemaya, as a second wife. However, when Soemaya and Sedick agree to this, Nadia feels betrayed although she is aware that Sedick has scrupulously followed the Qur'anic prescription of equality for wives:

> Sedick bought a huge double storey on Third Avenue, and identical furniture for the lower and upper floors. He took God's Words so literally, that when you stepped into the lounge on the main floor, the coffee table, the couches, the dining-room table and chairs were exactly the same as the furniture on the top floor, and in the same positions.
>
> (DS: 143)

The first night of the newlyweds is unbearable for Nadia and she leaves the house early to avoid seeing Sedick. On her return, she finds him in her kitchen and notes how awkward he is feeling. After a week of avoidance on her part, Soemaya comes to take issue with her friend's behaviour, and to offer to ask Sedick for an early divorce. Touched by this reminder of their friendship, Nadia asks her to defer the request. Their encounter enables Nadia to stop avoiding Soemaya, and in time the three of them regularly go out together and dine.

When Soemaya falls pregnant with twins, Nadia accepts her friend's idea of the babies having two mothers. Shortly before the twins' birth, Nadia discovers to her delight that she too is pregnant and she looks forward to telling Sedick and Soemaya the news. Sedick's strict observance of the equality stipulation seems to have made it possible for this particular polygamous marriage to prosper.

In "Postcards from South Africa", Munieba suffers in an unequal polygamous marriage with Hamid. Although she is the first wife, her husband appears only on Sunday nights "after a Sea Point lunch and outing with his young, second wife" (PSA: 162). It is clear from the description of the discrimination suffered by Munieba that she used to feel extremely bitter. That stage, however, has phased into indifference, probably as a form of emotional anaesthesia. On the Sunday night which is the culmination of this brief episode, Munieba braces herself to do what she has somehow previously not been able to bring herself to: when Hamid begins to touch her in bed, she asks for a *talaq*. The deferred *talaq* in "Double Storey" which one assumes is never again requested, helps to point the essential contrast between these two stories.

In "Sabah" Jacobs confronts the rival possibilities offered in "Double Storey" and "Postcards from South Africa" in a more complex way. Sabah, frequent protagonist in the stories in the first section which trace her development from childhood to adulthood, has returned to South Africa

after years of exile in Canada (as in Jacobs's own experience). While strolling on the beach with her dog, she thinks of her preference for her present lifestyle in which she meets her lover on two nights a week. With another man, Adam, whom she has known since high school, she wants only friendship, although he is keen to make her his second wife, and even promises her the extra day (in terms of marital favours) if she accepts.

As part of her reflections, Sabah thinks of how her friend, Jehan, though initially shocked at being betrayed by her husband's marriage to his secretary, has come to realise her advantages:

> She can have the extra day. I'm better off for it. I don't have to cook for him. And when we get together now, he's so glad to see me, we do things he never would've done before. There's that guilt, you know, being able to have two women with God's consent. But God didn't consent to lust, and they know it. (S: 197)

Jehan's explanation reveals a critical intelligence similar to that of Beeda in *Confessions of a Gambler*: she is aware of the disparity between Qur'anic teaching and male practice. Her advice to Sabah to marry Adam ("You'll have a man when you need one, and still have your freedom. It's a heck of a deal" (S: 198)) is perfectly in accord with her own situation, and we might be tempted to suppose she represents Jacobs's viewpoint. However, Sabah makes it clear that she could not make such a choice: "she couldn't do it – not to another woman, and not to herself" (S: 198). The consequent drama on the beach, in which Sabah saves herself from being raped by three youths only because of her dog and her gun, reinforces the implication in Jehan's point that "God didn't consent to lust, and they know it" (S: 197).

Conclusion

In conclusion I offer some general answers to the questions posed at the beginning of this paper. Hassim's passionate identification with his fellow Indians in their resolute struggle for justice seems to have blinded him to Muslim ethical considerations about violence. Dangor, on the other hand, uses implied contrast in *Bitter Fruit* to invite us to see Michael Ali's involvement with Islamic fundamentalism as a grave, though understandable delusion. The Imam's deliberate and subtle exploitation of Michael involves obtaining sensitive information about the government's measures to combat terrorism and monitor extremist groups. By inference one concludes therefore that Ismail is participating in extremist schemes of terror. In this case then, I would argue that Dangor *is* interrogating Islam for the way in which it has become susceptible to the use of treacherous

violence.

In “The Hajji” Essop offers a painful contrast between Hajji’s stubbornness and the Muslim deputation’s repeated plea that he should forgive his brother. The influence of the Muslim religious context eventually leads Mr Sufi in *The Visitation* to some acts of self-sacrifice, and greater sympathy for his wife and family. Dangor takes up the theme of fraternal refusal to forgive, contrasting Malik’s vindictive spirit in “Kafka’s Curse” with his wife’s wish for mercy on Malik himself, and even on Amina, the apparently heartless murderess. The merciful approach of a woman is highlighted also in Jacobs’s *Confessions of a Gambler* through Beeda’s plea for understanding towards the dying Reza. Her explicit references to the Qur’an, and the effectiveness of her example help to endorse the value of *rahma*. Dangor’s and Jacobs’s implicit interrogation of conventional Muslim practice is all the more effective in being achieved through women’s actions.

Implicit belief in feminist values is already present in Essop’s handling of the women in “The Hajji” and *The Visitation* where the male arrogance of both major protagonists, Hajji Hassen and Mr Sufi, is foregrounded. In *The Lotus People* Hassim, though affected to some degree by feminist thinking, remains ambivalent about the role and status of women. Overt engagement with feminist issues emerges only in Jacobs’s and Dangor’s work. What looms large for Jacobs in *Confessions of a Gambler* is the exploitation by men of Qur’anic sanction for polygamy without scrupulous adherence to the scripture’s requirements. In her recent stories she gives qualified approval to a polygamous marriage where the husband has made impressive efforts to ensure the equality of his two wives. However, it is clear from the final story, “Sabah” (through the protagonist, with whom Jacobs seems most closely to identify herself), that she would not favour polygamy for herself under any circumstances.

Even Jacobs does not venture beyond marital issues to engage with the status of women in Islam generally. Amina Mandelstam’s “reign of terror” against men in “Kafka’s Curse” has its roots in her own suffering and her mother’s in a situation of heartless polygamy. Dangor could hardly have protested more compellingly than he does through Amina’s multiple murders. However, what prevents his portrayal of Muslim women in the novella from becoming a one-sided rant, emerges through Fatgiyah, Malik’s forgiving wife. Through the compassion of women like Beeda and Fatgiyah, writers like Jacobs and Dangor may be seen as simultaneously celebrating and interrogating Islam. The virtue these characters practise is closely related to the Islamic concept of *rahma*, yet it is a distressing irony that Muslim women themselves seem in general to have benefited all too little from this virtue. One hopes that these fictional interrogations, together with

the challenges of writers such as Mernissi and Ramadan, are strong indications of a way forward to the full emancipation of women within Islam.

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