

*High Low In-between* by Imraan Coovadia (Umuzi) R200

16 August 2009

Imraan Coovadia has valuably extended the range of the South African novel by concentrating on a lesser-known sector of South African society: the educated Indian middle-class. In this, his third novel, Coovadia homes in on a sub-sector he evidently knows well: the academic-medical grouping around the University of Kwazulu-Natal. The central characters in his novel are the immediate family of Arif, an about-to-retire professor of medicine and Aids researcher. His retirement has been brought about by his opposition to one Hansel Metzger, an Austrian Aids denialist in cahoots with the Vice-Chancellor of the University, and by extension with the President and the Minister of Health of South Africa, who between them have frustrated years of research. In addition, Metzger is suing Arif for defamation, while the latter is recuperating from a kidney transplant performed by a young protégé of his, Govin Mackey. Mackey and an associate, David Gerson, have been charged with trafficking in human organs. Arif's wife, Nafisa, also a doctor, attempts tirelessly but unsuccessfully to get her sexually active Zulu servant, Estella, to undergo an Aids test. ...

Anybody acquainted with South Africa's recent history will recognise that Coovadia is here opening a substantial can of worms. In the process he makes clear, controversially, that a new racism is undermining essential services almost as perniciously as the old apartheid racism. Arif, once a courageous and vociferous opponent of the apartheid government; is now side-lined by previous comrades who are marching to the government's drum; Nafisa, once victimised by a state-appointed superintendent, is now patronised by Zulu nurses who make no effort to hide their contempt for an Indian woman, and who resent her professional standing: "Nobody, under the new dispensation, was supposed to know better than anybody else."

No wonder, then, that when Arif is found shot on the day before his retirement party it is assumed that he committed suicide: "who wouldn't be depressed to discover the government dismantling the work of a lifetime?"

But his photographer son Shakeer (Sharky), arriving from San Francisco for the party that turns into a funeral, refuses to believe that his father committed suicide – and here the

medical-political intrigue deftly turns into a whodunit, in which Nafisa's undeclared stash of money in a London bank, mysteriously drawn by an unknown person, becomes an important element. It also incidentally makes the point that Nafisa, with her boxes of undeclared paper money, is not necessarily a model citizen.

The danger of topical relevance is, paradoxically, irrelevance. Circumstances change, rendering obsolete the fiction based on them. In this case, the President and the Minister of Health who "ensured African dignity by drinking herself into a public stupor by lunchtime on a working day" have mercifully passed into the annals of bad governance, and the embattled country faces new challenges from the new incumbents. But Coovadia's novel survives the departure of the administration that in a sense animated it, because his characters are so much more than pawns of history or the sum of their political positions.

The novel is skilfully constructed around the alternating points of view of mother and son, Nafisa and Shakeer, and between them they puzzle out the events leading to Arif's death. But more importantly, they tease out the puzzle of human relations, or rather, separately arrive at the conclusion that human relations are not to be puzzled out: "Sharky became convinced that every human being inhabited a separate universe. There was no means to convey a message from one to another, or if there was, it was transmitted by the logic of the broken telephone so that it was garbled on arrival."

Nafisa finds a different metaphor for the same breakdown: "The world was full of situations. Things were not intended to fit together. Each person was a puzzle piece drawn from a different set."

And yet, human beings are forever striving to close the gap, to move closer to other human beings, as Sharky realises, looking at a photograph of Nafisa and Estella that he took without their knowledge: "They managed to sit closely to one another, to be as close as mother and daughter, and yet to be as distant as if one was Saturn and the other Jupiter."

Clearly such distance, though intensified by different ethnic backgrounds, is more than racial in origin: it forms part of a pattern of human relations in the novel whereby the closest associates are at times unreachably far and yet at other times lay claim to one's

intimacy and care. Thus Nafisa, early in the novel realises that “on the planet Estella was the individual who needed her, Nafisa, the most.”

Human need and human isolation: politics are only the public manifestation of this ancient human dilemma. Not for nothing does Sharky revert to Sophocles’ gloomy saying: “Call no man happy until he is dead.” By this logic, Arif is the happiest character in the novel; and yet, who would change places with him? As, once again, Sharky realises: “given a choice, [we] would never consent to non-existence.”

*High Low In-between* does not offer any answers to the many questions, both political and philosophical, that it raises: its value lies altogether in the compelling urgency with which it dramatises its characters’ quandaries. It is an angry novel, but its compassion outweighs its anger; it is a political novel, but its humanity is stronger than its political charge.