

Deena Padayachee. *What's Love Got to Do with It? And Other Stories.* Dormerton: USM Publishers, 2003. 175 pp. No price listed, paper, ISBN 978-1-874879-14-5.



Reviewed by Page Laws

Published on H-SAfrica (May, 2005)

Americans hearing the title "What's Love Got to Do with It?" quickly conjure up a gyrating Tina Turner, her song of that title having won her multiple Grammys in 1985, and her biopic of the same title having almost won Angela Bassett (playing Tina) a 1993 Oscar. Given the globalization of Tina's tunes and twisting torso, most current South Africans probably conjure up Tina long before they think of short stories. So it is a bit of a surprise to find this title chosen for a collection--now in its second edition--depicting Indian (especially Tamil) community life in South Africa, 1985-1991. Granted, it was a period of history with enough political gyrations to exhaust even Tina. But those great upheavals are fortunately rendered in this collection on the microcosmic, very personal level appropriate to the short story genre. We do not get Gandhi leading an army to the sea; we do get everyday South Africans of Indian descent fighting everyday insults to their race and place.

Author Deena Padayachee is a family doctor who, according to the book's back cover, works at a free government clinic as well as his own prac-

tice. Padayachee has been frequently published in South African literary magazines and even some "Best of" anthologies. Winner of the Nadine Gordimer Award (1991) and the Olive Schreiner Prize (1994), he is deservedly praised by academics, especially from his KwaZulu home region.

The first story in the collection, "The Visitor," is written from the point of view of a looter (most probably black) rifling through a semi-ruined Ashram outside Tegwhite. It is a classic short story of the type where some piece of knowledge must slowly "dawn" upon the reader. Everything depends on pacing and the rationing out of clues--slowly and surely. We have five pages to figure out that a ragged fellow "rioter" is not there to take but to give. Could it be the spirit of the Mahatma, appearing to soften one looter's heart?

The second story, "A Different Kind of Standard Four," has a speaker much more like Padayachee himself, we suspect. Standard Four refers to the level of formal schooling the speaker's father was able to complete. When still a young man, the father tried to build a better life for brown-skinned people in the tangible form of a school,

the very school the speaker now attends. The father exhorts his son to go beyond the Boercentric curriculum to learn about Indians and Africans.

"The Finishing Touch" is another concise glimpse into a "colored" world that South African whites and blacks rarely see. Here a "coolie" (Indian) tries to assimilate by changing his Indian surname. This maneuver will enable him to sidestep the bureaucracy and get a business license. But the ultimate cost of assimilation remains an unknown. What are the costs and benefits to his soul?

"An African Lotus," the next story, is a vehicle that also takes on the cost of betraying one's own people for short-term rewards. A man of color points out what he considers to be a religious insult to his friend's Ruz religion. So far, so good. The "insult" is to be found, however, in an otherwise very worthy book by an embattled black writer. It slowly dawns on the reader that blacks and the practitioners of Ruz ("coloreds," we presume) are being pitted against each other by parties unknown. The cynical hand on the provocateur's leash begins to look suspiciously white. The following story, "Surprise Package," is one of several in the book about young people, sexual attraction and "miscegenation," a theme linked with the infamous Immorality Act and its long-lasting repercussions.

In "A Pestilence in the Land," Padayachee experiments with writing from the point of view of insects and vermin who are delighted by the idiosyncrasies of mankind. The attempt is noble, but falls far short of being successfully Kafkaesque. Yet another story relying on a touch of the supernatural is "A Letter to the Mayor." Originally published in *The Staffrider*, it concerns a white Mayor who was dared to go and live in a black township during the apartheid era. In this version, a magical computer churns out copies of the titular letter even when it is not plugged in, and the Mayor--just as miraculously--undergoes a change of political heart.

"A New Woman in Town" explores black boys' fantasies of white women. Once again, carefully inculcated notions of miscegenation and forbidden love foster self-loathing and intra-racial prejudice. This story's ending proves unequal to its important theme.

In his penultimate story, "The Guests," about ghostly visitors to a young girl, Padayachee seemingly strives to rival Henry James. He understandably falls a bit short of the Master. But the story is certainly comparable to an M. Night Shyamalan film, and that, in itself, is no mean feat. Clever twists are still clever. (Someone sees dead people!)

The final title story of the collection "What's Love Got to Do with It?" might have been named "Love among the Med Students." Once more, issues of color and religion rankle young students striving for personal achievement as well as some semblance of normal life in their own country.

While Deena Padayachee might be defter in his narrative craftsmanship, he has a doctor's steady, comforting hand on the pulse of his community and an obvious desire to improve its overall health. South Africa can well use this physician in both of its healing professions: medicine and humane letters.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at
<https://networks.h-net.org/h-safrica>

Citation: Page Laws. Review of Padayachee, Deena. *What's Love Got to Do with It? And Other Stories*. H-SAfrica, H-Net Reviews. May, 2005.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10534>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.