

BOOK-REVIEW

The impotence of due process

Timol: A Quest For Justice by Imitiaz Cajee, STE Publishers, Johannesburg, 2005, 200pp.

There is a peculiar language used in public and in private about the death of Ahmed Timol in detention in 1971. The public language consists of the official versions and the unofficial versions. Officially it is said that he committed suicide. Unofficially it is said that he fell ten storeys to his death.

The private language is different. "We know he was murdered by the security police. He was tortured, and thrown out of the window."

Adding to the intrigue is that the unofficial public version and the private version are often spoken by the same people. The official public version is spoken only by those who seek the security and protection of the law under apartheid. The private version is spoken by those who seek justice and full disclosure of the truth in this matter.

The great irony is that, to this day, the official apartheid court ruling continues to provide protection to the security police who were present when Ahmed Timol died. This is why, officially, we cannot speak of murder and torture. The court found no evidence to support these charges at the inquest. Instead, it found that Timol committed suicide. When

in the case of Ahmed Timol, we have to do so privately because, officially, it never happened.

Imitiaz Cajee grapples with the absurdity and the pain of this reality in *Timol: A Quest For Justice*. The convictions of those who lived and worked with Ahmed Timol, those who knew him well and those who had a significant association with him stands against this officialdom. The absurdity lies in the intimate knowledge and information that was never admitted as testimony at the inquest,

When we speak of murder and torture in the case of Ahmed Timol, we have to do so privately because, officially, it never happened.

is further compounded by the invulnerability of perpetrators who are secure enough not to have applied for amnesty during the TRC hearings.

Apartheid, officially, is no more, but its legacy of loss and trauma still lingers. The ones who survived and live with its scars to this day are still seeking justice and closure. Of the greatest afflictions a mother can bear is not

identity so distinctly explored by Cajee. However, the nature of Timol's struggle as a communist has a compelling universal dimension. He died struggling for freedom against oppression. His sacrifice was for the oppressed people of South Africa and, therefore, his memory should be embraced by all those who are now the heirs of a decade-old democracy.

One of the more remarkable aspects of corroboration in the accounts of friends and associates in the life of Ahmed Timol is that of his character and personality. In particular, it is the gentle nature, the generosity, the compassion and empathy that pervaded his life and touched the lives of those around him. The agreement on this aspect of Timol's life is almost unanimous and Cajee succeeds in drawing together the various personal impressions Timol had made on others.

The author states in his introduction that there is no point in giving a "dispassionate or clinical account" of Timol's death. It is perhaps with this intention that Cajee is the intrusive narrator, occasionally offering an opinion or a sentiment on the issue at hand, often amidst lengthy instances of direct speech. However, the presence of the narrator is, above all, felt in the relationship he shares with Timol.

Despite this, there are missing dimensions in the book. The story of Timol, in countless instances, lends itself to the dramatic elements of a more literary narrative style. For example, the moments where Mohammed and Hawa Timol each learn of Ahmed's death and where Haji Timol, arriving at John Vorster Square after the death of Ahmed, faces Colonel Greyling who offers him a sweet, are all pregnant with

These are poignant moments for figurative devices to explore the profound sensibilities and depth of pain and outrage felt by the victims of extreme brutality. It is possible and opportune because the people are real and accessible. Furthermore, although we are told that Timol reconciled being Muslim with being a communist, we gain no insight into his thoughts on Islam and communism. He is referred to as a deep thinker even though theory was not one of his strengths. Ultimately, we never get to know Timol the thinker because the real focus is on Timol the activist.

Of the most exceptional acts of sacrifice undertaken by Timol was his decision to return to South Africa. Timol lived with the Pahads in London, which offered reasonable comforts. Above all, he had met the woman he would have wanted to spend the rest of his life with. Instead, he chose above all this his commitment to his people. It is a reality that this concept of sacrifice is beyond the comprehension of young South Africans.

There is something esoteric about the struggle: it is glorified not only by people who now, decades later, can speak openly about their sacrifice, but also by countless others who regard with envy the nobility and the camaraderie of the comrades in struggle.

Cajee's book may not achieve distinction for its literary qualities, for in this respect it tends towards an unpretentious earthy style, but it achieves a distinction in affirming a moral imperative in our country: we have a generation - the young and the restless of the day - that needs to appreciate a history that is theirs.

REVIEW BY MAHMOOD SANGIAY