

Why I Wrote *The Story of Maha the*

Mad

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I didn't always want to be a writer, though I've been a reader ever since I can remember and clearly recall the excitement of being involved in purchasing my first book, at four and a half. I got my first star for creative writing when I was eight - we had been asked to bring in a picture cut out from a magazine or newspaper and I had forgotten. I was thus at the mercy of a boy who didn't really like me, snob that he was, but who had more than one picture. After hemming and hawing, he gave me what he thought to be his worst, a black and white newspaper cutting of the Maharani Hotel being built on Durban's Golden Mile. I remember gazing jealously at the bright shiny, colourful pictures in his hand, and simply sighed and got on with my task. The thing is, the traditional Sunday drive had been along the same Golden Mile and my father had slowed down as we passed the construction site,

pointed it out and chatted about it...I found that for once, my writing flowed easily and handed my work in with satisfaction that was sealed by my first star...an unforgettable lesson that it is easiest to write about that which one knows. However, the decision to be a writer came later, inspired by a fabulous Secondary School English teacher... All teenagers have their angst, but for Muslims growing up in an unjust country within a society hell-bent on its public image...the angst is of African proportion...and at this point I was grim with adolescent determination that I would create the voice of an Indo-African Muslim Female.

However life as we know it, often tends to get in the way of good dreams or perhaps it simply builds up to them? Although I scribbled intermittently, it was not until I dropped out of my chosen and loved profession rather recently that I actually sat down to seriously write the story I'd always wanted to. I'd like to say that I was inspired by something sacred or profound...but alas, I do not categorise myself as a serious voice... however, by this time, my motivation had altered somewhat, in fact it had

grown...I thoroughly enjoy modern chick-lit, and savour opportunities to indulge in a new one...but every time I read yet another amusing tale, I was gripped with the need to present Muslim Society in this fashion...for Muslims and everyone else to be able to read of imperfect (and thus realistic!) protagonists facing up to similar twenty-first century issues, albeit coloured by their faith. This determination snowballed post-September eleventh, when suddenly from mild thought; it grew to a matter of increasing urgency. Yes, more and more people are reverting to the faith, ironically enough...but at the same time, the existing body of Muslims seem to be spiralling further apart.

It is one problem that the world is exposed to Western media confusing people as to what Islam really is...and this is out of our control...what is within our power, though is to expose the world to Muslims who are clear and united on the essentials of faith. Now, more than ever before it seems necessary that people do not forget that Muslims are human beings, no different from the rest of the race... real people. People who laugh and eat and love and hurt and

dream and hope ... who think, who question and do most of what all other people in the world do ... and while their faith may be more important to them than to other people, it does nothing to hinder or hamper living amongst all sorts in the twenty-first century

If actions speak louder than words, then our words have to be louder and clear so as to be heard above the suicide bombs and hate speech. It may not be possible to undermine the propaganda...but we must take heart and try anyway...

After growing up on a diet of Enid Blyton and Judy Blume, and still feeding on a literary diet based predominantly in Europe or the America's, and in stories where other faiths or non-faiths do seem to colour the thoughts words and deeds of most protagonists...it seems imperative that one should be able to find literature, light serious and otherwise, with protagonists for whom being Muslim is an essence to his or her existence, but how this does not mean that she is an enemy of all things western, modern or twenty-first century. We need to be reminded that Islam is not *Westernist* or *Progressophobic*, how can it be, if its

message is for all Humankind, a creation built to evolve and progress naturally? Muslims are not taught to be hateful...we are meant to cultivate within ourselves good character and respect for The Creator and all creation. We should be spreading the message of peace and love...and the fact that this is attributed to Hippy Culture is a shame upon the *Slumou* for sure!

It would be deceitful of me to ignore the fact that I also very firmly believe that the hilarity of *Chaarspeak* and South Africanisms should be out there for the entire world to enjoy, and have thus used my writing as a means to this end!

The Story of Maha the Mad is simply any odd person's story of growing up in any part of *Slumurban* South Africa. I knew that the story would start at her birth and end, for now anyway, at her wedding. Well, it is an Indo-African tale after all; making getting married the natural conclusion. I suppose technically speaking the genre would be classified as a *Bildungsroman*, a coming of age tale...though whether Maha really comes of age, I am not altogether certain. She certainly grows, and in her own

mind, seems to accept her circumstances and simply move on...

The story follows her life through childhood and adolescence, that period where everything becomes entangled in a mish mash of faith, ancestral culture and South African culture (unique, apartheid model)

Somehow the western powers seem to think that they invented spin...when we all know that it was invented aeons ago by the *Chaar Ma* who is able to play up or play down anything with a look of conviction that conveys the message 'I choose to believe this, therefore so shall everyone else...' That marvellous ability to bury the head in the sand while holding it up high in all its *orni-clad*, bejewelled glory. The misery of wondering at what or who one is? *Chaarou/Slumou* in Africa? What did that mean? Second class citizen and 'White is Right'? Living in a society surrounded by upholders of great *Chaar* tradition including all those that make no sense whatsoever...for a teenager, it can feel like there are signs everywhere. No posters and leaflets with warnings or instructions...but verbal and non-verbal innuendoes. The messages, apart

from being unclear confusingly include the 'White is Right' philosophy thereby aggravating our turmoil. No boyfriends, no boys as friends...you are all evil sluts...the messages seep through... but without any back up in the form of helping one find the balance on the tightrope of life...keeping the faith while keeping it real. Why don't the great voices of wisdom, in between barking at us to pray or else we'll burn and The One will be furious at us...and yelling at us to cover our hair and bodies and have some shame...and avoiding all things western as such is the source of all evil...that The Creator created humankind weak. That The Creator does neither expect, nor demand perfection from us...merely that we simply try our best...and like the song goes...'if at first you don't succeed...pick yourself up and try again'

We can try and aim ... hope and pray, for as perfect as possible on earth...that is all...whatever comes, we simply have to accept and move on, dealing with each day as it comes with hope and prayer.

Slumurbans appear to have an old tradition of goodness knows what...what is it that motivates the *Slumou* to cling

onto aspects of culture that suit him and his desires,
discard those that don't...and do the same with his faith?
Whatever happened to good old common sense? If one is a
believer, then when did self-awareness and self-
improvement cease to be an essential part of the
faith...along with moderation and God-consciousness?
Whenever it is that humankind forgets the importance of
education ... people regress to Neanderthal like behaviour
as a result.

Don't educate your women...second class, subservient sluts
that they are...and they will breed namby-pamby spoilt
brat Ma's boys who end up greedy, selfish and abusive,
with Ma's choice tucked away at home tending to six kids
while he drinks, gambles and frolics merrily with other
women. And then he comes home and tells his daughter to
pray and cover her hair, shouts racist abuse at the
gardener for scratching his precious German car...and is
the trustee of his local mosque.

The time for burying the head in the sand has come to an
end...it has simply got to go along with all other malignant
cultural practices. Admiring the unusual beauty of a blue-

eyed *Chaarou* is perfectly in order, but expressing shame at the fact that her daughter hadn't inherited them is not...along with dark-skinned relatives being insulted and even disowned. In fact disowning has got to go as has the Self-Imposed Haraam Status of cross-cultural socialisation. Yes, the faith acknowledges the fact, as do all intelligent people, that it is easier to marry within ones culture, the more 'knowns' in a relationship, the smoother the general sailing. But this does not make it a matter of dishonour and sin...indeed, the Prophet (SAW) himself had wives who were not all Makkan born Arabs from the exact same tribe. The Muslims of South Africa need to see themselves as that, a group of people from a variety of cultural backgrounds united by their land and faith...far more tangible and immediate influences.

The fact that Islam means peace and the most important part of it is the Unity of the Creator needs to be shouted from the rooftops...promoting harmony and the unity of the creation, hopefully...The *Chaarous* need to shake off the boundaries of the Indo -Pak subcontinent...and remember it as a whole sub-continent from whence our

ancestors hailed bravely, along with others from other parts of the world ... sans Lonely Planet guide and phrasebook of South African Languages.

We can take pride in these early pioneers, and embrace the beauty and joy of the culture they brought in our food, clothes and celebrations.

Books are written in many ways, on scraps of paper, or Hemingway-esque Moleskin notebooks...but *The Story of Maha the Mad* was written in a strange manner ... From the time I'd decided I was going to write about growing up in Slumurbia, South Africa...I don't think I ever stopped thinking about the story... and so when I sat to write I simply started at the very beginning, which I knew to be 'a very good place to start'...

I gave myself a manageable three day working week, writing all morning from Monday to Wednesday, and attempting to read over, edit and ponder the tale the rest of the time. When I finished *The Story of Maha the Mad*, I read through it once, cast it aside and continued her tale in *The Story of Maha the Married*. It was while I was busy with this, that I was told of the Ronnie Govender Literary

Award, and entered the competition with great hope and fear...forcing myself to swallow a daily dose of reality that the book had not been thoroughly edited and beating myself up over errors I had probably made. Not an easy time ... though I kept myself busy and sane with Maha the Married. It was thus with incredulity and joy that I got news of my runner-up status...that it coincided with a trip to my beloved land in the month of my birth, made it all the more special...

For my writing to receive recognition, albeit amongst a handful of Durban's Literati is something that means much more than the cash prize I won ... for it is this that has given me the ability to accept that I am not frittering away precious time by indulging in my selfish scribbles. This acceptance has strengthened me, making it possible to continue writing ... and also, giving me hope that the dream of being published could some day, come true.