

Kharnita Mohamed, Called to Song.

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Called to Song documents the journey of a woman towards full self-actualisation, after having lived an outwardly perfect life for decades. It examines the intergenerational impacts of gender-based violence on families, and of quasi-religious patriarchy and internalised racism on communities. The novel is located in a South Africa that, far from being the happy-clappy rainbow nation that the political evangelists would have us swallow, continues to be traumatised by its apartheid past and the enduring inequalities which our history has bequeathed us.

For a Black female who grew up in a working-class neighbourhood in Mitchell's Plain, Qabila's career successes and middle-class lifestyle appear to be enviable indeed. However, her mother's death catalyses a growing determination to escape an arid marriage that has subsumed her without fulfilling her hopeful fantasies, and to redirect the trajectory of a life that has tanked her girlhood aspirations. She can no longer endure an existence founded on deceit and maintained through a carefully-woven web of lies.

Author Kharnita Mohamed provides a strong foil for the protagonist in the character of Qabila's sister, Zainab. A homemaker whose life lacks the conspicuous consumption and material wealth of Qabila's, Zainab nonetheless enjoys an abundance of love in her marriage and family, and a steadfast groundedness in her faith. Contrary to popular stereotypes that portray traditional Muslim women as passive victims of a suffocating patriarchy, Zainab wields a considerable degree of power in her chosen spheres of life. Increasingly, Qabila becomes aware of the power she has ceded in both the personal and professional realms.

In her quest to claim back her power, Qabila is forced to confront the various forms of abuse she has absorbed and endured. This highlights palimpsests of erasure and reinvention, from childhood memories of physical violence to the emotional trauma of unrequited love and manipulation by a partner who uses her to mask his own secrets.

Qabila's professional persona – the erudite Black female professor who has transcended apartheid-era sexism and racism – conceals the lived challenges of Black academics in contemporary South Africa. Far from being a collegial arena for cutting-edge thought leadership, the academy can be a toxic space for females and people of colour, where white privilege and the old boys' network continue to flourish, and petty rivalries predominate.

Perhaps the most wrenching aspect of this novel is Qabila's excavation of her complicity in her own victimisation. She begins to learn "how to look in the mirror and be more than history had decreed for her. How to love herself when everything she knew, everything she'd been taught and shown, told her she was not deserving."

Mohamed's writing is rooted in the "Coloured" community of the Cape flats, and especially the Cape Malay subset of that community. Her use of colloquialisms and *Afrikaaps*, the *lingua franca* of the flats, adds authenticity to the narrative but does not detract from its flow. (There is a useful glossary in the appendix).

The novel's wry depictions of social mores, of the evolution of cultural and religious standpoints within a community, is lovingly executed. The author's intimate knowledge of this place and its people is tempered by the objective gaze of the analyst. Finely-drawn characters exhibit the universal human tendency to cling to beliefs and opinions that have no basis in rationality. Mohamed ambushes us with humour and glimpses of pathos that endear her characters to us and keep us turning the pages.

While Mohamed's assured writing style, unusual in a debut novel, undoubtedly owes much to her own experience as an academic, she deftly avoids the trap many academics fall prey to when attempting to transition from non-fiction to novel writing: that of being pedantic and over-emphasising their specific hobbyhorses.

Called to Song explores the framing of gender identity and sexuality, of how definitions of masculinities and femininities are both under- and overlaid with religious and socio-cultural cadences and the weight of tradition and expectation. Is it possible to move beyond infidelity and betrayal? Do cultures that permit polygamy open new paths for abuse or protect against it? What role does the dominant narrative play into the erasure of non cis/het identities? These are but a sample of the many questions the novel explores.

Through a cast of secondary characters, Mohamed introduces themes such as internalised racism, and global and local Islamophobia and

homophobia. Specifically, homophobia within the Muslim community is highlighted. Though some of these threads are not developed fully, Mohamed has laid a foundation for further work on them.

Central to the novel is an unflinching depiction of the deep-rooted pervasiveness of women abuse in South Africa, and its recurrence across generations. However, this bleak reality is leavened by a spark of hope that current and future generations, emboldened to speak out and resist abuse, can break the cycle, and redirect the anger underlying toxic masculinities into more constructive channels.

Not least, *Called to Song* tracks Qabila's rediscovery of her creative power and her spirituality, and highlights the transformative nature of this path. When she finally responds to the insistent promptings of her subconscious to create lyrics, to contribute to a legacy of exquisite music, her catharsis and self-redemption come full circle. Qabila's creative fulfilment mirrors the metaphor in her mother's patchwork quilts. The quilts embody her mother's need to create beauty and preserve memory even as she struggled to overcome abuse; they are a family legacy whose message reverberates across time.

Qabila's niece, Saliegha, a budding engineer who dreams of constructing bridges, shares her grandmother's advice to find something wonderful to create from within oneself: "So you know the world doesn't only do things to you. You have the power to do things to the world too."