

Book Review: *The Emperor* by Lenasia author, Ahmed Essop

(Dr Haroon Wadee – Facebook, 15 March 2025)



Recently at a gathering I mentioned Ahmed Essop - the late great Lenasian writer - and one of those seated at the table said that his novel, THE EMPEROR, is actually based on a former teacher/principal from a Lenasian school - can't quite remember the name off hand but will make sure to follow up at some point. Anyway...I picked up my copy at a second-hand bookstore a while ago having remembered seeing the novel on my late dad's pedestal when I was a kid growing up in Lenasia aka Lenz. My dad always had a pile of books on his bedside table and this one was a firm favourite in the mid-80s (published in 1984 and set in 1971 Lenasia). It took me less than day to read as I couldn't put it down, having read non-stop hooked until 2am salivating for more. The novel tells the story of a career-teacher with aspirations of moving up within the Apartheid Department of Education...he finally becomes a Principal and the novel explores bullying, authoritarianism, narcissism, egotism, back-stabbing, manipulation, power-plays, collaboration with oppressive regimes, corporal punishment, human folly, insecurity and also our fragility. He is portrayed as a tragic character almost like Macbeth without the influence of a Lady Macbeth. He is the total power-hungry brute stuck in his ways, manipulates and controls those around him, but like all tyrants he too has his weaknesses and is not immune to the dire consequences of selfish self-centred self-serving megalomania...We actually feel sorry for him...He is pitiful and sad and lonely and when (he) has no purpose is discarded and has no respect, no love, no admiration, no redeeming qualities. On the one hand Ahmed Essop provides us with insights into the psyche of power-hungry megalomaniacs whilst on the other he also explores the role of the apartheid machinery on controlling the population, dividing them, using them, manipulating them using bullying, fearmongering and control with sheer strength to achieve its ends. In many ways it was subtle indictment of a cruel barbaric system and the way

in which it too will fall and implode. He explores the cultural power plays, the lack of understanding of Indian culture, the role of white supremacy, the fickle aspirations of the aspirant Indian nouveau riche, those sucking up to the white man, reminding us that there were pockets of resistance within the community standing up for social justice and equity...People principled with a strong moral backbone unafraid to speak up for what they believe in...the strongest character is in fact a woman - an English teacher (the maths and science teachers are spineless sell-outs) - Zenobia ...She wins the hearts and minds of all including - importantly - the reader. She is a bastion of beauty, knowledge, creativity, independence, free-thinking and leadership. I honestly feel that many should try to get hold of this book. Apparently, the late Ahmed Essop's sister (I think) if I recall sells copies from the family home in Lenasia - I picked up a few titles back in 2019 and will find the address and share details once I do. The novel is so relevant today as we see the radical shift to the right with notions of supremacy abounding as we sit on the precipice of unfettered authoritarian rule of fist. Ahmed Essop was a visionary, and his legacy is so powerful - more powerful than he could have imagined, and he had one fantabulous imagination. If there's one book to read - it's THE EMPEROR. It is sad, funny, witty, insightful, tragic, relevant and visionary. Thank you, Ahmed Essop, for this gem of a novel and thank you Dad for imparting and imprinting the memory of this book in my mind - forever - my father...my EMPEROR.