

# Gentle love story in hard times restores our faith in people

## Love in the Time of Treason

by Zubeida Jaffer

(Kwela) R145

review: Hillary Hamburger

This beautiful love story tells us about love in its fullest and most liberating sense.

In her powerful and moving memoir, *Our Generation*, writer Zubeida Jaffer told her own personal and intimate story woven into the turbulent political struggle against apartheid. In *Love in the Time of Treason* she goes back in time to tell the story of Ayesha Dawood.

Again the personal and the political are interwoven to form a rich tapestry of a time and place – or rather places, as the lives of the protagonists move between South Africa and India.

Struggle stories abound and our understanding of our past has been enriched by the many fine biographies that have appeared in recent times. But this story stands apart. Its fresh narration invites one into the harshness that invaded the lives of ordinary people, especially those who were the immediate victims of apartheid repression.

Some, such as Ayesha Dawood and her Yusuf, who, unbeknown to her, loved her from afar, were able to transcend their lot against all odds. Love didn't conquer apartheid but it did find a remarkable way through it.

The gentle telling of the life of Ayesha is storytelling at its best. She grew up in Worcester in a large, loving Muslim family. They were classified Cape Malay, although her father Achmat Tambe was Indian. He had come to South Africa at the beginning of the 20th century from Gondghar, a poor village on the western coast of India, to escape riots and famine. He married a local woman of Indonesian, Javanese and Cape stock, the daughter of the local imam.

Achmat ran a small grocery shop which, with three tables and a cook, made Tambe's Restaurant a minor landmark in the town. White policemen would call there to get their cigarettes for free – an insignificant detail except that it highlights the shadow cast on Ayesha's life in the 1950s when she

became politically active.

Her father was illiterate and he depended on her to read newspapers to him so that he could keep abreast of political events. She left school at 15 to help her father in the shop.

There was a strong bond between them and he encouraged her to volunteer her services to the Food and Canning Workers' Union, where she met and was taken under the wing of Ray Alexander.

Although he encouraged her independence, Muslim girls were not allowed to go out on their own. When she was invited as a delegate to international conferences in Denmark, Hungary and Romania, her father balked at it. Finally he agreed to her going, only on condition that she would stop off in Gondghar on her way home to see his ailing mother.

It was there that she encountered the handsome and self-

'She understood  
... to be truly  
free is to embrace  
the certainty  
of uncertainty'

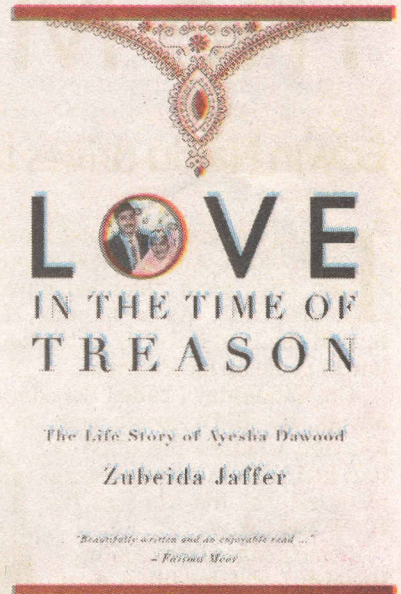
assured Yusuf Mukadom, who like her was from a large, loving family from a tiny village near Gondghar. His father worked on an oil rig in Dar es Salaam and returned home every year to see his family. Life was hard but the family was bound together by love and respect.

Jaffer evocatively conjures up the simple routine of village life, where a stream of clear water flowing from the hills into the rice paddies also supplies the village with water. There is no road and steep paths lead to the surrounding villages.

On his day off, Yusuf visits his cousins in Gondghar, which is where Yusuf and Ayesha meet. He is immediately drawn to her, but destiny is against him – she leaves for South Africa and years of political activism follow.

But Yusuf is an impossible dreamer and his determination, tenacity and imaginative strength enable him to reach for the moon.

When, years later in 1960, he



finally gets to Worcester and to everyone's initial astonishment, asks for Ayesha's hand in marriage, the family and she agree.

Her longing for love had remained unmet and she was struggling with depression after the ANC was banned in 1960. So she is prepared to take a leap into the dark.

"She was ready to be married and for once she didn't cling to the safety of the cause that had defined her life... She understood for the first time that life is a set of uncertainties and to be truly free is to embrace the certainty of uncertainty."

And so begins the journey of the dutiful daughter and committed activist to the discovery of intimate love.

Do people like this really exist? Obviously they do, but you have to read *Love in the Time of Treason* to find out how chance and choice mingled to make a magical story, albeit one strongly rooted in reality. Ultimately, it is a paean to ordinary people whose culture, suffused with a gentle faith and the goodness of Allah, enabled them to transcend the inescapable loss and pain of life.

Their survival in the face of tough political activism against racist oppression was embroidered by the rich and varied colours of love.

The story and the limpid manner of its telling renew one's own faith in the goodness of people and the virtue of virtue.

Sunday Independent 1 Feb 09