
Etopia – A week in the life of a worker in the year 2020

by Ari Sitas (MADIBA Publications)

*Reviewed by Langa Zita **



Etopia is an historical novella about the life of Mathew Zondi, a shopsteward at Metalplate in Inanda Ward in Durban. It is exactly 27 years since Mandela's ANC won the first non-racial election, and 1993 is of historical value only. People's power is hegemonic.

Mathew Zondi is married and in his late thirties. He stays with his wife, Dudu; their niece, Jabu, and her kid, and Zondi's father, William, who was a trade unionist during the heroic days of the first decade of COSATU.

Mathew and Dudu are the main bread winners. Jabu looks after the house and is studying for a psychology degree with Unisa, whilst the old man goes about the house, reminding everyone of the heroic past.

Life abounds with a sense of collectivity and communal participation. There is the neighbourhood Hi Ace kombi, which is owned by the civic and is used for transporting people to work.

Gender relations

Gender relations in the home have been transformed and house chores are on a rotational basis. Even outside the Zondi home, present stereotypes are withering. Jabu is in love with a soft-hearted white man, Roland, a situation the old trade unionist finds difficult to imagine. He calls Roland an amphibian.

Mrs Magogo Faya, together with her all-women soccer team, KwaMashu Maniacs, reflects the changing role of women in society.

Yet, the old in all its ugliness still exists, for example, Dudu's corrupt and drug-trafficking employer, Kuzwayo, sexually harasses her.

Metalplate

Metalplate, originally owned by Barlow Rand, almost closed down after advances in food preservation technology made canning redundant. "Their (workers) jobs were saved by a compromise: the new facilities were started with the state and Barlows taking up 50% each of the shares. They also agreed that 10% of each of their shares would be taken up by the workers through a share ownership scheme over the next four years." This joint ownership gave scope for genuine democratic control by the workers in the factory to an extent that even managers were elected.

Alienation

Work practices are more sensitive to human beings, but there is still a long way to go. Mathew's alienation captures the situation. "He realised how alone he was in front of his machine. How despite the many victories he boasted, unless something fantastical happened his life would still be whipped by the devil's tail. He remembered as he relined and restarted his lathe the 'Useful Lives' book that his father swore by ... the chapter on, 'Alienation, Work and the Shit life goes

* *Langa Zita is NUMSA Information and Media Officer*

on', ... a piece that impressed him."

However, even with a relatively fulfilling life, dreams are still part of the human condition, and wild dreams at that.

"Mathew wanted to be a metallurgist, he wanted to be an inventor, he wanted to be a poet, he wanted to be the greatest lover in the universe, he wanted all women to love him, he wanted Dudu and Jabu, and he wanted the new girl from the camps and Martha Shelembe, he wanted Mrs Raijgapul (the neighbour's wife) and he wanted the librarian at the municipality who was so nice to him, he wanted, yes why not admit it, even the 'Tightbitch' (Mrs Karlson, the white manager)." However, the question remains, can dreams compensate for life?

A communist contemplates his death

Though *Etopia* is qualitatively different from apartheid South Africa, the continuity between the two, if not eternal continuity, makes its stark impact.

The old COSATU veteran tells his son, "I wish I was religious, but I am not. I wish I was somebody else with a different life, but I am not. If I was religious and ready to go riding on the back of angels into the Universe I would have felt better, but I can't ... Damn this life, I am trying to understand that it will be shorter than I thought." Communists are mortal after all.

Some remarks

Sitas's novel is important in many ways, including what is pronounced by his silence.

Leaders are given no clear role. Perhaps this is important in as far as it underscores the fact that socialism can only be realised as a process driven by the self-activity of the working class. But to present a leaderless

process in the very first steps of the transition weakens the educative function of the novella.

For Sitas, socialism emerges (as did capitalism from feudalism) from the interstices of the present, with an effective role played by the state, both in regulating the withering away of the erstwhile ruling class and through actual participation in the process of production. Though this is interesting, one fails to identify the critical factor in this process.

Where is the consciousness that informs this process located, and what kind of consciousness is it? What is the objective of the transformation process? The picture given in *Etopia* is of a pragmatic socialism, a socialism determined purely by the exigencies of the production process (as in the case of *Metalplate*), as against one that is informed by class conscious proletarians in pursuit of freedom.

This pragmatism/freedom dialectic infects the whole spectrum of the characters in *Etopia*, whose sum effect is a generalised impotence, in particular, of women. Necessity keeps the women captives, both in their lives and in their minds. Sitas's women cannot experiment, they are timid. Dreaming of making love to the whole world is the preserve of a man, Mathew.

Sitas has broken new ground, not only in writing the future as history, but also in presenting history as aesthetics. More important is his employment of the working class as the triumphant subject matter. This novella is not only educative, as its cover suggests, it is also a weapon of struggle. The first struggle I would suggest is that it should be translated into all the indigenous languages and be made available to the SABC to force the airwaves to open to the proletariat. ☆

