

The good, the bad, the ugly, the tragic

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Ali Abdul v The King: Muslim Stories from the Dark Days of White Australia

By Hanifa Deen

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BY any measure, Australian multiculturalism has been remarkably successful. Waves of migrants after World War II transformed the Anglo monotone of 1950s Australia profoundly yet peacefully. And the social and cultural outcomes have been enriching, despite the bleatings of some media shock-jocks and their political handmaidens in Canberra.

Tony Abbott recently confessed that he's changed his mind about multiculturalism — which I presume means he's now for it — but after a decade of opportunism around the issue, what are the chances of achieving a meaningful bipartisanship? A more disturbing question is: given Australia's much-vaunted ethos of mateship and fair go, why have race and immigration been such rabid points of contention here for so long?

In *Ali Abdul v The King*, Hanifa Deen goes to the National Archives of Australia to find a partial answer by focusing on Australian antipathy towards Muslim immigration in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Deen is the granddaughter of Muslim migrants, so the stories she uncovers — about Afghan cameleers, Indian hawkers and Indonesian pearl divers — have a personal significance, too. And she is always listening for echoes of our present attitudes to 21st century illegal immigrants: the so-called queue jumpers and asylum-seekers who are predominantly Muslim.

“The Afghan problem” of a century ago

was a direct result of the need to open up the interior of Australia. In the days before rail and road transport, camels were the only real alternative for carrying heavy supplies through the desert. And with each consignment of the animals came “60 or more cameleers”, mostly from other parts of the British Empire; Afghanistan or what is now Pakistan. Between 1860 and 1920 up to 4000 cameleers are estimated to have landed in Australia.

Some white Australians exercised a violent hatred for these wrongly labelled “dusky Hindoos”. In some cases, the cause of their animosity was commercial: the cameleers were competing very successfully against white-owned haulage businesses that used bullocks and horses. In other cases, a deep-seated racism regularly drove white Australians to distrust, fear and attack the very men who were helping develop the continent. After the Aborigines and the Chinese, the “Ghans” were particularly reviled as racially inferior to whites. The cameleers may not have been the first or only target of racist violence, but the solution was usually the same. As one

man said in 1897 in a letter to a newspaper: “Get rid of the bastards. . . . Next to the dirty Chinks the Afghans take the cake and their morals are exceedingly questionable”.

The epitome of this brutal, atavistic hatred was the notorious Immigration Restriction Act, better known as the White Australia Policy, one of the first pieces of

legislation passed by the newly minted nation in 1901. Deen rightly pours scorn on the hidebound bigots who saw no contradiction in celebrating Australia as the classless land of “cobbers, diggers, mates” while at the same time considering anyone not quite white enough as sub-human.

Deen focuses on real events. For example, the 1894 “Incident at Afghan Rock” in Western Australia when a white man was acquitted of murdering two Afghan camelers over a dispute at a waterhole. Or the story of how Ali Abdul, a shopkeeper in the inner-Sydney suburb of Redfern, was harassed by police in 1931 and wrongly charged with being an illegal immigrant.

One of Deen’s most interesting stories concerns Samsudin bin Katib, a Sumatran-born pearl diver who had worked as indentured “cheap Asian” labour in Broome before being recruited into the

Australian Army in World War II. He served for almost four years, volunteering with other Indonesians, Malays and Timorese to be part of a top-secret force called Z Special Unit, and fighting as guerillas behind Japanese lines. Despite his service for king and country, after the war Samsudin’s applications for naturalisation were denied, he was forced back to Broome to work again as an indentured labourer, and he was finally deported by the Labor government for repeatedly trying to unionise the local workforce. He died in Singapore two years later, aged 32. To her credit, Deen balances such stories of institutionalised racism and cruelty with examples of ordinary (white) Australians deviating from the twisted “normality” around them and treating Muslims with humanity and generosity of spirit. The White Australia Policy was eventually dismantled. But it took 70 years



A Muslim cameleer circa 1910

and there are many in the Islamic community who argue our old racist attitudes still prevail. Race remains as central and controversial an issue in modern Australia as it did a century ago. And with 380,000 Muslims living here now, Islam is probably even more significant than it ever was.

This is a slight book, but it testifies to a need to understand how all our stories, no matter how uplifting, ugly or tragic, contribute to multicultural Australia.

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Hanifa Deen will be a guest of the Melbourne Writers Festival (August 26-September 4) and Brisbane Writers Festival (September 7-11).