



Letters to my Mother.

The Making of a Troublemaker

Kumi Naidoo

Publisher: Jacana Media: Johannesburg, 2022. R300

Review by Debby Bonnin

Kumi Naidoo, an internationally recognised human rights and climate justice activist, was born in the Indian township of Chatsworth, Durban. His memoir primarily focuses on his early years of activism. While explaining how he came to be “a troublemaker”, he also provides an in-depth account of the rise of democratic anti-apartheid youth organisations in the working class Chatsworth township and the part played by these youth organisations in the broader political struggles of Durban in the 1980s.

Although Naidoo’s academic publications (for example Naidoo, 1991) touch upon certain aspects of this narrative, this memoir provides greater depth and detail. It offers insights into his personal experiences and positionality within these historical events. In many ways it is a coming-of-age story, capturing the essence of growing up during the final stages of apartheid, when youth and their organisations stood at the forefront of the struggle.

Foregrounding the story is the tragic death by suicide of Naidoo’s mother, the first thing one learns when beginning the book. The introduction reveals other personal tragedies, not only the death of his mother when he was 15 years old, but that of his baby brother, the loss almost 40 years later of his older sister, and, during the process of finishing the

book, the devastating death by suicide of his son. It was specifically the death of his sister that caused him to pause, reflect and in processing his grief begin the “letters” addressed to his mother.

Naidoo begins his narrative by telling the reader about his family, his home and the township of Chatsworth. These memories are deeply personal and provide a clear picture of the people, the place and the environment. The images he paints are rich and evocative; those who know these streets will recognise the scenes in their minds eye. As Naidoo journeys from childhood to adolescence, the stark reality of a divided and oppressive apartheid South Africa becomes increasingly apparent in his experiences and observations.

The first chapters of the book discuss how Naidoo became politically involved and the development of youth organisations in Chatsworth. His mother’s death and the ceremonies that followed coincided with the onset of the 1980 school boycotts in Durban. These boycotts had begun during April 1980 in the “coloured” schools of the western Cape and rapidly gained momentum, spreading to other parts of the country, including Durban.

At his mother’s 16-Day Ceremony, Naidoo was waylaid by his cousin’s fiancé, a student at the University of Durban-Westville, who asked him to gather his friends. Krishna Reddy told the gathered group about the

spreading school boycotts, revealing that schools in other Indian townships were planning to join the boycott the following day. The next day Naidoo and his brother Kovin “fired up by our conversation with Krishna [arrived at school] ready to highlight the injustices of apartheid education to our peers” (p.55). It was these boycotts, and his role in coordinating the protests among schools in Chatsworth and educational institutions beyond the township, that thrust Naidoo into political activism.

The early 1980s were politically formative. Naidoo recounts how he and his friends established the Helping Hands Social Club, aiming to organise and empower the youth in their neighbourhood. This initiative had a broader vision of “encouraging young people to think critically and [...] building a well-oiled political machine” (p.62). Helping Hands became an important vehicle not only for Naidoo’s political activism, but also for connecting the youth in Chatsworth with their peers in other parts of Durban.

This period witnessed a surge in anti-apartheid campaigns, including the Anti-Republic Day Campaign in 1981, the anti-SAIC (South African Indian Council) campaign also in 1981, the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in 1983, the UDF’s One Million Signature Campaign in 1984, and the boycott of the Tri-Cameral elections in the same year.

These events played a pivotal role in shaping Naidoo's political engagement. He provides a detailed account of his involvement, describing how his political participation, as well as that of his brother and comrades, developed. Older activists in Chatsworth who were part of the Natal Indian Congress sought him out and drew him into other political networks. This opened doors for further political growth and learning, ranging from practical skills such as screen-printing posters and t-shirts to deeper political education.

From the mid-80s Naidoo's political involvement expanded beyond Chatsworth to Durban and then nationally. In the book he reflects on several pivotal moments such as his involvement in the Natal Youth Forum, the UN International Youth Year, the launch of the South African Youth Congress (SAYCO), the mobilisation in response to the murder of activist and lawyer Victoria Mxenge, protest marches through the city of Durban, and being part of organising the 1986 National Education Crisis Committee Conference in Durban. These were turbulent years characterised by the need to elude the security police and the violence perpetrated against activists by Inkatha.

As a result of his activism, Kumi Naidoo became a target of security police surveillance. The final chapters of the book provide a detailed account of this tumultuous time, which included being detained, going into hiding and the immense pressure of trying to complete his university exams while in hiding. Eventually, in 1987, at the age of 22 he left South Africa to pursue a Rhodes scholarship at Oxford University.

In recounting his experiences of this period of struggle Naidoo puts on record the story from below, the way in which activists collectively participated in and shaped these historical events. A notable example is the National

Education Crisis Committee Conference, where young people, unexpectedly, in a situation of complete chaos, had to find ways to fend off an attack by two busloads of Inkatha supporters and ensure the conference continued (Chap. 28).

Naidoo's narrative sheds light on the development of his political consciousness and the emergence of networks among various organisations and activists throughout the city, across areas and communities divided by apartheid. While this is ultimately Kumi Naidoo's personal story, it also serves as a valuable record of the experiences and activities of others who were politically active during this time. By sharing his own journey, Naidoo effectively documents the collective story of many involved in the struggle.

The book engages with a number of important themes which emerge through the narrative of political struggle. Firstly are relationships; relationships with comrades, friends and family as well as romantic relationships and how these were marked by political involvement. In times of struggle deep connections and true comradeships are forged, but often family and personal friendships are put aside. Both are evident in this very honest account and Naidoo expresses regret that in prioritising the struggle he did not give sufficient attention to family and more intimate relationships.

A second important theme is the divisions produced by apartheid and the important role youth organisations played in breaking down these racial barriers. Naidoo reflects on the exhilaration he felt attending meetings alongside individuals from different racial backgrounds and forging friendships with activists from other areas. These experiences serve as a poignant reminder of the restrictive constraints imposed by apartheid society.

A third theme explores organisation-building and leadership. Naidoo frequently emphasises the need for building organisations from the grassroots upwards, as demonstrated in his discussion of Helping Hands and the establishment of the Bayview Residents Association. He also emphasises the importance of meeting people where they are ideologically and fostering a culture that embraces a diversity of ideas.

He reflects on the political divisions that existed within anti-apartheid organisations, for example between black consciousness and congress-aligned organisations, and the cabal that ultimately squashed youth formations organised through the Natal Youth Forum. Moreover, he engages in self-reflection, acknowledging the challenges he encountered in his own leadership role, the criticisms posed by his comrades and the lessons he had to learn.

Finally, this memoir is a testament to resilience and unwavering determination. Forced out of high school, Naidoo completed his matric through night classes and independent study. While in hiding from the security police, he finished his university degree and sat his final exams. In the face of personal tragedy he took to heart the advice of his Uncle John and found a way to "live with purpose, and work for the dignity of all people" (p.1).

While this memoir is very much Naidoo's personal narrative, it also serves as a tribute to the youth of that time who organised and fought for freedom.

REFERENCE

Naidoo, K. 1991. The politics of youth resistance in the 1980s: the dilemmas of a differentiated Durban, *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 18(1) 143-165. 