

Below is an extract from a book about Uganda's Exodus in 1972, called "Ninety Days" written by Rashmi Paun.

Discretion is advised for those that might have possibly been victims of such heinous ordeals.

It is sad and it is certainly unethical that the very people and their families who helped build Uganda were dishonourably tormented, persecuted in such besieged way to be felt to their very anguished souls that were stricken up to a pulp in such an inhuman way, by compellingly degrading them as trash.

This such heinous experience, that many of us not exposed to would have ever envisioned, these were literally daylight nightmares in the making whilst your eyes were fully wide open and awake for the anguish Mothers, Fathers, Grand Parents, Aunts, Uncles, Sisters, Brothers, Children, , their heart thumping away, disoriented for they had done no wrong but were victims of callous greed, evil through one person's vision or call it schizophrenic attack.

It was Day 89: 1st November 1972

Devji: Escape from Uganda

A hornbill flies across my vision. Its yellow beak and bright plumage glow in the red rays of the setting sun. But it is too late to point it out to Savita and Lalita because just then, as I navigate round the bend, another roadblock suddenly looms up.

I slow down and Savita reaches under the seat. She takes out a large packet of bank notes wrapped in a paper bag. She looks at me and I nod my approval. The small packets have been adequate for the makeshift roadblocks set up by the low ranking army personnel. But this looks more official because the soldiers have erected several tents in a clearing in die Mbira forest by the side of the road. This is the third time in one hour that we are being stopped and once again I fervently hope that there will be no problems. I notice Savita murmuring with joined hands, Please God, help us get through this safely. I look in the rear-view mirror and notice that Lalita has slipped low on the seat, her forehead glowing in the red sunlight. Her eyes are shut tight and I am sure she is also praying.

I slow the car right down. There are two soldiers in the middle of the road with AK47s at their hips pointing at us. One of them motions us to stop in a space near the tent. He is a young man, slim and tall, and very likely still in his teens. I get out of the car. The second soldier, who is short and I mil I like a tank, approaches me with his gun pointing at my head. "I have a gift for your commanding officer," I say and hold out the packet.

He grabs it and tells me, "*Goja hapa* (Wait here)." He has a surprisingly high-pitched voice. Almost a whine. He orders me to stand with my arms on the roof of the car. I move to the passenger side so I can see him as I spread my arms on the dusty roof.

He goes to a green camouflage army tent pitched right back in the cleared foliage amongst the trees. I can see Savita looking at me anxiously and I smile reassuringly at her. I realise it is a wan smile for she still looks worried. Lalita has slunk as low as she can in the back seat.

I keep my hands on the car. The sun is warm on the back of my neck. There is the usual background of insect humming, punctuated by an occasional sharp birdcall. The soldier walks back

with his commanding officer, a man of medium height with three parallel slashes of the Kakwa tribe on each cheek. He is in his khaki uniform but is not wearing a jacket. His hat, similar to the one Amin wears in all his pictures, sits askew on his head, giving him a jaunty look. The soldier shuffles a respectable step behind his superior.

“Where’re you going to?” the officer says in English in his deep voice.

“To the airport.” Of course he knows where we are going. The only journeys Asians undertake now are either to Kampala to get Visas from foreign Embassies, or to the airport to flee the country. But at sunset, the Embassies are closed; so the airport is the only place we could be going to.

“Your papers.”

I bend to reach the papers on the dashboard with one hand, keeping my second arm still stretched out on the top of the car.

“Everyone, out of the car,” he says without looking up as he flicks through the papers.

Savita and Lalita step out of the car and stand near me.

“So, you’re Devji Mitani. She your wife?” he says pointing at Savita. I nod.

“And that your daughter?” he asks taking a long hard look at Lalita, who steadfastly stares at the ground.

“No, sir, she is my sister.”

“Stay where you are,” he orders, walking back to his tent.

Long minutes pass. The two soldiers come back from the tent. Without a word, they grab Lalita’s arms and start frogmarching her towards the tent. She struggles to free herself and I lunge forward and try to pull her away from them. The nearest soldier lets go of her and swings his rifle at me. The butt strikes the side of my head and knocks me to the ground. I feel faint but I manage to grab the soldier’s leg. He yanks his leg free of my grip and kicks me hard on my shoulder. The pain makes me groan but I grab his other leg. “Stop. I can give you more money,” I barely recognise my own voice, which seems to come from far. The soldier lets go of Lalita and lifts his rifle ready to swing at me.

“*Wacha duguyangu. Mimi na kuja pamoja wewe.*” (“Leave my brother alone. I am coming with you.”) Lalita’s voice is firm. She has mainly used Swahili to communicate with servants and is used to speaking in an imperious tone.

The soldier turns from me and takes Lalita by the arm again and the two soldiers continue to walk her to the tent.

As I lie on the ground, I listen to their footsteps crunching on the gravel. The sound fades towards the tent and then there is just the drone of the crickets. I feel tears of pain and hopelessness sting my eyes. “She is my little sister,” I say, as I lose consciousness.

I have no idea how long I have been out. I become aware of a jolting movement. My head is spinning and a memory swirls in my head. I am transported back five years to India to the sparsely furnished living-room of my parents. My mother’s kind and loving face stares at me, her greying hair piled in a loose bun on top of her head. I am trying to put her mind at rest. “Lalita is my dear little sister, *Ba*, and you know I will do all I can to ensure her happiness.” My mother just smiles in response. She trusts me enough to let her darling daughter leave home to join me in Africa.

There is throbbing in my head and an acute pain in my shoulder. I try to think where I am and suddenly remember the events before I passed out. I open my eyes and find I am lying in the back of the car with my head in Lalita’s lap. I try to sit up but am still a bit groggy and fall back. Savita is driving the car and it is dark outside.

“He has woken up,” Lalita says as if I was just having a nap. Her voice is flat.

Savita is silent but gives me a quick glance over her shoulder.

“Are you ... are you ... ?” I stutter. I want to ask Lalita if she is all right when I know she is not. I cannot think of the right words.

“I am alive,” she responds. “And so are you. Thank God.”

I prop myself on my elbow and gently sit up. There is a bandage on my head, the long end of which dangles on my shoulder. I recognise it as the blue silken material from Savita's sari. I realise we are in a town because the orange glow flashes and fades as we drive past the lamp-posts.

"Are we in Entebbe?" I ask.

"No, in Kampala. We're going to Mulago first."

"Forget Mulago. There are better hospitals in UK. We can't afford to miss the flight. Just go to Entebbe."

Entebbe is about thirty kilometres from Kampala and we come across two more roadblocks. At each one they shine their torches in, notice my bloodstained bandage, Savita hands over a small packet, and they wave us on.

In the airport lounge we recognise several families. They gather round us to enquire what happened and if we need any help. We have not rehearsed our stories but we find ourselves saying the same thing: Soldiers at the roadblock in Mbira forest attacked me. I passed out. Savita drove us to the airport. No mention of Lalita's ordeal. Not now, nor ever, I expect, unless she needs to talk about it to heal her memories. But I doubt she will ever mention it. I watch her reactions. The chandlo on her forehead is a red smudge and draws one's attention away from her expressionless eyes. She is grim-faced but then so is everyone else until the plane takes off and there is a sudden release. It is like an interval at a music concert. Everyone suddenly starts talking. The envelope of voices is punctuated by some youngsters actually shouting out "yippee". There are smiles on faces. The old lady in the aisle next to me has her eyes shut tight; her wrinkled hands are folded as she thanks God.

We get a last glimpse of the land, which was our home, before the plane ascends above the fluffy clouds into the starry sky. I look at Lalita, who is sitting between Savita and me. Her eyes are closed and two big teardrops roll down her cheeks. I notice Savita is also looking at Lalita and she is crying too. We each hold a hand of Lalita. She gently presses our hands, opens her eyes and smiles at us through her tears.

I have not shed tears since when I was about five. My elder brother then told me to stop crying like a girl. But today I cried at the roadblock, and now again, for the second time in one day, tears well up in my eyes. I failed you, Nani Ben (little sister), when you needed me.

Books review....

Ninety Days is a story about what life was like for Asians in Uganda before the President ordered them all to leave, and what happened afterwards as law and order broke down and people considered themselves lucky to escape unharmed. In August 1972 President Idi Amin announced that God had come to him in a dream and told him to order citizens of Asian origin out of the country. He declared: 'If they are not out in Ninety days, they will soon see what happens to them!' The story centres on the Hindu Mitani family whose biggest problems before the announcement are their elder son's choice of a Muslim wife, a sister's unhappy marriage and whether or not the community should spend its money on yet another religious shrine. But as the deadline approaches and there are beatings and imprisonments they, like their friends and neighbours, become increasingly desperate to find refuge in whichever country will take them, though they must flee more or less penniless and leave all their possessions behind. Within ninety days, 70,000 members of what had been a close community many of whom were born in Uganda, were scattered across the world, mostly in the UK, Canada, India and the US, but some others across Europe and as far afield as Australia and New Zealand.