



A BAG OF SWEETS

by Agnes Sam

AGNES SAM - BACKGROUND

- Born in 1942
- Great granddaughter of indentured labourers from India
- Grew up in PE/Gqeberha
- Had a Catholic education
- Attended university in Lesotho & Zimbabwe and taught in Zambia
- In 1973 she was exiled from SA and went to live in York, England
- Her writing explores culture, tradition & religion and how it combines to shape people's lives

INDENTURED LABOUR

- **INDENTURED LABOUR**

- Indentured labour was **a system of bonded labour that was instituted following the abolition of slavery**. Indentured labour were recruited to work on sugar, cotton and tea plantations, and rail construction projects in British colonies in West Indies, Africa and South East Asia.
- Indentured servitude is a form of labour in which a person is contracted to work without salary for a specific number of years. The contract, called an "indenture", may be entered "voluntarily" for purported eventual compensation or debt repayment, or it may be imposed as a judicial punishment.

SETTING

- A Muslim family in what could be South Africa. There is no reference to geographical place and time. It is close to the ocean since Khadija misses the new year outings to the beach.
- No indication that it is a rural or urban setting.
- Action takes place mainly in the family shop and what could be the family house.

‘ Our shop was small. There was one door, just one glass display case and standing all around the floor space were sacks of rice, sugar and flour, propped up against drums of spices.’

CHARACTER S

- The story features two main characters, Khadija & Kaltoum and the one brother, Abdul who features briefly.



CHARACTERS

KHADIJA



- Is the youngest child.
- Falls in love with a Christian man and marries him.
- Leaves the house and loses all contact with the family because of the relationship.
- Returns to reconcile after 3 years.
- Appears to have a convivial, pleasant demeanour.

KALTOUM



- Eldest sibling. Narrates the story.
- Was closest to Khadija of all the siblings.
- Rebuffs all Khadija's attempts at reconciliation.
- Her unyielding attitude sets the tone for all the other siblings' attitudes towards Khadija.
- Comes across as harsh and inflexible.

KALTOUM

- Kaltoum is the eldest sister who was closest to Khadijah
- She narrates the story, so our experience of events is through her eyes, heart and mind.
- It is her hardened attitude towards Khadija which largely drives the story.
- She works in the shop, mainly on Fridays.
- As the eldest she appears to be in charge of family matters now that both parents are deceased.

KHADIJA

- Khadija is the youngest child who falls in love with a Christian man and marries him.
- She had to leave the house as a result of her decision.
- She has the closest resemblance to their late mother.
- Comes across as convivial with a pleasant demeanour.

In reference to Khadija:

- 'I could see those hands running across the keyboard, typing, playing the piano. Those hands had given her freedom. In doing so they destroyed the people we loved.' - Kaltoum (P.67)
- 'It was not that we could not forgive her for wanting the right to choose whom she could marry; it was the consequences of that freedom we could not forget. Our parents died within months of each other.' – Kaltoum (P.69)

ABDUL

- Abdul, one of the brothers, features peripherally when Kaltoum shares with the family how she had thrust a bag of 'cheap sweets' in Khadija's arms.
- His forgiving nature is juxtaposed with Kaltoum's unforgiving attitude since he appears to be more flexible than his eldest sister.

'I knew he would have forgiven Khadija the very day she ran away to marry the Christian boy. But he had to take his cue from his parents. '

- Shows how Abdul differs from his sister, Kaltoum.
- He comes across as more forgiving and conciliatory.

STORYLINE / PLOT

- The youngest daughter of a (conservative) Muslim family, Khadija, falls in love with a Christian man and decides to marry him.
- It appears that the relationship was conducted in secret since her parents would not have allowed it.
- Khadija elopes with her Christian lover and becomes an outcast, losing all contact with her family.
- This has such a devastating impact on the parents that it affects their health to the point that they die within a few months of each other.
- The siblings were expected to support their parents in their opposition to Khadija's relationship and eventual marriage even if they did not necessarily feel the same way about it.

STORYLINE CONT...

- The death of their parents led to a severe hardening of attitude towards Khadija among the children, especially in the case of the eldest daughter, Kaltoum. They hold Khadija responsible for the death of their parents.
- Three years after she had left the house, Khadija returns with the intention of re-connecting with the family, but her advances meet with total rejection.
- Khadija's urge to reconnect with the family is driven by homesickness and a longing for what she grew up with:
‘...how homesick she was for our New Year's picnic at the beach, how she missed the things we took for granted, and how she missed me more than anyone else.’
- Everyone refuses to speak to her, or even acknowledge her. When she visits the family shop, Kaltoum refuses to speak to her. Despite getting the cold-shoulder treatment she persists with her visits to the shop.

- Kaltoum's animosity towards Khadija is visibly demonstrated when she violently pushes her away when Khadija tried to assist her with filling bags of sugar.
- It is also in this moment that Kaltoum realises how much Khadija resembles their late mother which softens her harshness, but she does not allow this moment to make her share her grief with Khadija.
- When she visits the family home, she experiences the same treatment. Whoever opens the door shuts it in her face once they see that it's her.

STORYLINE CONT...

- On her futile visits to the shop she would as usual have a conversation with herself since Kaltoum never responded to her conversations.
- On one such visit, when it came to locking-up time, Kaltoum put some sweets in a paper bag and shoved it into Khadija's arms where they lay folded on the counter.
- This appears not to be an act of reconciliation but rather one of humiliation. This much becomes clear in Kaltoum's conversation with her brother and other siblings:

"It's what you'd do to a child, isn't it? To get rid of it? You give it a bag of sweets." - Kaltoum, P70

She also emphasizes that it is 'cheap sweets' (P. 70), which further reinforces this point.

- Despite this humiliating gesture Khadija continues to visit the shop on a Friday when Kaltoum is on duty since the brothers would be attending Mosque.
- The siblings find this awkward, that Khadija should visit on a Friday when they attend Mosque.
- Abdul is most verbal in trying to figure out why Khadija continues to come back despite the humiliation. ***“I can see you want to make Khadija feel cheap! But why does she come back?”***
- Kaltoum explains that she is like an abused woman who constantly forgives her perpetrator.
- Abdul feels that she should rather have converted to Christianity as well, which Kaltoum disagrees with:

“Yes. Now they don’t want her and we don’t want her.”

“She should’ve turned Christian,” he said

“You think if she turned they will treat her any different? Christians are funny people.”

- The denouement is particularly powerful:

‘One Friday Khadija did not come in to the shop, although I waited for her past closing time.’

DENOUEMENT / RESOLUTION

The last paragraph is poignant and very telling: I can still see her face when I close my eyes, her lips softened, just for a second, before she regained control. One Friday Khadija did not come into the shop, although I waited for her past closing time.

- How does this moment compare with her attitude earlier in the story when she couldn't wait to lock the shop while Khadija was still trying to make conversation with her?
- What is the significance of this?

TONE / MOOD

- The tone throughout is cold, tense and strained because of Kaltoum's intense dislike she now has for her sister.
- Strong feelings of bitterness and animosity also run throughout the story as can be seen when Kaltoum violently shoves Khadija aside in the shop.
- The humiliating bag of sweets is further testimony to this hardened, unyielding attitude Kaltoum shows towards Khadija.

THEMES

- Love vs religion/tradition/culture/custom
- Forgiveness / Reconciliation
- Bitterness

TECHNIQUE

- The author uses first person narration which brings the reader right into the heart of the action.
- The story opens up on a powerful note which stirs the curiosity of the reader: ' You would have thought the past three years had never happened, the way my sister Khadija breezed into the family shop and stood beaming at me, radiating that glow that comes from knowing someone is surprised and overjoyed to see you.'
- We experience the story through the eyes, heart and mind of Kaltoum, who harshly refuses to accept her sister's advances to reconcile.
- The author aggravates the situation and exacerbates the tension by bringing in the death of both parents. Kaltoum mentions how deeply hurt she is by Khadija's choice which led to the death of her parents.
- Khadija's return in the opening paragraph is described as 'breezing in' nonchalantly as if nothing happened the last three years since she has left the family. Also, using words like 'beaming' and 'radiating' accentuates the rift with Kaltoum who is now consumed by a fire of animosity because of Khadija's seeming nonchalance.

TECHNIQUE CONT.

- **Tension builds up throughout the story as Khadija regularly visits at the family shop and also at the house where the door is shut in her face every day.**
- **The plot is mainly driven by this situation: Khadija trying to make conversation with Kaltoum and meeting with no response until one day she puts a few 'cheap sweets' in a brown paperbag and thrusts it in her arms which lay folded on the counter.**
- **It does take her a while before Kaltoum eventually shares this incident with the rest of the family.**
- **The bag of sweets is an act of humiliation and it is meant to cause hurt, unlike the usual association of goodwill and caring which demonstrates the intense dislike Kaltoum now has for her sister.**

Classroom activities

- ORAL PRESENTATIONS:

Research the basic tenets, traditions, cultural practices of Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism etc. and do a presentation (groupwork).

- Facilitate a discussion dealing with forgiveness and reconciliation.
- WRITING: Dialogue / Letter / email – requesting reconciliation/forgiveness for inappropriate behaviour.
- Short play based on a family feud. The triggering incident could be a choice of boyfriend/girlfriend.



Marrying outside of Islam

- Modern practice^[edit]
- Despite [Sunni Islam](#) prohibiting Muslim women from marrying Non-Muslim men in interfaith marriages, interfaith marriages between Muslim women and Non-Muslim men take place at substantial rates, contravening the traditional Sunni understanding of [ijma](#).^{[4][6][7]} The modern tradition of [reformist and progressive Islam](#) has also come to permit marriage between Muslim women and Non-Muslim men.^[4] with Islamic scholars opining this view including [Khaleel Mohammed](#), [Daayiee Abdullah](#), and [Hassan Al-Turabi](#), among others.^[8] In the [United States](#), about 10% of Muslim women are today married to Non-Muslim men.^[12]
- Many [Arab countries](#) allow interfaith marriages to Christian or Jewish women but not to Christian or Jewish men.^[13] In [Lebanon](#) for example there is no civil personal status law and marriages are performed according to the religion of the spouses. In [India](#), Muslim women can freely marry Non-muslim men. In order to promote trust among the religions, these marriages find larger acceptance in Indian society.^[citation needed] [Turkey](#) allows marriages between Muslim women and Non-Muslim men through secular laws.^[14] In [Tunisia](#) since 16 September 2017, Muslim women can lawfully marry any man of any faith, or of [none](#). In [Malaysia](#), a Non-Muslim must convert to Islam in order to marry a Muslim and the offspring of such unions are automatically Muslims.^[15]
- Recent studies on interfaith marriages in [Muslim-majority countries](#) have shown that parent attitudes remain more negative toward marriage of a daughter as compared to a son, and that "stronger religious belief was associated with more negative attitudes", though less in the case of Muslims who perceived Islam and Christianity as more similar than distinct.^[16]

- Wikipedia