

Zuleikha Mayat: South African author and activist who led a life of courage, compassion and integrity

Published: February 6, 2024 2.29pm SAST

Author



Saleem Badat, Research Professor, UFS History Department, University of the Free State

Disclosure statement

Saleem Badat receives funding from the National Institute for Humanities and Social Sciences.

[University of the Free State](#) provides funding as a partner of The Conversation AFRICA.

Few Indian South African women have achieved wider public recognition than author, human rights and cultural activist [Zuleikha Mayat](#), who passed away on 2 February 2024. An honorary doctorate from the University of KwaZulu-Natal was just one of many awards bestowed on her during a life that spanned almost 98 years.

Mayat was a remarkable pioneer, evocative writer, public speaker, civic worker, human rights champion and philanthropist. She was a staunch supporter of [Palestinian freedom](#) and an end to Israeli apartheid and genocide.

I am a scholar of social justice issues in South Africa and have known Mayat for 49 years, through my friendship with her children. I assisted her with her last book, and recently penned an e-book about her incredible life.

She embodied principled, faith-based, socially committed, inspired leadership based on special talents and indomitable resilience, and upheld the dignity of all with whom she associated. In an interview in 2019 she said that she hoped to be remembered as “someone who interacted with everyone, no matter who they were, without prejudice”.

Early life

She was born on 3 August 1926 in Potchefstroom in South Africa’s North West province, the third-generation child of Indian-South African shopkeepers of Gujarati origins. In a country marked by racial divides even before the advent of apartheid in 1948, she learnt from her grandfather –as she later wrote– that intermingling across social divides and boundaries was important, as was “learning the languages and folkways” of other social groups.

Her father was generous to poor people and drummed into her,she later reflected, that “others have a share in our incomes”. For her “the Bounty of God is not just for a select few but must be shared” so that all “can benefit”.

The young Mayat read voraciously but racialism stifled her formal education. After grade 6 at the Potchefstroom Indian Government School there was no secondary school for Indians. Segregation (1910-1948), the precursor to apartheid, which legally entrenched racial classification and enforced segregation in all walks of life, meant separate schools for different “races” and the schools for whites would not enrol her.

Patriarchy also played a role. She was one of seven siblings; boys, like her three brothers, continued secondary education in other towns or cities “but sending daughters away was almost unheard of”. And, so, her ambition to become a doctor was thwarted.

At age 14, as described in her 1996 book A Treasure Trove of Memories: A Reflection on the Experiences of the Peoples of Potchefstroom, she discovered that she “had a gift as a writer, an intellectual orientation, and a capacity for expressing strong views”. A correspondence course boosted the “English in which (she) would come to write” prolifically. Later, she achieved a certificate in journalism.

A letter to the editor

1944 was a turning point. An 18-year-old Mayat posted a letter signed “Miss Zuleikha Bismillah of Potchefstroom” to the newspaper Indian Views, which was published in Gujarati and English. The editor was M.I. Meer, father of human rights activist and scholar Fatima Meer. He published the letter, in which she “argued for higher levels of education for girls” in a “style that revealed not only a principled passion concerning this matter but also her sharp wit”.

In 1954, aged 28, she invited friends to her small apartment in the coastal South African city of Durban. After supper, the Women’s Cultural Group was founded. It sought to mobilise women for social change.

Fatima and her husband Ismail Meer roped Mayat and her husband Mohammed into their revolutionary activities. While hiding from the apartheid authorities, activist and future president Nelson Mandela slept at the Mayat home a few times.

In 1961, she edited the famous Indian Delights, a recipe book, which flew off the bookshelves “like hot samosas at a buffet”. Several new editions have been published and it remains one of the best selling books in South Africa today.

Between 1956 and 1963 Mayat contributed a weekly column to Indian Views. Her column, Fahmida’s World, brought what academics Goolam Vahed and Thembisa Waetjen have described as her “signature liveliness and humour, as well as a sharp moral eye, to bear on various topics”.

In her columns, she criticised social hierarchies, “ethnic and class prejudices” and racist and inhuman conduct, and commented on “the ethical triumphs and breaches of daily life”.

Mayat was involved in numerous institutions and organisations. These included the McCord Zulu Hospital, Shifa hospital, Black Women’s Convention, South African Institute of Race Relations, the Natal Indian Blind Society, and schools, old age homes and mosques.

And, throughout her life, she wrote.

A life of writing

In 1966 she compiled Quranic Lights, a book of prayers. Nanima’s Chest appeared in 1981 to promote the appreciation of traditional Indian textiles and clothing.

A Treasure Trove of Memories: A Reflection on the Experiences of the Peoples of Potchefstroom (1996) recounts growing up and life in her home town. South

African scholar Betty Govinden called the book “an important contribution to autobiographical fiction in this country”.

History: Muslims of Gujarat was published in 2008, the result of “inner urges” that compelled her to probe into her family’s distant past.

A year later came Dear Ahmedbhai, Dear Zuleikhabehn: The Letters of Zuleikha Mayat and Ahmed Kathrada 1979-1989, based on 75 letters exchanged between herself and anti-apartheid giant Ahmed Kathrada that covered culture, politics and religion.

Then in 2015 she published Journeys of Binte Batuti, a travel memoir. And at age 95 Mayat published The Odyssey of Crossing Oceans, an enthralling and expansive narrative by a consummate storyteller, which embodied some of her philosophy of life.

Justice and peace for all

Post-1994, when democratic elections were held for the first time in South Africa, Mayat continued her fight for equity and social justice. She spoke out and marched against local and global injustices.

She was acutely aware that for many the world was an inhospitable place. She sought, like Nelson Mandela, “justice for all”, “peace for all” and “work, bread, water and salt for all” – for people to be “freed to fulfil themselves”.

Copyright © 2010–2024, Saleem Badat & *The Conversation*

Reference:

Badat, S. (Prof.). (2024). *Zuleikha Mayat: South African author and activist who led a life of courage, compassion and integrity*, from *The Conversation*, 6 February 2024 [online]. Available at <https://theconversation.com/> . Accessed 14 February 2024