



## A Chameleon from the Land of the Quagga: An Immigrant's Story

**Joan Bismillah**

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*A Chameleon from the Land of the Quagga is a memoir that's broad in scope yet sharp in its depiction of apartheid South Africa.*

Joan Bismillah's sophisticated memoir *A Chameleon from the Land of the Quagga* covers a strenuous time in history.

Bismillah was born in South Africa in 1928. One of her first memories is of her mother dying on her seventh birthday, after which she and her four siblings lived with their overbearing grandmother, with whom Bismillah often butted heads. During World War II, she and her sisters were sent to a convent school, where she spent her teenage years. She met her future husband, a South Africa-born Muslim Indian, when they were students.

Meanwhile, apartheid was taking hold of South Africa, and any person who was not European was deemed less-than in the government's eyes. Bismillah and her husband had to keep their relationship secret. Her marriage and work as a midwife exposed her to violence against people of color perpetrated by law enforcement and "the contradiction and absurdities of the divisive law." The book traces Bismillah's growth from a spirited child to a burgeoning midwife and political activist to a dynamic matriarch living in her adopted country, Canada.

Though billed as an immigrant's story, Bismillah and her family do not emigrate from South Africa until two-thirds of the way through the book. Hers is more than an immigrant's story; it is an empowered narrative about fighting racism across continents. Interjections throughout the book offer pertinent and intelligent examinations of social differences and discrimination.

The memoir speaks with a voice that eschews all pretense of submissiveness and is instead open and forthright. All of Bismillah's positive qualities, beliefs, and flaws are on full display. The level of detail throughout the book is impeccable, illustrating settings, cultures, and emotions well. Imagery is succinct yet appealing: in their first winter in England, a stepping stone for her family between South Africa and Canada, Bismillah notes that "the pale sun looked more like a faded paper moon."

Misused commas sometimes confuse meanings. While part one, which comprises two-thirds of the book, is told in chronological order, some scenes in part two are related out of sequence in time and jump forward at uneven intervals.

While much of Bismillah's life has been fraught with tragedy, the book ends on a positive and optimistic note. *A Chameleon from the Land of the Quagga* is a memoir that's broad in scope yet sharp in its depiction of apartheid South Africa.

AIMEE JODOIN (June 21, 2019)

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