

## Severed Roots

**Nego Huzcotoq**

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*In the dystopian novel Severed Roots, people find solace in each other against an unforgiving world.*

In Nego Huzcotoq's dystopian novel *Severed Roots*, the ethics of marriage and gender equality are centered.

Nick is inquisitive and apathetic in a world order centered on matriarchal power; the time when men ruled the workforce, nations, and the household is recalled as the Age of Oppression. Men are now second-class citizens who often have to live on social welfare and are viewed as volatile threats to civilization and justice. Their sex drives are taken from them around puberty by an injection, they have tattooed identification, and they are encouraged to pursue sex changes. Women are forbidden from having sex with men or giving birth unless they are one of a chosen few, and issues like teenage pregnancy and homeless runaways have been eradicated.

Disillusioned with life, Nick seeks solitude. Then his friend Beatrice admits her desire for motherhood and declares that she will take her own life on her birthday to escape this world. Nick feels powerless to stop her. He finds respite in a new friend, Morrie, whom he meets on a bus. Morrie is raising a family underground, and his wife takes pride in her serving skills and motherhood. Nick's initial reaction is to be skeptical. Rather than inform authorities, though, he decides to find out more.

The novel moves between nuanced conversations about gender disparities and polarizing symbolism. Its women are prone to remarking on how abusive and disgusting the nuclear family structure was for women during the Age of Oppression; reactionary groups use biblical passages to justify women's subservience, making views of men as aggressive and religion as bombastic difficult to deny. Characters become stand-ins for philosophical positions, as with a woman chosen for the childbirth job who wants to keep the babies she bears.

Making an argument for the inherent goodness of the nuclear family, the novel features scenes of exemplary parenting and support. It makes intriguing suggestions about the harm of human disconnection and isolation, too. Still, despite the book's heavy messaging, it is hesitant when it comes to declaring positions or a way forward. Further, the events leading up to this new world are kept vague. Gender essentialism is presented as a reality, despite the doubts about it that are raised throughout the story. Though the prose is active and the story is gripping, the novel's reluctance to offer clear explanations prevents full immersion.

In the dystopian novel *Severed Roots*, people find solace in each other against an unforgiving world.

ALI ORTIZ (December 14, 2022)

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