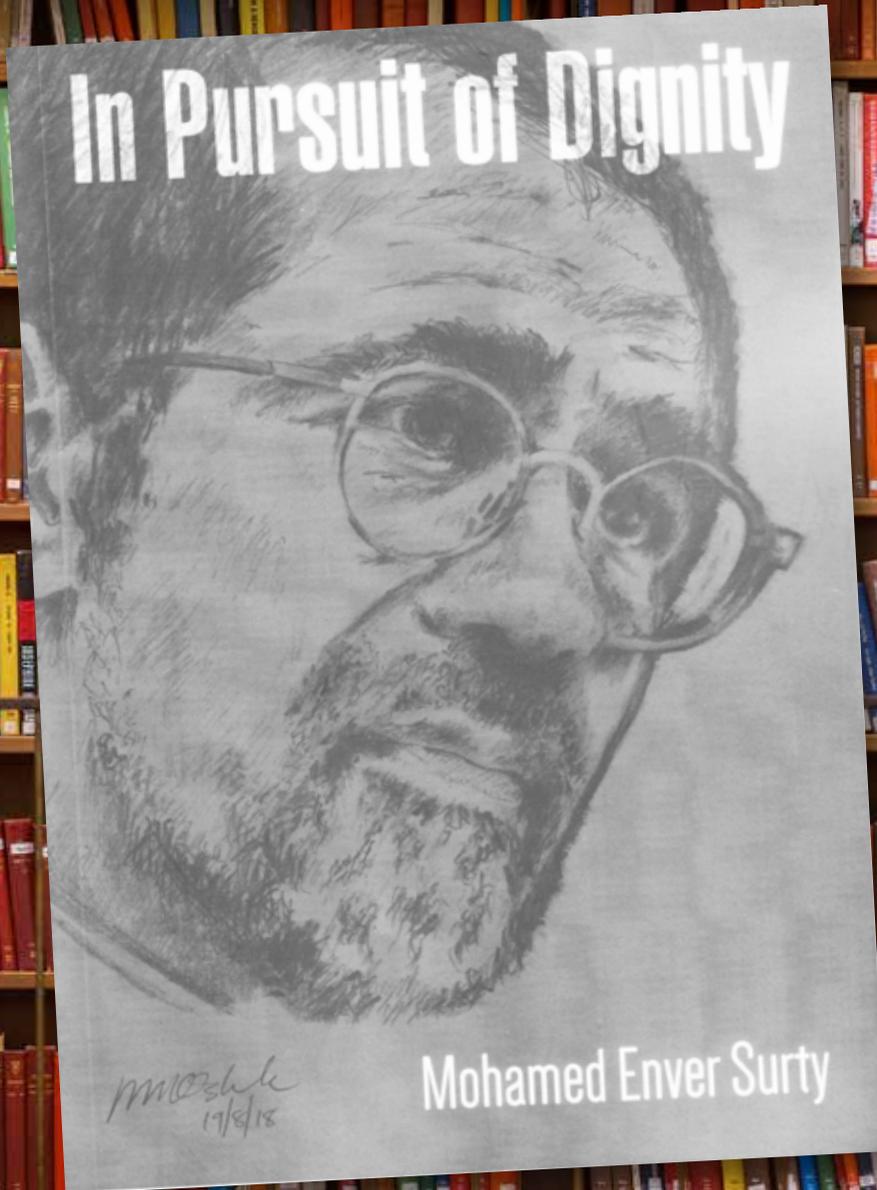


Mohamed Enver Surty's *In Pursuit of Dignity*

By Hussain Savant



In Pursuit of Dignity is the unusual autobiography of our erstwhile Deputy Minister of Basic Education, Mohamed Enver Surty. The author served in government for twenty five years with distinction, and can be justly proud of a distinguished career both as a lawyer and as a government minister.

The autobiography is a staid and prosaic account of the author's life story and his contribution to the Bill of Rights, which was successfully embedded in the South African Constitution, representing the nation's ideal of a non-sexist, non-racial and just society. By all accounts, he has done sterling work in this regard.

The notion of “dignity” in the book’s title operates on the existential, the constitutional, and the political levels simultaneously. In the new South Africa, it does not exist in a vacuum and must be understood in terms of its “pursuit”. “Pursuit” here refers to the legal attempts to embed this notion of “dignity” in the new Constitution. In the chapter entitled “Human Dignity as a Pre-eminent value”, we learn that it was the late Dullah Omar who recommended the inclusion of “dignity” in the Constitution, and that it was Surty who advised that “...it would best serve as an overarching value over all rights. It would also be included in the limitation clause and the interpretation clause and in so doing permeate all rights” (2019).

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As far as autobiographies go, *In Pursuit of Dignity* is a highly original book, with a specifically postmodern narrative technique and structure. Whilst Surty does not share the postmodern doctrine, the composition of his work leaves no doubt that he has espoused its method. The book’s introduction lays bare both the intention of the work, together with a brief outline of its structure. Surty hopes that his “...stories will reach the children of the Constitution because they carry the hope of a new world and they are the final arbiters of the legacy that his generation has bequeathed them” (2019).

A lawyer by profession, Surty also completed an LLM in Constitutional Litigation as well as a Postgraduate Certificate in Higher Education. An official description of Surty’s career on the South African Government’s website states that: “He was a member of the Management Committee of the Constitutional Assembly and negotiator for the ANC on the Bill of Rights for the period 1994 to 1996. In Parliament, Mr Surty participated in the following select committees: Justice, Safety and Security, Constitutional Affairs, and Local Government and Administration” (2020).

Surty prefers to describe his experiences as “stories”. This is probably his way of not only distancing himself from the atheistic postmodern

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movement, but also of fulfilling a deep desire to become a writer, springing forth from his early years.

Whereas the writer of fiction often transmutes his personal experiences into stories, the writer of autobiography sometimes inevitably transmutes his stories into personal experiences, although this is not true in Surty’s case. Fiction is occluded in such a case, “mixing memory with desire” (in the famous words of T.S. Eliot), as Surty struggles to transmit his life story onto the printed page.

Accordingly, the book is divided into three distinct sections. As Surty outlines: “In the first section I reflect on my early learning years – school, university, finding love and the confusion that overtakes the search to understand my place in the world...The second section deals with moments in my career as a lawyer and my participation in civic affairs in my hometown of Rustenburg. This formative period did much to prepare me for the gruelling public life made so much easier by the fond embrace of comrades...The third section looks at some of my memorable times in politics, first in the making of the Constitution, then in Parliament a Senator and later Chief Whip, and finally in the executive as Deputy Minister and former Minister of Justice” (2019).

It should also be mentioned that Surty is a grandson of Suliman M. Nana, former Head of the Transvaal Indian Congress during the 1930s and

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40s. Surty is thus the inheritor of an innate political and constitutional talent, of which his amazing grandfather would have been justifiably proud.

Surty’s narrative plunges into the remote past at the most appropriate and unexpected moments, thus surreptitiously weaving together with delicate artistry the stories of his childhood, youth and manhood, in an artistic attempt to achieve a sense of the unity of a life already lived, without any perceptible hiatuses between the various events of his life.

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Chapter 2 (“Swearing In”) provides an excellent example of Surty’s narrative technique. In it, Surty writes about travelling to Cape Town with his family, on the occasion of his swearing-in as a newly appointed Senator. The transition from this past reminiscence to an even deeper past is skilfully executed: “I felt a great sense of relief after I had taken the oath. I was more than ready to take up the new challenge. I was forty and brimming with energy. The chamber was spotless, not even a speck of dust could be seen on the furniture or on the floor...It was then that my mind turned to my childhood years...” (2019)

The perception of an absence of dust in the Senate Chamber makes Surty think about his childhood years in “Mosenthal, also known as Bosspruit...some twenty km north-west of Rustenburg”, an area where there was a plenitude of dust (2019). This description is then followed by vivid descriptions of his childhood and early youth which are a delight to read.

In Section Two of the book, we find Surty ensconced in his own legal office in the city of Rustenburg during the height of the apartheid

era, living amongst members of the Indian Muslim Community. Here we are provided with three examples of his excellent litigation technique and a strong affirmation of the need for consultation, whether at the pre-trial stage or with members of the then Nationalist government. He comes across as a highly skilful and intelligent lawyer and a respected member of his community, without any self-conceit. In these passages he projects humility, self-confidence and dignity, underscoring the title of his book.

The book also details how Surty managed to persuade the then Department of Community Development to authorise the building of a shopping centre on strategic parts of the Rustenburg mosque property, thereby allowing members of the Indian community to rent premises that were to be allocated to Whites only during the apartheid era. This is reminiscent of similar successes carved out by his maternal grandfather, Suliman M. Nana, and makes highly interesting reading. Surty, like his late grandfather, demonstrates an inability to be flustered. Moreover, his great secret as a human being and his success as a writer is the result of his respectful, humble and dignified tone towards whomever he may be addressing. Added to this is his uncompromising integrity, as well as his self-confessed “pragmatism”.

The third section of the book deals with his political career, giving readers unique insight into the inner workings of government. As Minister of Basic Education, Surty openly declared that Outcomes Based Education (OBE) was “dead”. As an alternative, he declared that more emphasis was to be placed on “Literacy and Numeracy”, as these were the foundational cornerstones of any successful education. He is to be commended for this. He also correctly perceived the philosophical underpinnings of OBE, without mentioning the names of the philosophers who had provided the impetus for the movement.

For those keen on Constitutional Law and the inner workings of the South African government, this book is an excellent introduction to the confluence of Law and Politics. ■

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