



By Jane Shussa

'We Are All Birds of Uganda' by Hafsa Zayyan: You can't stop birds from flying

"If you do not know where you've come from, you will never really understand who you are and where you are going," Sameer tells Maryam as he goes to Uganda to learn about some pieces of himself and his family history. In her historical debut novel, Hafsa Zayyan explores the lives of an Indian family in 1960s Uganda through Hassan and Sameer in present-day London.

Sameer, a 26-year-old lawyer of Indian descent, is thriving in London. His firm offers him a chance to move to Singapore to help launch a new branch — a fast track to becoming a partner. He's excited to prove himself.

But he struggles to tell his parents the news, fearing they won't approve. In Indian culture, children are often expected to join the family business to show gratitude for their parents' sacrifices.

"We have worked very hard, Sameer, to give you this life you have," his father says. "We made so many sacrifices that you wouldn't understand. We've built an empire

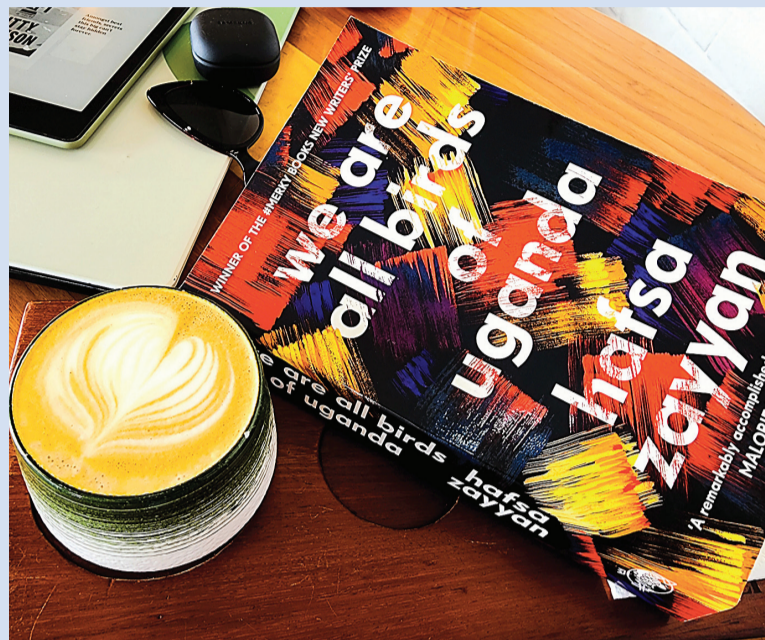
from nothing. There comes a point, son, at which it is only right that you should start giving back."

As he buys himself time, something tragic happens to his friend, Rahool, forcing Sameer to take a six-week leave from work. At home, his parents are thrilled—finally, they think, their son has come to his senses and will join the family business, not knowing that this was never in his plans.

While at home, he meets a family friend, Mr Shah, a successful Indian businessman. Mr Shah tells him stories about Uganda. These stories push Sameer to want to visit—to see, feel, and understand a place that holds the roots of his family's past.

Through letters written by Hassan—Sameer's grandfather—to his late wife, Amira, we are transported to 1960s Uganda under Idi Amin's rule. Hassan recounts life before, during, and after independence. Indians in Uganda acted as intermediaries between the British and Africans, allowed to do business while Africans were not. This bred resentment, as Indians often treated Africans as inferior, a dynamic also reflected in Karim Hirji's *Growing Up With Tanzania*.

The idea of independence unsettles Hassan. "The idea of independence makes me uncomfortable," he writes. He fears what will happen to the Asian community without British rule. His fears are not unfounded,



given the tensions between Indians and Africans.

At independence, Indians are given a choice: remain British or become Ugandan. Born and raised in Uganda, Hassan chooses Uganda — the only home he has known. But this decision haunts him when Idi Amin expels all Asians.

"I was born here; I never knew India. Papa came here in youth, at the time when you had the freedom to choose who you wished to be. He chose to become Ugandan; he came to shed himself of India. And

as a result, my dear, I have no other home."

Raised with privilege, Sameer is initially blind to racism in England. That changes when a new boss excludes him and makes distasteful remarks about Muslims and his culture. He thinks about his Black friend, Jeremiah, and wonders what he had been blind to when they were growing up. Because the truth is, perhaps racism is far more pervasive when you're Black. Take, for example, how his grandfather treated Abdullah, a man who raised him. They became

close. Abdullah managed his shops better than anyone else. But Hassan never considered making him a shareholder. He always referred to him as a servant. And it was a business family, he said — an excuse for excluding him.

In Uganda, Sameer falls in love, not only with a country that feels like home but also with a version of himself he never thought he'd meet, drawn out by his love for Maryam, Abdullah's great-granddaughter. She carries herself with quiet confidence, and her dedication to healing others as a doctor is deeply admirable. Sameer begins to see who he is and what he can become through loving her.

"Maryam has awakened something inside of him, a hunger for knowledge. He did not know before he met her that beyond a partner in body and mind, he was looking for a partner in spirit."

Zayyan's debut explores identity, belonging, loss, family, home, friendship, and race. It's a powerful read that questions colonialism's legacy on Africans and Asians. She also points to a growing trend—seen in Tanzania, too—where an influx of Chinese migrants, some undocumented, are taking on small-scale jobs that many poor locals rely on to survive and support their families.

"Now we've got the Chinese migrating here — a lot of them and many illegally. And they're not doing what you guys did — they're doing what a local Ugandan would do, the small-scale stuff."

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By Victoria Lyimo,
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Family and community key to early childhood development

The period from birth to age eight is crucial to a child's development, as it has a holistic impact on cognitive, emotional, social and physical growth that extends into adulthood.

In public health, what is referred to as Early Childhood Development (ECD) intervention is, as explained by Unicef, a collection of efforts aimed at ensuring that all children benefit from policies, programmes, and practices that protect, promote, and support optimal nutrition, stimulation, learning, health, safety, and security in early childhood, everywhere (Unicef, 2024).

The United Nations, through the Convention on the Rights of the Child adopted in 1989, established that healthy early childhood development is a fundamental right of every child. This was intended to influence the implementation of policies that support children's well-being worldwide and ensure they achieve healthy, holistic development and reach their full potential. To this end, good health, safety and security, early learning opportunities, responsive caregiving, and adequate nutrition are essential, interrelated factors that shape brain development, social adaptation, lan-

guage acquisition, and overall health.

A 2007 comprehensive study revealed that in developing countries, more than 200 million children under five failed to reach their potential in cognitive development because of poverty, poor health and nutrition, and deficient care (Sally Grantham-McGregor et al., 2007). Recent research data reveal that one-quarter of children globally are suspected of having developmental delays (JDC Gil et al., 2020). The World Bank reported in its Policy Research Working Paper dated November 2022 that more than 40 percent of children below school age do not have access to child care. Equally, between 2010 and 2016, 25.3 percent of children in low- and middle-income countries were reported to have had developmental discrepancies (JDC Gil et al., 2020).

Based on these statistics, early childhood development is an important component in building healthy communities and a healthy nation. Safe and secure communities are built on the holistic qualities of the members. These qualities become stronger when the foundation in

early childhood is stronger and well integrated, leading to the formation of adults who are emotionally and practically intelligent and have good mental health. The complexity of it makes it an urgent yet collective responsibility to ensure that children get the best care in their early childhood.

The government has invested in fostering early childhood development through the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Community Development, Women and Special Groups. Investments in maternal and newborn care have had a positive impact, though much still remains to be implemented by families and communities.

Since early childhood development begins at conception, families and communities should ensure appropriate care for pregnant women, starting with early antenatal visits, proper nutrition, prevention and response to gender-based violence, and support for their physical and emotional well-being. Families and expectant mothers are also encouraged to stimulate their unborn children by talking to them in the womb.

This care should continue after birth

The infancy period, up to one year of age, is marked by rapid growth and development. During this time, an infant begins exploring through the senses, recognises familiar faces, starts to understand cause and effect, such as shaking objects to produce sounds, and begins to express emotions by smiling, crying, and more. Family members' cooperation with the infant through play, smiling back, responding to the infant's needs, and interpreting and reacting appropriately to expressions is crucial to the infant's development.

From ages one to three, children now referred to as toddlers become curious and eager to explore their surroundings. They begin solving simple problems, such as opening containers to see what's inside or testing whether they can put the lids back on. At this stage, toddlers are often considered stubborn and unpredictable by families. However, this behaviour is normal and should be understood and accepted by parents. A supportive attitude is essential; parents should encourage

the child's learning by answering questions patiently and offering help without being harsh or rough.

From ages three to five, children are considered to be in the toddler and preschool stage. This is the period when many children begin to ask numerous "why" questions, as they try to find reasons for everything they see and hear. At this stage, children start to show empathy while also seeking to please adults and gain their approval.

One of the challenges of our time is that many parents do not spend enough quality time with their children. Instead, some respond by yelling or shutting down the child's innocent curiosity. Such actions can intimidate a child's rational thinking and instill negative fear, an emotion that may hinder their learning journey. In conclusion, early childhood development is a process that can be supported more effectively when those involved have at least some basic knowledge. Parental instincts alone are not enough, especially if we aim to shape our children's future from the very beginning.

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