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*Afghanistan, Where God Only Comes To Weep* is about an unremitting search for normality in a world in which the abnormal is the norm; in which social conditioning is determined by rape, murder, humiliation, poverty, disease and despair.

And in the novel Shirin-Gol is a heroine, not because she does not succumb to the vicious circumstances of her existence, but because she never gives up hope.

Though the novel is about Afghanistan, it is also about Somalia, Darfur, the Congo, South Africa and all countries in the world where human beings are dehumanised in the name of ideology, religious and political, and live in conditions of abject poverty, disempowerment and bondage and then are annihilated by foreign powers that kill innocent people in their determination to take over their governments.

The novel finds in ordinary human beings the civilised values, the values of ubuntu, that are lacking in those who assume power and authority over others. These civilized values are a threat to those who govern and kindness and consideration for others are severely punished. People, nevertheless, risk being kind, being helpful and generous.

But they are forced to conform and one of the most poignant incidents in the book is the scene in which a teacher is forced to implement the cruelty of the rulers and turns away Nasser, Shirin-Gol's son, the brightest student in his class simply because he is an Afghan.

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*Nasser stands there for a long time in his old, ironed*

□□□□□□□□□□trousers, the white shirt, clutching his exercise book

□□□□□□□□□□and his textbook.□ He can't move, he can't even raise

his head, he can neither turn it nor raise it nor lower

it, nor jut it forwards to swallow his saliva down. His

head stays exactly where it was when the teacher was

standing in front of him, not looking at him and speaking

without a break or a comma.□ (p. 203)

He stays rooted to the spot until his mother comes looking for him in the evening.

The novel is an indictment of all politicians who forget the awethu in amandla awethu and treat power as their private perquisite and government as the means to enrich themselves at the expense of poor men, women and children. Shirin-Gol, her husband and children in their search for a life of peaceful survival, travel from Afghanistan, to Pakistan, to Afghanistan, to Iran and back to Afghanistan, and find kindness only among the downtrodden.

□□□□□□□□□□...it is all far too much, far too big for the little souls of the

□□□□□□□□□□children, which are becoming more fragile, insecure and

*anxious from one time to the next. □ What is a country? they*

*ask? □ What does home mean? □ Where is my home? □ What is*

*a border? □ Where is it? □ this line? □ This gate? □ This flag? □ Why*

*are we going back? □ What will we find there? □ Why don't we*

*just go nowhere? □ Is home a place where I was born? □ Where*

*my father was born? □ Where my sister is? □ Where my brother*

*is? □ Is home where I get stones thrown at me, where I am*

*mocked and humiliated? □ Then home is everywhere. □ (p. 231)*

It is only when the family is far from any form of government that they find

the civilized values of love, caring, sharing and happiness.

Siba Shakib's poetic style - its paring down of expression to essentials, its repetition of words and phrases, its simplicity - renders most powerfully the suffering of people who cannot understand how actions taken in the name of God, can be so relentlessly devastating.