

# Narrativising the Past: The Quest for Belonging and Citizenship in Post-apartheid Indian South African Fiction

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## Abstract

The post-apartheid moment and its ‘rainbow nation’ project have been remarkable for activating both anxieties over questions of belonging and citizenship, and ethnic self-assertion. A number of fictional works that are produced at this moment engage with imaginative reconstitutions of the past as a function of contemporary politics. In this article, I explore how three post-apartheid Indian South African novels construct oceanic voyages and the subsequent struggles of indentured labour, translating indentured and passenger Indian subjects into South Africa’s citizens. I argue that the histories that the three novels construct articulate the sacrifices and commitments that Indian South Africans made to legitimise their belonging and citizenship claims.

**Keywords:** Indian Ocean, citizenship, belonging, Imraan Coovadia, Aziz Hassim, Ronnie Govender

## Introduction

This paper traces how the arrival of Indians in South Africa and subsequent struggles for citizenship and belonging in the 1860s-1980s are represented in Imraan Coovadia’s *The Wedding* (2001), Aziz Hassim’s *The Lotus People* (2002) and Ronnie Govender’s *Song of the Atman* (2006). These narratives emerge in the context of the desire for a definitive history that both reassures Indian South Africans of their legitimate space in the post-apartheid

formation and balances the tension between a common citizenship founded on a non-racial constitution with the need to articulate Indianness in South Africa. For many scholars<sup>1</sup>, the post-apartheid moment and its 'rainbow nation' project simultaneously activates the past and offers an opportunity to articulate a specific Indian identity that in the apartheid era had, for political reasons, been rejected in favour of a 'black' identity claimed by all the oppressed peoples of South Africa<sup>2</sup>. The recalling of Black Consciousness's politics of non-racialism in these narratives emerges in the post-apartheid moment as a critique of the realities of the new 'rainbow' nation.

Coovadia's debut novel, *The Wedding*, written during the author's sojourn in the United States, constructs the story of Ismet Nasin's and Khateja Haveri's voyage from Bombay to Durban. Narrated by the protagonists' grandson, the novel represents experiences that are prototypical of passenger Indians in Durban in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The materials from which the narrator (re-)constitutes Indians' beginnings in South Africa are gleaned from the narrator's forebears, and he claims it as a 'knowledge that belongs to [him]' and which he needs in order 'to find [his] bearings' (Coovadia 2001: 267). The resonance between the narrator's articulated desire for his 'bearings' and the voyage to, and migration from, South Africa implicates politics of location as critical to the construction of Indian South African selfhood. Narrativising these beginnings for the narrator becomes critical to navigating his cultural identity across different locales.

*The Lotus People*, also Hassim's debut novel, represents the experiences of passenger Indians in Durban. In the novel, Hassim, a third-generation Indian South African, represents what he claims in an interview

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<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie (2000: 27); Mariam Pirbhai (2009: 71); Pallavi Rastogi (2008: 114); and Goolam Vahed and Ashwin Desai (2010: 4).

<sup>2</sup> Anti-apartheid struggle deployed non-racialism as its guiding ideology to counter apartheid's separatism. During the struggle, affirmation of blackness was regarded as a marker of political identity rather than a racial one and an act of self-definition rather than being defined by others. It was also a conscious rejection of apartheid's deliberate strategy to undermine the unity of all the oppressed peoples of colour.

with Rastogi to be a historically accurate portrait of conditions of the passenger Indians in South Africa (2008: 221). Set in Durban's Casbah, the novel traces the lives of two passenger Indian families through four generations<sup>3</sup>. But it straddles a larger communal backdrop, as Devarakshnam Govinden notes (2008: 29), weaving the stories of both ordinary and affluent Indians into a common tapestry of belonging and citizenship. Written from the author's conviction that 'the truth that remains untold is the beginning of a lie,' the novel is devoted to showing 'where all the Indians are coming from' (Rastogi 2008: 221), a grand aim that the author indicated he hoped to realise in the sequel, *The Revenge of Kali* (2009) that constructs the harsh experiences of the indentured Indians<sup>4</sup>.

Govender's *Song of the Atman*, like the first two novels, also retrospectively constructs the history of Indian beginnings in South Africa, focusing on the experiences of indentured labourers. The novel, a fictionalised account of Chin Govender, the author's uncle, traces the protagonist's life across different locations in South Africa while anchoring its trajectories on the protagonist's humble beginning. Chin's father, Karupana Govender, as a young man, accompanied his parents to South Africa from Thanjaoor, India as an indentured labourer. Remarkable for his resilience, Karupana is undaunted by the toils and hazards of daily labour the cane fields as he sings his favourite Carnatic songs (Govender 2006: 28). Karupana initiates a culture of refusing to suffer indignity, a tradition that is handed down to his descendants and that in later years becomes for them an inspiration for outright forms of anti-apartheid resistance.

In the next three sections, I explore, first, how pastness is produced as a function of contemporary politics; second, how oceanic voyage and subsequent processes of transplantation translates subcontinental seafarers into South Africa's citizens; and third, how the anti-apartheid struggle emerges as an altar upon which Indian South Africans lives are sacrificed as

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<sup>3</sup> See n.4, p.2 for the distinction between 'indentured' and 'passenger' Indians.

<sup>4</sup> The two novels, together, construct the 'truth' of Indian beginnings in South Africa, for Indians, as is already well known, arrived in South Africa in two distinct categories: either as indentured labourers or as voluntary, self-paying passengers, who mostly belonged to the business class.

a symbolic purchase on South Africanness. In each section, I treat the imaginative reconstruction of pastness as anchored on the political demands of narrating the post-apartheid moment.

### **Post-apartheid Politics and Representations of Pastness**

Coovadia's, Hassim's and Govender's novels construct apartheid and pre-apartheid pasts in ways that invite re-examination of contemporary realities. The novels suggest that imaginative engagements with these pasts stem from the urgent demands and anxieties of narrating the post-apartheid present. The new dispensation, for Indian South Africans, usher in profound disillusionment and a victim consciousness that Goolam Vahed and Ashwin Desai have captured in the parallel they draw between the experiences of the Jews in anti-Semitic Europe and the 'stranger' stereotype borne by 'Indians' in South Africa (2010: 3). Vahed and Desai highlight how affirmative action has occasioned widespread disaffection among many 'Indians' towards 'Africans' for appropriating the 'Black' identity forged during the anti-apartheid struggle and excluded them from the promises of the post-apartheid nation<sup>5</sup> (2010: 6 - 8).

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<sup>5</sup> Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie (2000: 28) captures a similar disillusionment in a common refrain of Indians, that 'for years apartheid discriminated against us as we were too black, now we are not black enough to gain from affirmative action'. These concerns, however, do not acknowledge the provisions of Employment Equity Act, No. 55 of 1998 of the Ministry of Justice, Republic of South Africa which sanctions affirmative action. Section 2 of this legislation states as its purpose the need 'to achieve equity in the workplace by (a) [p]romoting equal opportunity and fair treatment in employment through the elimination of unfair discrimination; and (b) [i]mplementing affirmative action measures to address the disadvantages in employment experienced by designated groups, in order to ensure their equitable representation in all occupational categories and levels in the workforce'. Section 1 defines 'designated groups' to mean 'black people, women and people with disabilities' and 'black people', in the spirit of Black Consciousness, as 'a generic term which means Africans, Coloureds and Indians'. Section 3 states that the Act must be interpreted, among other stated restrictions, 'so as to give effect to its purpose'.

The pasts that the three novels construct articulate these concerns to legitimise belonging and citizenship claims advanced by Indian South Africans. Post-apartheid politics and the desire to celebrate the new nation's multicultural constitution become central to the dismantling of the whites/non-whites vector that had been invoked to rationalise apartheid governmentality. The narratives play the crucial task of weaving experiences of Indians, as one of the peoples disenfranchised by apartheid, into the national narrative. In view of Brij Maharaj's observation of how ethnic identity is always determined by struggles, the formation of Indianness in South Africa is shaped not only by its engagements with Europeans as the dominant group and with other marginalised groups in their struggle for resources, entitlements and privileges but also internally in its struggle for control over its 'material and symbolic resources' (2006: 69; cf. Vahed 2002: 77).

Focusing on the oceanic voyage and subsequent transplantation that, as Meg Samuelson (2010: 273) has underscored, translates indentured and passenger Indian subjects into South Africa's citizens, I explore how anxieties and celebrations of cultural identities in the post-apartheid moment motivate the search for roots and imaginative engagements with history and the quest for recognition as South African citizens in the three novels. The 'narrative performance' that these novels stage, in Bhabha's expression, 'interpellates a growing circle of national subjects' and produces the nation as a narration (1994: 209) simultaneously through what Philip Holden has termed, after Bhabha, its 'retrospective' and 'anticipatory' pedagogies (2010: 455). The narratives thus furnish a critical means for articulating both Indianness and South Africanness. In light of Mariam Pirbhai's inquiry into South Asian diasporic formations, I aim to explore, not only how Indianness is constituted in South Africa through its place within the quadratic axis of race relationships (2009: 68), but also how the vexed questions of citizenship and belonging are complicated by race and class.

Belonging, as Vahed and Desai conceptualise it, implies being 'a part of or connected with something'; it 'assumes voluntary membership by those who constitute a self-generated group' (2010: 9). Belonging can further be construed after Gerard Delanti as a component of citizenship. For Delanti, citizenship, beyond its preoccupation with rights, involves participation in the affairs of the political community:

It concerns the learning of the capacity for action and for responsibility but essentially, it is about learning of the self and of the relationship of the self and other. It is a learning process in that it is articulated in perception of the self as an active agency and a social actor shaped by relations with others.... Citizenship concerns identity and action; it entails both personal and cognitive dimensions that extend beyond the personal to the wider cultural level of society (2002: 64 - 65).

The performative sense of citizenship that Delanti captures here underlies Coovadia's, Hassim's and Govender's choice to focus not so much on the granting of formal citizenship to the subcontinental subjects, albeit in a limited sense, in 1961, a century after the first group of their forebears arrived in South Africa, as they embraced the struggle and sacrifice for a just South Africa. In these novels, belonging is contested and re-inscribed in ways that complicate questions of national and diasporic identities. For Indian South Africans – as a group that from the dawn of their arrival in South Africa have had to contend, first, with the oppression, deprivation and segregation under indenture, colonialism and apartheid and, later, with uncertainties of the post-apartheid moment – belonging can be constituted imaginatively by re-constituting the past as a site where desire and hope converge.

For Pallavi Rastogi, the return to the pasts in Afrindian fiction, as she terms it, is prompted by the need to stake a claim on the present. Rastogi contends that this gesture was part of a wider trend in South African fiction, echoing the call by writers such as Njabulo Ndebele to move away from the 'spectacle' to 'rediscovering the ordinary' (2008: 114). In the three novels, memory lends itself readily to the critical task of not only re-constituting the past from the present and but also mining quotidian experiences and strategically asserting continuities between the two temporal planes to legitimise national belonging and citizenship claims in the post-apartheid moment. Recognising this tendency towards the ordinary, Samuelson postulates:

To the extent that we can talk about a South African literature ... it is one marked, even fractured, by the search for a form through which

to articulate the extraordinariness of everyday life in this place, to harness the resources of the ordinary, while simultaneously pushing beyond its cruelties, reaching for the horizon (Unpublished conference paper).

Celebratory in her approach, Samuelson acknowledges the ‘tyranny of place’ that Eskia Mphahlele identifies as the condition of South African literature under apartheid, emphasising the need to turn to the ‘here and now as a location from which to open up into connections to other places, or to imagine other ways of inhabiting this place.’

Samuelson’s insistence on a specific spatial present, in intriguing ways, resonates with Rastogi’s reading of the return to the past in post-apartheid fiction. Both are, however, different strategies of a nationalist pedagogy that, in the former case, is retrospective and, in the latter, anticipatory; and both reveal quotidian textures of experience which, as Rastogi notes after Ndebele, had been ‘forgotten in the grand narrative of political struggle.’ The surfacing of such forgotten or, indeed, ‘erased’ experiences and histories becomes for Indian South Africans an avenue through which to carve for themselves a space in the democratic present. As Rastogi aptly notes, the ‘return’ to the pre-apartheid – and, for this chapter, apartheid – past(s) in Indian South African fiction produces a form of literary ‘retrieval’ that ‘uncovers the story of Indian *arrival* in South Africa ... in order to assert national belonging in the present’ (2008: 115).

As a departure from this mode of reading which posits the pasts as frozen segments of time to be *returned* to or *retrieved*, I treat pastness here as a site of contestations or, as Immanuel Wallerstein contends, a tool that people use against one another – *and* in a bid for legitimation. Pastness, in this sense, signifies ‘a mode by which persons are persuaded to act in the present in ways they might not otherwise act’; it is paradoxically diachronic and often dictated by present needs. Wallerstein notes further that in so far as it is used as a mode of social control, ‘pastness is always a contemporary phenomenon’ (1987: 381). Such notions of pastness suggest a critical tool that, while attending to its modes of imaginative construction, takes into account its textual or transitory nature.

As works of historical fiction, Coovadia’s, Hassim’s and Govender’s novels rally tropes of memory and genealogies to constitute narratives of

national belonging by traversing vast locales and temporalities in the interest of producing Indianness in South African. In Michael Green's sense, the 'historical' in this context evokes not the traditional notions of 'change over time' but rather 'the particularly intransigent set of circumstances signified by the word apartheid.' It signifies not so much a series of temporalities as 'an extreme awareness of the present as history' (1999: 3-4; 16-17) and, indeed, history as the present. The hermeneutic strategy that this notion of the historical as bound temporalities calls for implicates the interplay of history, narrative and ideology and re-echoes what Green terms 'resistant form,' by which he means

the search for a critical model as much as an aesthetic mode that can, at one and the same time, recognise the inevitable constructedness of its subject within its own productive processes, yet create that subject in such a way that that subject challenges the terms within which it is constructed – thus resisting the very form within which it is produced (1999: 6).

The notion of resistant form expressed here resonates with the ways in which narrativisation of the past emerges as subjectification processes in the three novels. The historical revisionism that these novels stage from the post-apartheid present is not so much about the narrated contents as with the production of the historical. Thus, the novelistic form, as Green maintains (16), becomes critical to the construction of collective identity– an Indian South African one in this case – requiring a keen awareness of its politics.

### **Sea and Soil in Pre-apartheid Pasts**

Indian migrants, as indentured labourers or as free passengers, come to South Africa in the late nineteenth – and early twentieth – century under the auspices of British colonialism. Their voyages across the Indian Ocean establish contacts between Africa and the Indian subcontinent, resulting in the consolidation of diasporic presence in South Africa, complicating the country's racial politics even further (Rastogi 2008: 4; Maharaj 2009: 73). The conditions and dreams that attend their migration to South Africa are compounded by the realities of British colonialism within which they are



enmeshed. Coovadia's, Hassim's, and Govender's novels plot the processes of claiming citizenship and belonging that follow their settlement which, as Isabel Hofmeyr and Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie suggest elsewhere, reflects developments in the ways 'India' perceived itself – and is perceived – within the empire (2007: 7). This perception is, in turn, reflected in the ways Indian South Africans positioned themselves in anti-apartheid struggle, and remains relevant in making sense of how the group relates to their host/home country. The shift from an India within the empire (which thus shares its boundaries, particularly that of 'the native'/'African'), to one positioning itself outside the empire and in opposition to it has significant bearings on the ways Indianness is constituted in South Africa and how Indian South Africans claim belonging in the post-apartheid present (Hofmeyr & Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2007: 7)<sup>6</sup>.

In intriguing ways, the sea and British colonialism provide useful frameworks for appreciating the migration of Indians to colonial Natal. In *The Wedding*, these two forces are central to the tensions that propel the narrative. The story that Coovadia plots in this hilarious novel begins with the pre-migration ill-starred marriage between Ismet and Khateja. In her determination to regain her freedom, having been forced into marrying a quixotic Ismet, Khateja schemes to make her husband's life 'a long gigantic horror' (2001: 74, 82). Ismet, on his part, obsessed with the idea of domesticating Khateja and turning her into a loving wife, decides to haul her across the Indian Ocean to Durban with a double vision of 'forging a commercial empire' and founding 'a new race' (2001: 105,119). Seemingly unaware of the ambit of British colonialism within which he is enmeshed, Ismet sets sail for Natal – which, like India, is also a British colony – bubbling with his own imperial fantasies.

The Africa he envisages is 'a clean table of a continent,' a place without a history, yearning for settlement. Ismet, in his assumed role as the father of a new race, fantasises: 'From Khateja's womb would spill a legion

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<sup>6</sup> Hofmeyr and Dhupelia-Mesthrie point out that this shift in Indian nationalist thinking takes place in the first two decades of the twentieth century. In the first instance, India saw itself as a self-governing colony within the empire but soon realises that it can attain freedom only outside the empire (6).

of children.... A hundred, a thousand, peopling the vast land' (Coovadia 2001: 119 - 120). Ismet's vision, as Samuelson eloquently argues, is 'allegorical of the emergence of a new Indo-African people' and 'suggestive also of the ways in which 'India' emerges as a product of what the novel describes as the 'aboriginal forge' of Africa' (2010: 270; cf. Coovadia 120). In Ismet's settler vision, the author satirises the colonialist orientation of the Indian business class 'of which Ismet is a classic example' (2001: 264) and mocks it for sustaining the group's illusions and attitudes about Africa, suggesting that such an orientation actually threatens any belonging and citizenship claim that they may advance.

The imperialist orientation that produces Ismet's fantasies is indicative of the perspective from which he operates. As the ship approaches the shores of Durban, Ismet, in his momentary euphoria at the prospects of carving for himself a fortune out of Africa, romanticises the continent as he disparages India.

[U]nlike India, Africa had been spared the nonstop penny-pinching of the spirit.... The important thing: there was a final break with this conniving, rhetorical, feverish India, this India of gambit and deception, this India in which it was beyond the capacities of any man to build up something new and strong, this tropical India in which it had become impossible to love! (Coovadia 2001: 119 - 120).

Sooner than later, however, Ismet realises that Africa – actually, colonial Natal – was not any different from colonial India. With its myriad of draconian laws around which Indian traders have to skirt painstakingly, Natal was possibly even worse. Dhupelia-Mesthrie points out that as early as 1896 there were fears in Natal that Indians would overrun the colony (2000: 16). The resultant climate of fear ushered in an avalanche of restrictive legislation in the first two decades of the twentieth century which culminated into the institutionalisation of apartheid in 1948.

*The Wedding* shows how oceanic voyage and the subsequent transplantation of Indian migrants come to constitute what Stuart Hall has described as a process of *becoming* (1990: 294). Amidst determined repression and growing disenchantment with Africa, Ismet's and Khateja's initial perception of themselves as mere sojourners is paradoxically

transformed into the reality of rootedness. For the couple, 'India' becomes simply a source of cultural sustenance and pride of 'being linked to an ancient culture,' as Vahed and Desai (2010: 5) have put it. The civilisation discourse invoked here implicates how racialised boundaries such as 'the native'/'African' (Hofmeyr & Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2007: 7), for the couple, unsettles the realities of rootedness in the continent. Despite their attachment to 'India,' the couple comes to a sudden realisation:

It was time, to start shooting off roots, to set seeds in the patient earth, time to husband their pool of resources. Had they travelled so far to embrace stagnation? India is a portable country, to some extent, which moves as people do, accommodating itself freely to new environments, but if they started off forsaking her, forgetting her in this and that detail, what would happen at the end of time? (Coovadia 2001: 157).

The ambivalence of adopting South Africa while conserving Indianness becomes, for the diasporics, a delicate matter in the process of identification. The need for 'shooting off roots' that the couple experience suggests a commitment to, and dependence on, the South African soil which negates their perception of themselves as mere sojourners – 'tourists on an extended pilgrimage' – who 'should keep to themselves, pacifically, and then... return home' (Coovadia 2001: 189).

For Ismet and Khateja, Durban becomes the closest approximation of their homeland as they grudgingly come to terms with the reality of their rootedness while still harbouring a vision of Indianness that is untainted by its contact with Africa. With its population of a million residents, equally distributed among blacks, whites and Indians, Durban, as the narrator remarks, 'housed the largest number of Indians in a single place outside India [and] it was, excluding the subcontinent, the most rhetorical city in the world ... and ... in a sense ... created the nation-state of India' (Coovadia 2001: 142 - 143). *The Wedding* credits Durban, in Rastogi's words, for 'willing the Indian nation into existence'. Rastogi notes that it is in Durban that the diasporics first constituted themselves into Indianness (2008: 134). The harsh conditions under colonialism and later apartheid enabled the 'Indians' in Durban to suppress their internal differences in the interest of forging a pan-

Indian identity. Gandhi returned to the subcontinent with this notion of Indianness learnt in South Africa which culminated in the creation of Indian nationality in 1947.

In *The Wedding*, South Africanness is never really foregrounded. Towards the end of the novel, the atrophying of Indianness and Ismet's and Khateja's sojourners' dream leave only a hint that the protagonists have eventually rooted themselves in South Africanness. To the narrator, a third-generation South African Indian, India has become quite remote and has to be disavowed on careful consideration. In the United States, he does not have a clear answer for a Sikh driver who wants to know whether he is from India. Uncertainly, he struggles to pinpoint his Indian roots (Coovadia 2001: 274). His double heritage makes the articulation of his national identity a complex process.

In *The Lotus People*, Indian migrants leave the subcontinent for colonial Natal in the late nineteenth century in pursuit of new opportunities. The novel implicates British colonialism for engineering the voyages that bring the group to Natal. In sending his son to Natal, Yahya's father invokes the British colonial policy of using Indians to open up remote colonies for colonial exploitation (Hassim 2002: 50). The subcontinental seafarers arrive to a hostile reception as their economic adventurism comes into competition with that of European colonialists who view it as their prerogative to exploit Africa. The rich economic prospects that Africa presents set the two groups on a collision course. Commenting on the bitterness and sentiments against Indians, Maharaj notes that the whites in Natal were more concerned about what they described as the 'Asiatic menace' than the 'Native problem.' He maintains that such anti-Indian sentiments were engendered by the economic competition that Indians presented and the anxiety to contain their rapidly growing population, both of which were perceived as threats to white privileges (2009: 73). This brown-white tension, playing out within the context of British colonialism, not only raises the question of India's place within the Empire, as Hofmeyr and Dhupelia-Mesthrie maintains (2007: 7), but also the delicate divide between privileges and legitimacy, suggesting that belonging and citizenship claims ought to be wagered on the nature of a people's relationship to the soil.

The novel represents how the quest for belonging and citizenship supplants the sojourners' tendency of the first-generation Indian migrants.

The translation processes implicated here resonates with Delanti's observation that citizenship, in its cultural dimension, concerns identity and action (2002: 65). These processes, for the subcontinentals, involve dismembering attachments to the subcontinent in preference for the assertion of a South Africanness. The re-membling processes that follow involve reckoning with the realities of colonialism and apartheid and are vital to the making of Indianness in South Africa.

The logic of belonging and citizenship espoused in the novel requires the heirs of the first-generation migrants to perform their South Africanness as a gesture of home-making. Hassim sets the urgency of this citizenship duty against the temptation to emigrate from the country as Dara contemplates doing in a moment of what the novel describes as the 'fear generated by political impotence' (2002: 41). It is, however, not as though the Dara has not done anything for the country; in fact, he catalogues a list of his evident commitments to South Africa, emphasising the hard work and contributions of his family in building the country's economy and infrastructures (Hassim 2002: 24). Dara's concerns highlight the victim consciousness that steadily entrenches itself among Indians in contrast to the complicity that characterise Coovadia's world.

The novel suggests that economic investments and acts of charity do not in themselves endear one to a country that is torn asunder by injustice and misery. Likewise, it represents bitterness and impotence as antithetical to the quest for belonging and citizenship. Dara realises the futility of the sojourning dream that sustained his father's pioneering generation and paints a bleak future that awaits Indians in South Africa. His recourse is to prepare to vacate the country lest the business empire that his family has built comes to nothing. Jake, Dara's eldest militant son, however, dismisses his father's fears. 'We belong here', he says, 'we are part of the struggle ... this is our country. We can't just forsake the country' (Hassim 2002: 26). Jake's generation and the one after them have, in Dara's views, acclimatised themselves to the country and have 'comfortably accepted the African way of life' (Hassim 2002: 25). Where economic investment, largely viewed as another form of exploitation, seems ineffective as a rooting strategy, the younger generation resort to 'blood sacrifice' in the form of armed struggle as a more radical mode of asserting belonging and citizenship claims.

Govender's *Song of the Atman* makes one significant departure from *The Wedding* and *The Lotus People* in its representation of indentured Indians in South Africa. In this novel, belonging and citizenship rights are wagered on the 'sweat sacrifice' made by the protagonist's indentured forebears. Upon completing his indenture contract, Karupana Govender, as a marker of his valorisation of freedom and dignity, rejects an improved offer from his employer that would re-indenture him as well as the colonial repatriation scheme. Instead, he secures a job as a court interpreter (Govender 2006: 30). By choosing to settle in South Africa, Karupana redefines his relationship with the South African soil from that of a bonded labourer *tilling* it to that of a free migrant *owning* a piece of it. This choice prompts a particular mode of transplantation that Govinden has described as the setting up of 'little Indias' in South Africa. The process defines, among other things, the construction of temples or mosques, observing religious festivals, observance of 'Indian' customs, values, cuisine, architecture, forms of dressing, etc. As Govinden notes, such practices were not about replicating the subcontinent but rather 'reworking and recreating it in a new context' (2008: 83). The transplantation processes that Karupana activates spring from and signal the new relationship to the soil. The accommodation of Indianness in South Africa becomes a legitimate ground for advancing belonging and citizenship claims.

While transplantation emerges in the novel as one of the strategies for navigating the new life in South Africa, one of its unintended ramifications is the general waning of Indianness – which privileges South Africanness. The Govenders' command of Tamil deteriorates as they increasingly adopt English owing to the opportunities it presents, especially in terms of integration into the South African and global economies. In the novel, South Africa also mediates conversion of Indians to Christianity and, as in *The Lotus People*, the Anglicisation of Indian names. The resilience of characters such as Amurtham, Chin's mother (remarkable for her devotion to her religious faith), or even Veerasamy Govender (the author's paternal grandfather, reputed for his mystical powers), nonetheless, forms a bastion of resistance against the hegemonic forces of cultural imperialism.

*Song of the Atman* foregrounds the tense race relations in South Africa. The novel opens with a prologue that depicts Chin's visit to Robben Island. He has with him a letter that has 'the potential to disrupt the course of

his life – which up to now had been so ordered, so jealously private. This danger lay in its being made public’ (Govender 2006: 14). As a product of a community that so jealously polices its members’ conduct, Chin is ashamed of his paternity of Devs, an illegitimate son produced out of his liaison with Grace, an indigenous woman. The unease with which Chin negotiates his cross-racial liaisons and their aftermaths highlights the incapacity of transgression to obliterate the rigid racial boundaries between Indians and the black ‘Other.’ Chin’s attitude towards Grace and Greta, his white lover and benefactor, betrays his consciousness of racial hierarchy and, by extension, the racial superiority of his own Indian race over her black race.

As a novel that constructs indentured Indian lives in South Africa, *Song of the Atman*, of the three novels, represents not only the broadest spectrum of Indian characters, especially in terms of class, but also stages the most meaningful patterns of inter-racial engagements among the four South Africa’s racial groups. The novel grants prominent spaces to characters from the four races and, in forging inter-racial transaction, deconstructs apartheid racial taxonomies. These broad representations are possible because the experience of indenture positioned Indian South Africans within contact zones where meaningful engagements with other groups become both necessary and inevitable. The inscription of Indianness in such interstitial spaces, as P. Pratap Kumar maintains, is significant for generating awareness about a cultural group’s presence among the outsiders, which is crucial for social acceptance and quests for legitimation (2009: 54).

The novel, however, does not posit any essential Indian subject. Rather, Govender foregrounds the contradictions that class, caste, ethnic and racial differences raise among Indian South Africans. For instance, when Baijnath (also of indentured Indian parentage), who had earlier toyed with the idea of employing a gifted young man who could marry one of his daughters and become a partner in his business, discovers that Chin, whom he is set to employ, is a Tamil and (more importantly) belongs to a different caste, he discards the whole idea. ‘No matter how good Chin was,’ Baijnath resolves, ‘he could never marry one of his daughters. The prospective bridegroom had to belong to the same caste’ (Govender 2006: 24). In another instance, a combination of caste and class differences prevents Chin from marrying Rani, Gopal Puckree’s daughter, while Chin’s elevated class later in the novel enables him to marry Gopal’s younger daughter, Mogie. These

contradictions reveal the split within Indianness itself and points to how the segregationist tendency among Indians parallels apartheid's racial project.

### **Blood Sacrifice and the Anti-apartheid Past**

The heterogeneity of Indianness in South Africa has been well documented. In this section, I want to draw attention to how the desire to showcase Indians' contribution to making of the new South African 'nation' produces a more inclusive narrative that destabilises entrenched stereotypes of Indians. As Vahed and Desai note, for instance, the 'stranger' stereotype that was directed not only at the business class but at Indians en masse (2010: 3), may explain tendencies in post-apartheid narratives to underscore the contribution of both lower-class and affluent Indians to the making of the new South Africa. While these narratives are careful to surface the diversity within Indianness, highlighting cases of collusion with the apartheid system, they simultaneously draw attention to exceptional commitments and contributions that are often obscured when anti-Indian sentiments are foregrounded.

In Coovadia's novel, as is the case with Hassim's and Govender's, the struggle for a just South Africa remains the most significant way of inscribing belonging. Although the reach of the novel stops short of the country's apartheid phase, the politics of Durban present Ismet with a choice similar to what the business class in *The Lotus People* and *Song of the Atman* face in terms of whether to confine oneself exclusively to business, or take the path of the struggle. Faced with the restrictive climate of Durban, Ismet, as typical of the business class in all the three novels, takes the former path. Getting embroiled in the politics of Durban, to him, amounts to 'playing with dynamite.' Vikram, Ismet's landlord and business partner, after trying in vain to politicise him, complains about 'this shortsightedness in the hearts of Indians who will only have themselves to blame if the road to freedom in this country is built over their heads' (Coovadia 2001: 223). The segregationist climate of Durban and the concomitant agitations anticipate the more concerted forms of anti-apartheid struggle that emerges in *The Lotus People* and *Song of the Atman*.

In *The Lotus People*, anti-apartheid struggle is reproduced as a critical avenue for inscribing rootedness and claiming belonging and citizenship rights. Samuelson has argued that in the symbolic and structural



movement of the novel, the transformative force of the ocean is displaced by the soil as a marker of national belonging. Samuelson contends, after Vijay Mishra, that the soil thus becomes a receptor for the ‘blood sacrifice’ that is ‘a necessary component of the right to claim the [country] as one’s own’ (2010: 275). Jake’s death in the hands of apartheid’s dreaded Security Bureau is significant for its symbolic purchase on South Africanness. This is especially so as it represents a refusal to conform to dictates of Indianness. Jake’s death also highlights one of the ironies of the novel, namely, that while Indianness is represented as antithetical to violence as a viable means of struggle, the unmasking of Jake as the famed *Aza Kwela*, the daredevil of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* (the African National Congress’s armed wing) instantly transforms him into a hero among his fellow Indians. Jake becomes an inspiration to many young Indian South Africans. His son, Zain, like many of his generation, promises to continue from where Jake has stopped. The pride that Indians draw from the realisation that *Aza Kwela* is one of their own highlights how the author values the Indian contribution towards the making of a just South Africa.

In the novel, the narrative oscillation between the past and the present contrasts not only two different modes of orientation to the subcontinent and South Africa but also two different approaches to the anti-apartheid struggle and the inscription of belonging and citizenship. In the struggle, the first-generation diasporics valorise non-violence and the power of reason over the militancy preferred by the younger generation. Their appeal to the civilisation discourse doubles as a signifier of their closer attachment to the subcontinent as the sacrificial approach preferred by their younger counterparts signify the latter’s closer affiliation to South Africa. Govinden, drawing on Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, has described the Satyagraha as ‘symptomatic of the question of discipline, order and control’ and that it was considered to be ‘*essentially* Indian’ during anti-apartheid struggle (2008: 56; e.a.), although, of course, both the ANC and the Pan Africanist Congress employed similar strategies in their civil disobedience campaigns until the 1960 Sharpeville Armed Struggle.

The linking of Indianness and the Satyagraha in this civilisation discourse privileges ‘India’ over South Africa. In a highly rhetorical delivery, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi makes an implicit claim that recourse to violence is tantamount to the destruction of Indianness, thereby equating

non-violence with Indianness<sup>7</sup> (Hassim 2002: 67). As such, the rejection of non-violence by the third and fourth generations amounts to a rejection of Indianness and simultaneously, if only symbolically, entails embracing South Africanness.

In the novel, Indianness functions as a rallying point, mainly in the earlier non-violent phase of the struggle. The novel identifies key historical figures such as Naicker, Goonum, Dadoo, Zainub Asvat, and Fatima Meer, who, in solidarity with Blacks and Coloureds, play a pivotal role in forging a united front against apartheid. In particular, women feature quite prominently in the struggle, mobilising their men across class, religious and ethnic differences to present a concerted opposition to a series of repressive laws (Hassim 2002: 95 - 96). The generation that takes over from these activists, however, make a significant strategic shift, sacrificially resorting to the armed struggle as the most effective way stamp their claim on South Africanness. The recourse to violence emerges as a counterpoint to the Satyagraha mode that apartheid South Africa has rendered into an unworkable signifier.

The novel's logic suggests that South Africanness can only be purchased through unreserved participation in the struggle for justice. The path of the struggle, far from negating or stifling Indianness, is actually an endorsement of its truest codes. The novel ends with vignettes of personal, soul-searching odysseys as the four male protagonists – Sandy, Nithin, Sam and Karan – unburden themselves to their wives in a bid to resolve their inner conflicts and come to grip with the social imperatives that bind them to

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<sup>7</sup> One intriguing contradiction that emerges in Hassim's novel is that while defensive violence is represented as definitive of Dara's Pathan ancestry, Dara's locatedness in South Africa has come to redefine it as a total negation of Indianness. With the first-generation immigrants, Yahya Ali Suleiman, Pravin Naran and Madhoo Daya, there is so much emphasises on the conflation of non-violence and Indianness in their instruction to their descendants that it comes to function as a measure of one's worth. Jake, Dara's firstborn militant son, loses his inheritance to his younger brother, Sam, due to his recourse to violence in the anti-apartheid struggle. Jake's choice of lifestyle, informed by a greater loyalty to his country, alienates him from his family.

the cause of justice – seemingly the only path to South Africanness. While the generation of their children have irrevocably committed themselves to resisting apartheid and embraced the country as their own, the four men, in the face of what seems to be the only logical recourse suggested in the novel, continue to vacillate on the vexed question of what form their participation in the struggle should take.

As in *The Lotus People*, the younger generation in the novel injects some militancy into the struggle. The establishment of *Umkhonto we Sizwe* signals the recourse to armed struggle. Govender, as Hassim does, also plots the processes through which Satyagraha is supplanted by armed struggle in the anti-apartheid movement, highlighting how the generational divide becomes critical to this shift. Besides, there are striking similarities between Hassim's Jake and Govender's Guru, Chin's militant nephew. Both readily forsake family privileges to devote themselves to the struggle; their capacity for sacrifice and the readiness with which they forfeit their privileges are shown to debunk the stereotype of Indians as a privileged group, obsessed only with making money. For Govender as for Hassim, 'blood sacrifice' becomes the ideal mode of inscribing belonging and citizenship. Just as Jake is returned home in a coffin having been tortured by agents of the Security Branch, Guru's body is returned home riddled with bullets as he attempts to engage the apartheid repressive machinery militarily. The cause for which they give their lives cements their relationship with the South African soil.

In the struggle, articulation of a 'black' identity is constructed as particularly desirable in presenting a common front against apartheid in the face of the regime's 'divide and rule' policy. In keeping with the policy, the apartheid regime and the British colonial authority before it, as Govinden notes, entrenched a European cultural hegemony under which both indigenous and indentured peoples were rendered as foreigners and systematically 'Othered.' The end of the anti-apartheid struggle has thus been to ensure that Africans, Indians and Coloureds belong to South Africa alongside the English and Afrikaners (Govinden 2008: 81). Govender's novel is given to the realisation of this all-embracing nation as succinctly captured by Guru in his view that 'Indians need to identify more with the African people if they are to secure the future of their children' (Govender 2006: 269). This is the same politics held by Michael Mbele, a coloured who chooses to identify himself as a 'native.' It contrasts sharply with Chin's

stance on politics. When he is invited to join the Cape Branch of the Indian Congress, Chin opines that a political union with the ANC in the fight against racism might 'make things more difficult for the Indians' (Govender 2006: 250). Chin's view is shared by many Indian traders (Govender 2006: 270). As in *The Lotus People*, the generational politics pits the young, who are far more radicalised, against their older counterparts, who are reluctant to join the struggle. Where Guru finds his uncle's anti-apartheid zeal wanting, he looks up to activists such as Velliammah Moodley and Thumbi Naidoo and many other unsung heroes and heroines who lost their lives in the struggle against colonialism and the colour bar. Through their 'blood sacrifice,' they demonstrated inspiring patriotism and secured their place in a South Africa that their children can share.

This vision of a non-racial South Africa is, however, undermined by the suspicion that the Indian business class harbour towards Africans. When Guru tells Chin that his decision to return to Durban to set up an ANC cell is prompted by apartheid injustices and the destruction of Cato Manor and the impending destruction of District Six, Chin shoots back:

What can you do about it? What can you, as an Indian, do about it? Just be thankful of what you have. Look at me, look at all these. We are living well. What more do you want? Indians are caught up in between. If the black people get into power you won't have a chance. Look at what happened during the 1949 riots ... (Govender 2006: 308 - 309).

As in *The Lotus People*, the 1949 riots become a watershed moment in defining Indo-African relations. Fed by white prejudice, the riots underline the difficulty of non-racial alliance, calculated as it is to justify apartheid's legalisation of racial separation (Maharaj 2009: 84). Remembering the riots underlies much of the anxieties that Indians have about the post-apartheid present and their perceived vulnerability within it, arising from a general distrust of 'black people.' Chin's angst about the *prospect* of the 'black people' in the seat of power and his complacency risk affirming the stereotype of Indians as sympathisers and beneficiaries of racial injustice, a stereotype around which Africans were quickly mobilised against Indians during the riots (Maharaj 2008: 85). Narrated from the vantage point of the

post-apartheid moment, the memory of the 1949 riots invites a critical re-examination of race-relations in the interest of forestalling a repeat of similar outbursts. Chin's emphasis on an unhyphenated Indian identity is similarly met with Guru's categorical disavowal of the same in favour of his South African identity (Govender 2006: 309). The evocation of Black Consciousness's non-racialism that is implicit here warrants a re-examination of the past to legitimate claims that are being made in the moment of narrating.

## **Conclusion**

Coovadia's, Hassim's and Govinden's novels emerge as products of a post-apartheid moment, which under the 'rainbow nation' project witnesses the supplanting of the politics of non-racial alliance by that of ethnic self-assertion. The novels evince increasing awareness that the assertion of blackness as the logic of an anti-apartheid struggle risks effacing Indianness that, as Rastogi notes, was 'already made fragile by migration and public invisibility' (2008: 26). Despite these shifts, the anxieties that the post-apartheid moment presents have, for Indian South African writers, occasioned the urgency to reconstitute the pasts that Indians share in a bid to legitimise their belonging and citizenship claims. The narrativisation of these histories reveals the remaking of Indianness by conditions of rootedness in ways that simultaneously bolster Indians' claim on South Africa. The desire for a particularly redeeming history that these authors articulate thus demands a keen sensitivity to their novels as products of particular historical and political forces.

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