



Indian African Fiction: Apartheid and Beyond

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Abstract

Life of the Diaspora has always been an issue of concern and a matter of study for Indian academics. The transition from the homeland to the host land is never natural and the transitions are captured in many forms. Diaspora and their stories bridge the gap for the Indians abroad to stay connected with their traditions. This study has been undertaken to investigate how the literature of the Indo South African Diaspora has been changing through decades and portrayal of these changing roles in contemporary South African Indian fiction, and to examine how this literature gives rise to new ways of thinking about South African culture. South African Indian fiction determines the conception of race as a social category shaped by its historical routes. South African Indian fiction explores the movement of Indians to South Africa during the nineteenth century, covering issues of migration, diaspora, transnationalism, hybridity, cultural undecidability, and blurring of frontier in the postapartheid fiction of Imraan Coovadia, Achmat Dangor, Farida Karodia, Beverley Naidoo, Shamin Sarif, and Ishtiyah Shukri. The interpretation of how the removal of apartheid failed to allow the races to reunite with the hope of a Rainbow Nation.

Key words: fiction, perspective, interpretation, rainbow, nation.

The history of mankind around the world has witnessed people leaving their original place to seek their fortunes, happiness and prosperity in faraway lands. Human beings from various strata of society prefer to migrate to other countries. The prospect of better job opportunities and better quality of life forces the individual to leave his/her homeland. The transition from the homeland to the host land is never natural and the transition is captured in many forms. The migration is an all inclusive term which includes the word 'Diaspora' too. The word 'Diaspora' can be defined as the dispersal of a people from their homeland. Diaspora is the term often used to describe any population which is considered 'deterritorialized' or

'transnational' – that is, which has originated in a land other than where they currently reside. They have social, economic, and political networks across the borders of nation-states or, indeed across the globe. The term Diaspora includes the various intellectual, socio-cultural, and political meanings of the place where they reside. Diaspora becomes the maker of movement across cultures and dislocation. "It is an approach through paradigms as varied as that of hybridity, multiplicity, paradox, polyphonic, multiculturalism." (Gillion 45)

Today the word diaspora means 'any de-territorialized population that is seeking to reterritorialize itself' (Verma, Seshan, 3). The term

'Diaspora' is now not specifically used for Jews only but to all nationals across the world that have moved out of their homelands to settle in other parts of the world for various reasons.

According to Bhikhu Parekh, the Indian Diaspora is like the banyan tree, the traditional symbol of the Indian way of life, which spreads out its roots in several soils, drawing nourishment from one when the rest dry up. Far from being homeless, they have several homes, and that is the only way they increasingly come to feel at home in the world. It has been noted that the migration from India started much before the colonial rule in India. Indian Diaspora has an overwhelming presence all around the world. It is the second largest Diaspora after Chinese and one of the most respected ethnic groups in world society. India being a rich country in cultural heritage goes deep into the psyche of the people who settled abroad. Indian values, rituals, customs, traditions, beliefs, and practices contradict many times to absorb and adapt to the new cultures. Sometimes this leads to conflict in generations and, it traumatizes the inner conscious. Several tools have been adopted to represent the psyche of Indian Diaspora. Literature, art, folk music, films, and plays are some of those tools.

Literature has always been a mirror to society, and this has been no truer than in South Africa. Drama has been a robust genre, being part of the warp and weft of the liberation struggle during the apartheid years. Our pantheon of dramatists, novelist, writers, and many internationally acclaimed literary figures, such as Ronnie Govender, Ashwin Desai, Ashwin Singh, Muthal Naidoo, Kessie Govender, Imraan Coovadia, Achmat Dangor, Farida Karodia, Beverley Naidoo, Shamin Sarif, Ishtiyaq Shukri, and Kriben Pillay, have relentlessly exposed South African society to itself, and to the world.

In a time, arguably, of diminishing intellectual and communal spaces for dissent and protest or even celebration, the theatre in South Africa continues to claim its right to explore the fault-lines and fissures of our society, and to create new and more inclusive social alignments. The use of comedy, as in Ashwin Singh's plays, where people come together to laugh at themselves and at one

another, but also engages in serious reflection and circumspection about our collective foibles. Ronnie Govender's works are significant in the construction of a South African national identity. His works engage critically with race, class and resistance through a collection of essays on Govender's oeuvre. His writings are re-invigorated by close reading within the context of postcolonial and critical theory. It recalls the resilience of the multiracial community of Cato Manor whose democratic coexistence and mutual respect comprise a model for the new nation. As a memory work, his texts recollect private and community identity in the wounded spaces of colonial and apartheid oppression.

Ashwin Desai's works reflect on the unique struggle and search to belong waged by the Indian community in South Africa that has proved penetratingly insightful and is rich in detail. In his books, *Arise Ye Coolies: Apartheid and the Indian 1960-1995*, and later *We are the Poors: Community Struggles in Post-Apartheid Africa*, he narrates the need for community and yet how this need must cohere with the one to preserve identity and even tradition in the struggle against hegemonies, during and even after apartheid, and that this struggle isn't merely one to be viewed in Manichean terms. He doesn't really deal with the Indian question of isolation, but how it has taken different turns over the decades. Many writers who have written about the post-apartheid South Africa, talks about identities and histories of the past which have sprung new challenges about unity and belonging.

Achmat Dangor's works are diverse in styles, talk of how difficult it is to establish pureness in identity matters and the new conflicts that might arise in a post-racial time. Identity may have been overcome with time but not history. As with other post-apartheid South African novels such as J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace*, *Bitter Fruit* talks of such interracial transgressions and what this might mean for a new South Africa.

Another writer who is setting his tales in a tumultuous post-apartheid South Africa is Imraan Coovadia, whose books beginning with *The Wedding* cover a wide terrain. Coovadia's *The Wedding* – the love story of Ismet and Khateja – is actually a

fictitious account of his grandparents' journey from India to South Africa.

During the final years of the apartheid era and subsequent transition to democracy, South African writers responded to the contemporary political turmoil and its daily effects on the people of South Africa. They satirized state-enforced racism and explored the possibilities of resistance. Now that apartheid is over, writers are questioning the conception of reconciliation and rebuilding. Writers are exploring literature that embraces these issues and has helped to shape definitions of ethnic identity and national unity. Apartheid and post-apartheid literature have become political narratives commencing a closer look at the juxtaposition of writing and ethics. Writers express their thoughts about apartheid in different ways through various forms of literature. At times the word "apartheid" is never even used in a piece of writing, but it is still a prominent theme in Indo-South African Literature.

Now one may question "What is Apartheid?" *Apartheid* (Afrikaans: "apartness") is the name of the policy that governed relations between the white minority and the non-white majority of South Africa during the 20th century. Although racial segregation had long been in practice there, the apartheid name was first used about 1948 to describe the racial segregation policies embraced by the white minority government. Apartheid dictated where South Africans, on the basis of their race, could live and work, the type of education they could receive, and whether they could vote.

"On the first day of school, my teacher, Miss Mdingane, gave each of us an English name and said that from thenceforth that was the name we would answer to in school. This was the custom among Africans in those days and was undoubtedly due to the British bias of our education. The education I received was a British education, in which British ideas, British culture, British institutions, were automatically assumed to be superior.

There was no such thing as African culture."
(Mandela, Nelson 24)

The above quote from Nelson Mandela's Autobiography clearly shows, the absenteeism of

African culture in Africa and cultural aspects of apartheid from the perspective of a young boy who have no idea how at each and every step he is moving away from his own land, ancestors, and way of life which he cherished till he was with his clan, his father. The Apartheid is not just discrimination against brown or coloured but spread across the human race and is not limited to specific geographical boundaries which is clearly evident by tracing three great men who fought for equality in their own time, and at different part of the world and they are Nelson Mandela, Martin Luther King Jr and Mahatma Gandhi.

Mahatma Gandhi, who was a barrister himself underwent the discrimination, and was forcibly removed from a whites-only carriage on a train in Pietermaritzburg, for not obeying laws that segregated each carriage according to race. Even though, the end of legislated apartheid was marked in 1990's, but the social and economic effects remained deeply entrenched even till today.

The collective experiences of violence and the plea for reconciliation that punctuate the rhythms of post-apartheid South Africa portray a national script in which ethnic, class, and gender affiliations blend and patterns of connectedness between varying communities are forged. The experiences of Indo-South African Post-Apartheid Literature demonstrate how the search for identity is an integral part of the national scene's project of connectedness. By exploring how 'Indianness' is articulated through the works of contemporary South African Indian writers.

Just a year back, on May 25, George Floyd, a 46-year-old African American man, died in Minneapolis after a white officer knelt on his neck, even when George complained for breathlessness, which created unrest across the US. Racial and ethnic tensions always take us back to where it started! Are we still there? Is it correct to say, Post-Apartheid? There is a shift in boundaries and new challenges of life in Post - Apartheid/Still Apartheid? The plight of Indian Diaspora in the foreign lands remains unpredictable to the Indians and re-examination is required on how apathy failed

to allow the races to reunite with the hope of a Rainbow Nation.

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