

Devarakshanam Govinden

# *'Sister Outsiders'*

The Representation of Identity  
and Difference in Selected Writings  
by South African Indian Women

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Devarakshanam Govinden

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# ONE

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## Exclusionary Practices in South African Literary Criticism: The Writings of Indian Women in South Africa

Will the Commission be sensitive to the word 'truth'?... If its interest in truth is linked only to amnesty and compensation, then it will have chosen not truth but justice. If it sees truth as the widest possible compilation of people's perceptions, stories, myths and experiences, it will have chosen to restore memory and foster a new humanity, and perhaps that is justice in its deepest sense. (Krog 1998:16)

### Introduction: A Time of Memory

In 1997 the then South African Minister of Justice, Dullah Omar, referred to the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in South Africa's reconstruction and development period as an attempt at 'healing the wounds of history' (cited in Nixon 1997:74). As with the TRC there has been much need among many South Africans since the transition to a democratic society to recount the suppressed histories of the past. One of the ways of rewriting history has been through the recalling of personal experiences of the apartheid era, in the quest to create an alternative national identity that transcends the separate 'nationalisms' that existed in the past. Rob Nixon (1997:74) has pointed out that 'the 1990's have witnessed an upsurge of South African memoirs and autobiographies as writers have begun mining the hitherto under-explored past with increasing vigour'.

Nixon (1997) has argued that 'a refusal of amnesia' is as important as some of the more material changes that have taken place in the reconstruction of the new society:

Many writers feel that post-apartheid literature plays an invaluable role by preventing, through restless exploration, the closure of history's channels. If the Truth and Reconciliation Commission has institutionalised the *rhetoric of witness* as a step towards healing, the new literature of autobiographical witness promises a more lasting *refusal of amnesia*. To revisit history can be a regenerative endeavour; it need not entail being stuck in the acrimony of the past. The lifting of censorship, the unbanning of outlawed political parties, amnesty for political

prisoners, the exiles' return, and Mandela's electoral victory have collectively led to a new liberty in which to engage history in more candid, textured, and impassioned terms. The result has been not just a return to the past but a return in a more personal way (p. 77, my emphases).

Johan U. Jacobs, writing earlier, in the watershed year of 1994, also sees the changes in the literary environment as a reflection of the changing political climate in South Africa:

Since 1991 South Africa has begun to recover from the censorship and banning under the Nationalist Government of the previous forty years; only now can this history freely be written and freely read. The country is at present engaged in a process of self-narration – a national recollection of those blanked-out areas of its identity. The current proliferation of South African life stories may be seen as part of the autobiographical impulse of an entire nation finally bringing its past into proper perspective (p. 878).

In recent times South African Indian women have been part of this large company of South African writers engaging in a 'refusal of amnesia' by dealing with the apartheid past in a 'personal way'. They have been among those undertaking the process of 'self-narration' that foregrounds some of those 'blanked-out areas' of South Africa's identity as a nation. Among these Indian women writers are Jayapraga Reddy, Agnes Sam, Farida Karodia, Zuleikha Mayat, Fayiza Khan, Dr Goonam, Phyllis Naidoo and Fatima Meer. In previous decades the writings of Ansuyah Singh and Muthal Naidoo constituted significant literary milestones. While some of these Indian writers receive attention, others are barely recognised as part of the larger body of South African writers. Historically, matters of race, ethnicity and identity under an increasingly intransigent and repressive white regime assumed particular importance in South Africa (see Jolly 1996:371), and these are all dealt with in different ways in these writings by Indian women. The writings are not only significant in signalling local discursive issues. Their significance may be gauged by the resonance they have with post-colonial writings in general, where pervasive concerns are those of colonial and neo-colonial domination (and in South Africa, rampant racial oppression), dispossession and cultural fragmentation, finding and defining 'home', crises of identity, and living with differences.

Although many of these issues are dealt with in writings by Indian women in South Africa these writings have largely gone unnoticed in South African literary anthologising and criticism. They have not been properly recognised locally or internationally as part of the collective critique of South African culture and politics. In this period of ongoing change it is necessary to incorporate these marginal voices in a more determined way into this critical discourse. A distinctly 'gynocritical' approach, against a male-dominated and male-defined literary endeavour in recent decades, has brought writings of women in South Africa to the foreground. With some effort, one may discover that Indian women's writings in South Africa also provide a useful lens with which to read and re-read the important issues of our time. As with those of other black women writers in South Africa who were largely excluded and 'othered', autobiographical, fictional and



discursive writing produced by Indian women in South Africa constitutes a way of 'talking back' (Smith 1993:20), and it demands to be recognised as such.

The political significance of an excavatory project of this kind should not be underestimated. Florence Stratton (1994:176), looking at exclusionary practices in African literature, argues that excluding women's writing has serious consequences in all walks of life: 'The critical practice of excluding women's literary expression from African literature is in Frederic Jameson's terms "a socially symbolic act". It reproduces in symbolic form, and therefore reinforces, institutional forms of exclusion that operate to marginalise women in society'. Accordingly, Stratton argues that the attempt to write women back into the literary tradition is also an attempt to write women back into every other sphere of social life.

The influence of colonialism and of apartheid is fundamental in the exclusion of black women writers in general. Margaret Higonnet (1994:200) states that a 'discourse of centres and margins, of course, can be used to discredit or trivialise literatures on stylistic, generic, or historic grounds', with Western and European literature seen as the centre and African and Asian literature viewed as marginal. Indian women's writings in South Africa have obviously been smothered in the larger politics of marginality that has attended the production and reception of literary texts historically, to the extent that the marginalisation has gone unnoticed even in corrective archaeological work. The idea of a 'core' and 'periphery' operates in a national context as well as globally.

Women's writing is not the only corpus that has suffered the fate of being seen as 'non-mainstream'. Higonnet points out that in the traditional delineation of high art versus low art, based on the binarism of intrinsic and extrinsic factors, not only women's literature but ethnic literature, especially that written in minority cultures, has also had to suffer marginalisation (p. 198). In view of this observation, it is arguable that Indian women's writings in South Africa have suffered marginalisation not only because of gender discrimination, but also because they have been seen as part of a minority culture.

In this study as a whole my purpose is both excavatory and discursive. I draw attention to a neglected corpus of writing in South African literary criticism. I foreground the writings of South African Indian women in a comprehensive overview of some of the most important works that have emerged so far. In exploring this field I simultaneously engage in a critical discussion of issues of identity and difference in relation to these writings and interrogate the very notion of 'South African Indian women'.

In this introductory chapter I consider exclusionary practices in South African literary anthologising and criticism in relation to South African Indian women's writings, and provide the broad scope of the study. This is not to engage in a case of special pleading for recognition of Indian women's writings as much as to draw the contours of the critical landscape in which literary writing has generally been received. My overview would be of interest to scholars in this field, both South African and international, as I point out the way in which Indian women have been omitted from serious academic consideration. Of course the field of reception has broadened now, with the media and bookshops, through the growing attention to reviews, book launches and interviews with writers, playing a significant role in this respect. I give some attention to



the question of reception – who reads these texts – at different points in my study, especially when I consider the individual writers.

Underpinning this study and linking the two processes – gynocritical and discursive – is a critical appreciation of the modes of representing identity and difference that an exploration of Indian women's writing might yield. Through genres such as autobiography, autobiographical fiction, poetry, fiction, short stories, drama, essays and discursive writings, I explore how social meanings and personal experiences are articulated and how the writers, portraying aspects of South African social and cultural history for the past 140 years, contribute to the enrichment and expansion of South African literary and cultural studies.

## **Exclusion of Indian Women's Writings in South African Literary Criticism**

Some of the recent critical discussions and surveys of South African literatures proceed as if writing by South African Indian women simply does not exist. The exclusion of Indian women's writings in South Africa must be seen as a dimension of the larger exclusion of women's writings, white and black, from South African literature in general. Such exclusion is the result, among other things, of the cultural politics of gender and of race in English literature – a literature which served as the foundations for the development of South African literature.

The marginalisation of Indian women writers in South African literary historiography and criticism may have been caused by several factors. Given the separation of racial groups historically, and the dominance of male writers, the literary achievements of Indian women have not been widely known by local Western audiences. Since these efforts have been relegated to the margins of South African society, anthologists, publishers and researchers have been inclined to gloss over them. Even 'fringe' activities in the arts have been those of Western alternative forms rather than those from different cultural traditions.

I believe, too, that the institutionalisation of English Studies in South Africa has also affected the reading and reception of texts by Indian women. 'Tradition' is so easily naturalised that we tend to forget that it has been created. Rory Ryan (1990:2) has stated that 'hegemonic discursive practice represses, marginalises and recuperates all rival practices in order to present itself as crucial; its existence is a sign of limitation and closure masquerading as freedom, invigoration and necessity'. For Indian women writers in South Africa, I would argue that this marginalisation resulted in a cycle of neglect: it has been detrimental, among other things, to the development of a more vigorous culture of writing and publishing, and to a fuller appreciation of the works that have already been produced.

When one is engaged in excavatory work focusing on women's writing, and black women's writings in particular, one must be crucially aware of the internal processes of hierarchisation and the way in which a literary hierarchy tends to be patterned on the

social hierarchy (see Davies's 1986:2). While the latter is criticised by liberal white male critics, complicity in the former tends to be overlooked. Carol Boyce Davies' arguments are directly pertinent to the discussion of the exclusion in South Africa of writings by Indian women, who have very likely been seen as a minority within a minority. She draws attention to the notion of 'major' literature and 'minor' literatures, and the fact that 'minor literature' is equated with 'minorities'. This is what seems to have happened to Indian women's writings in the South African literary tradition. With Davies we should ask, 'what defines and constitutes a major literature? What makes a literature or writer minor or major?' As she points out, such a discussion is central to the 'transformation of curricula as it identifies issues of marginalisation and the subordination of a variety of under-represented literatures and voices' (p. 4).

## A Historical Perspective

The extent of, and possible reasons for, the exclusion of writings by Indian women might be more fully appreciated if one took a historical perspective and tried to understand the direction a local tradition of writing in English took, a tradition that emerged from the mainstream metropolitan one. A historical survey may, of course, be used to 'prove' all sorts of things. I concede that presenting a literary history is a process of historical reconstruction in itself and agree with David Bunn (1996:33) that a more critical approach would take into consideration questions of genealogy, genre and political consciousness, and the way in which they constitute either internal and external determinations.

I present here a broad sweep of literary and critical publications in the twentieth century simply to trace a general pattern of exclusion of Indian women's writings. I believe that excavatory study revolving around this theme would show the ideological trajectory of literary studies in South Africa that resulted in such a pattern of exclusion. I consider literary production and its reception in tandem as complementary activities in the development of a literary tradition, and cross the decades looking at patterns of emphasis and inclusion in the different genres. My modest exercise should be seen in the context of a wider call for such activity. Critics have intermittently been reiterating the need for a general study of this nature to expose literary study to itself. There is definitely a need for historical anthologies of South African criticism (see Driver 1996) in order to develop a more critical approach to the inclusions and exclusions of the past. Stephen Gray, for example, has argued that an examination of past anthologies would help one to trace the historical construction of South African poetry (see Klopper 1990:268–69). He calls for greater independence of writing from criticism so that there would be more self-conscious criticism: 'That Southern African English literature has not created a significant accompanying critical machine other than that sustained by its own authors is symptomatic of the peculiar lack of self-awareness of the literature itself' (Gray 1979:9). Ryan (1990:11), in a scathing attack on 'literary-intellectual behaviour in South Africa', has argued that, 'There is pitifully little research being undertaken into the sociology of knowledge in literary studies in South Africa'.

Throughout the twentieth century excavation of writings and the re-ordering of the literary landscape has been a major critical activity, but my point is that it has been selective. The present study may be seen as following this tradition by identifying and addressing a lacuna: a considerable corpus of published (and unpublished) writing by Indian women that has been overlooked by literary anthologists, critics, and historians – a corpus that is generally not seen as part of or relevant to South African cultural history, literature and historical discourse. Each decade had its own critical priorities and imperatives and, as we shall see, Indian women's writings hardly featured among them.

In the early decades of the twentieth century there was an attempt in South Africa to construct an indigenous English literary tradition, separate from that of the British. But 'indigenous' did not really include black writers as much as it did white writers of English descent, writing of South African experiences. This is why white women writers such as Olive Schreiner and Pauline Smith were readily incorporated into the South African literary landscape. It is only in recent times that critical feminist readings of their work have developed and they have been claimed as part of a women's tradition of writing in South Africa, with the work of Dorothy Driver and Cherry Clayton, among others, significant in this field.

The early English anthologists, if we take one example, found it difficult, in their attempts to find roots in African soil, to free themselves completely from Eurocentric literary influences. F. C. Slater's *The Centenary Book of South African Verse* (1925) is an early example of drawing attention to an emerging indigenous tradition in this way. Slater, whose revised anthology, *The New Centenary Book of South African Verse*, was published in 1945, was among those trying to break from the colonial hold, but Romantic and Victorian influences made him construct 'a pre-industrial, arcadian South Africa' in his collection (Klopper 1990:275). Gray (1979:170) points out that no oral black poets, even in translation, appear in this anthology. Roy Campbell is another classic example of the attempt to establish a tradition of South African poetry. With William Plomer, Campbell in 1926 edited a literary journal called *Voorslag* ('The Whiplash'), to encourage the development of a distinctive South African Anglophone literary culture. However, Campbell has been seen by a critic such as Chapman as drawing on 'a British-South African Imperial tradition of African exotica' that has its origins, for example, in the novels of Rider Haggard (cited in Klopper 1990:281). In the immediate post-war period, Roy MacNab's co-edited *South African Poetry: – A New Anthology* (1948) was the first to feature a black poet, H. I. E. Dhlomo. MacNab also edited *Towards the Sun* (1950) and *Poets in South Africa* (1958). These local critics, with their landmark anthologies (see Lockett 1991:26), promoted writers selectively to serve as defining examples of South African literary history. In developing this separatist trajectory, these early poets and critics tended to ignore completely or relegate to the margins the writings that existed in other communities in South Africa.

This state of affairs was to persist for decades in spite of the emergence of a tradition of black protest literature, of which *Drum* magazine in the 1950s may be seen as the forerunner. There was still a hankering after the metropolitan centre of English Studies in the work of Roy MacNab and Guy Butler, who dominated the 1950s and 1960s.

Butler's main cause was the inclusion of South African literature in university syllabuses, but this was still directed to white writers. Butler's *A Book of South African Verse* (1959) worked towards a 'canon' of established poets. In his work, *The Republic and the Arts*, published in 1964, he still saw white and black people in broad, stereotypical ways. However, the creative activity at this time was showing another trajectory, as poets such as Sydney Clouts, Ruth Miller and Douglas Livingstone, who were coming into their own, were more interested in forging a peculiarly African style in their writing than Butler was. Their chief responsibility and objective was to secure the freedom of the writer from the censorship laws that characterised the period. Es'kia Mphahlele, as a black writer, in his significant work, *The African Image* (1962), was also calling for Southern African English writing to be seen in the larger context of African literature and experience (Gray 1979:10–11), in spite of the metropolitan pull that Butler and others succumbed to.

The 1960s, referred to as the 'silent decade' by Michael Chapman (1996:246), was a time when a spate of black writing was banned and many well-known writers went into exile. Chapman points out that it was for this reason that *Drum* magazine was particularly necessary, as it continued with valiant 'acts of recovery and reassessment' of black writing. Contributing to this 'silence' was the vigorous application of the apartheid laws and categorisings, which served to create marginal literatures, and diminish their value in the process. There is no doubt that Indian women's writings suffered as a result. For example, in 1960 Ansuyah Singh published her novel, *Behold the Earth Mourns*. This was a historic literary event, as it was the first time that a black woman had published a novel, but the book remained largely unknown outside the Indian community. It must also be remembered that there were few publishing outlets in this period; Singh used an obscure publisher called Purfleet. One of the lone efforts at literary publishing for black writing emerged in the late 1960s, when the literary magazine *The Classic*, initiated by Nat Nakasa and Barney Simon, encouraged writing by black people; but initiatives such as these were difficult to sustain.

Following in the footsteps of Campbell and Plomer, Jack Cope and Uys Krige compiled *The Penguin Book of South African Verse* (1968), which contained English poems and translations of poems in Afrikaans and African languages (e.g. Sesotho, isiXhosa and isiZulu). The compilers praised Campbell and Plomer, who in their opinion had 'started a totally new direction in South African English verse [with] their fierce criticism and rejection of established values' (Cope & Krige 1968:20). In their collection Cope and Krige included lesser-known English and Afrikaner women poets such as Phyllis Haring, Anne Welsh, Jill King, Sheila Cussons and Olga Kirsch (together with the better-known Elizabeth Eybers, Ingrid Jonker and Ruth Miller). They did note in their introduction that 'men and women of all races write verse in English', and included Indians in this category (p. 21), but did not include any verse by Indian writers, male or female.

As 'indigenous' writing was redefined, especially in the wake of the Sharpeville massacre and the Soweto uprising, which had a significant impact on the development of literature in South Africa, there was a more determined critical effort to include black

voices in the literary tradition. A spate of literary histories and critical writing mainly against apartheid emerged, promoted largely by the English-speaking academy. Christopher Heywood, who edited *Aspects of South African Literature* (1976), urged the compilation of a complete history, one that filled the gaps and cut through all boundaries. In 1979 Stephen Gray's *Southern African Literature: An Introduction*, based on his PhD thesis, *The Critical Co-ordinates of South African Literature* (1977) was published. This constituted an important event as Gray (1979:152), looking particularly at fiction, criticised the trajectory of English writing that maintained a liberal tradition in South African literary studies. Although Sarah Christie, Geoff Hutchings and Don MacLennan, in their critical work, *Perspectives on South African Fiction* (1980), were to criticise Gray for neglecting to see that South African fiction extended beyond realist fiction – they felt that he distorted the tradition and neglected to include writers such as Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee – they do acknowledge that Gray had rightly drawn attention to survey-criticism that tends to confuse bibliographical description with the genealogy of a literature.

Christie, Hutchings and MacLennan also exhorted all to move away from the tunnel vision of liberalism. They expanded the critical discourses around English literature to include romance, pastoralism, realism and fabulation, traversing the literary landscape from Rider Haggard to J. M. Coetzee. Their work was a milestone at the time as it included 'fabulists' such as Sheila Fugard and J. M. Coetzee, but also 'pastoralists' such as Sol Plaatje, and 'realists' such as Es'kia Mphahlele. It was a significant step that these black writers were now being admitted into the 'great tradition' of South African writing, although such inclusions were generally cautious.

The 1980s saw the period of indigenisation become more clearly defined as local black writers were more pointedly represented in anthologies. Kelwyn Sole, Isabel Hofmeyr, Stephen Gray, Tim Couzens, Mike Kirkwood and Michael Chapman (1996:419) contributed significantly to this development. Hofmeyr and Kirkwood, for example, emphasised the influence of Marxism in the critique of literary studies. They were highly critical of colonial as well as liberal ideology in the study of literature and introduced a more clearly defined class-based analysis (Klopper 1990:258). They also responded readily to the alternative publishing ventures such as *Drum* magazine and *Staffrider*. These critics were fighting another kind of exclusion – that based on race, class and ideology. With the decade enduring two States of Emergency their work had a particular significance on the socio-political front.

There was a self-conscious attempt at this time to see the literary establishment become less elitist, to recover forgotten indigenous texts, and to encourage the enterprises of new local literary publishers. Revisionist historiography turned to detailed, local work, with spaces being opened up to small voices, even though some rather 'dubious colonials' were resurrected in the process (see Chapman 1996:418, 419). But attention was generally directed to black male writers, rather than to black women writers. Priority was given to race and apartheid and the marginalisation of black men. Ingrid de Kok (1996:6) points out that the 'battle over authority, and over the "authentic" representations of the terms of South African life ... characterised literary discussions

during the apartheid decades', and it is clear that men rather than women were seen as providing these representations. In important anthologies of this time, such as *The Return of the Amasi Bird* (1982), *Voices from Within* (1982) and the *Staffrider* Tenth Anniversary collection (1988), women's voices, black and white, were distinctly absent or minimal (see Lockett 1991:73).

In the various attempts to include black writers – Indian, African and 'coloured' – in anthologies and critical commentaries, Indian male writers, rather than their female counterparts, became the perennial favourites, and their own published collections seemed to add to their stature. Well-known among male Indian poets was Shabbir Banoobhai, whose collections of poems, *Echoes of My Other Self* (1980) and *Shadows of a Sun-darkened Land* (1984), both received acclaim. Essop Patel was another writer who appeared frequently in anthologies of poetry. He produced collections of his poetry, *They Came at Dawn* (1980), *Fragments in the Sun* (1985) and *The Bullet and the Bronze Lady* (1987), and was seen as an influential voice.

Exclusionary practices in respect of Indian women's writings were probably dictated by perceptions of political relevance. Indian women's writings would not have been seen as being political. Through his depictions of Fordsburg and Vrededorp of the pre-Sharpeville era in *The Hajji and Other Stories* (Shava 1989:154, 155), in the tradition of 'Soweto' writing, Ahmed Essop was considered a significant writer in the 1980s in the context of black writing, and his short stories frequently reproduced. Andre Brink and J. M. Coetzee's anthology of short stories, *A Land Apart: A South African Reader*, includes Essop's short story 'Dolly' (Brink & Coetzee 1986). In *The Vita Anthology of New South African Short Fiction*, edited by Marcia Leveson (1988), Essop's short story, 'Love' is selected, together with Deena Padayachee's 'A New Woman in Town' and Farouk Asvat's 'Forgiveness'. Farouk Asvat drew from Black Consciousness for his collection of poems, *A Celebration of Flames* (1987). Achmat Dangor, who wrote a short novel, *Waiting for Leila* (1981), and published a collection of poems, *Bulldozer* (1983), was also seen as a politically 'engaged' black writer. Dangor's later novel, *Z Town Trilogy* (1990), and a collection of poems entitled *Private Voice* (1992) became widely known for their daring political content.

Michael Chapman, who made a major contribution to the development of literary studies in South Africa in the 1980s and ensured that new black voices were constantly foregrounded, actively promoted Indian male writers. Many black male writers, including Indian male writers, were specifically included in his critical writings and anthologies. Chapman's anthologies, *A Century of South African Poetry* (1981), *Voices from Within: Black Poetry from Southern Africa* (co-edited with Achmat Dangor, 1982), *South African Poetry: A Modern Perspective* (1982), *The Paperbook of South African English Poetry* (1986), and *Accents: An Anthology of Poetry for the English-Speaking World* (co-edited with Tony Voss 1986) featured poems by Shabbir Banoobhai, Farouk Asvat, Essop Patel and Achmat Dangor. Chapman's analysis of Banoobhai, included in an analysis of significant black writing of the period (in *South African English Poetry: A Modern Perspective*), exposed his writing to the general reading public. (It should be pointed out that writers such as Asvat and Dangor would not see themselves as Indian



writers but as South African and African writers.) Chapman's efforts were clearly 'excavatory', as this was the first time that Banoobhai was given any critical attention – and they were probably influenced by the fact that Kelwyn Sole was responsible for nurturing the young poet into print. Yet there was no apparent awareness of the existence of Indian women who were also writing at the time. The only Indian woman writer that Chapman notes is Jayapraga Reddy, and this is likely through her inclusion in the *Staffrider* series.

In her critical work on black South African writings, *A Vision of Order: A Study of Black South African Literature in English (1914–1980)* Ursula Barnett also gave attention to Indian male writers. She provided a more comprehensive bibliography than other compilers to date on Indian male writers. Arguing for inclusivity – 'you can't carve up the country of the imagination' – Barnett (1983:7), drawing from Es'kia Mphahlele, expands the definition of 'black' or 'African' writing to encompass not only colour or birth, but also political purposes. African writing is seen as literature with 'an African setting authentically handled and to which experience[s] originating in Africa are integral'.

In the anthology of South African poetry, *SA in Poësie/SA in Poetry* (1988), edited by Johan van Wyk, Pieter Conradie and Nik Constandaras, which tried to provide a corrective balance between Afrikaans and black poets, the poetry of B. D. Lalla, hitherto unknown to the wider literary community, was included. Lalla's poetry had not featured in any anthologies, and its inclusion was a necessary corrective. The importance of Lalla's work has been highlighted in Ayub Sheik's research on the writer (Sheik 1998). However, none of the other writings by male or female Indian writers was mentioned by van Wyk and his fellow editors, and Lalla's inclusion might well have been accidental, or the result of a conscious decision to include an Indian poet. The anthology did not include a single Indian woman poet. If these anthologists had looked closely enough they would have seen a body of writing that was developing a political edge of its own.

Such exclusionary practices seemed to have become 'naturalised' in the literary critical imagination. In her paper on 'Asian Literature in South Africa' presented at the Bad Boll Conference on South African Literature in 1987 Neela Govender-Alvarez-Pereyre also unwittingly foregrounded Indian male writers as being representative, pointing out that 'nothing comprehensive has been written so far on Asian South African writers in the field of creative literature' as it is 'a literature in the making' (1987:53). She argued that this literature was occurring at a time when 'the Asian community in South Africa finds itself, politically speaking, at a crossroads'. Her paper focused on the work of South African Indian male writers such as Ronnie Govender, Kriben Pillay and Farouk Asvat. However, Govender-Alvarez-Pereyre, a writer herself, neglected any reference to the writings of Indian women, even her own, and gave no hint that there was in existence a considerable body of Indian women's literary and non-literary work that had developed since the arrival of Indians in South Africa.

The only female writer who seemed to have enjoyed any critical attention in these years was Jayapraga Reddy. Her short story 'The Spirit of Two Worlds' was included in the retrospective edition of *Staffrider, Ten Years of Staffrider* (1988). Later anthologies

were to continue with this trend. Percy Mosieleng and Temba Mhambi have included Reddy's short story, 'Friends', in their collection, *Contending Voices in South African Fiction* (1993).

The end of the 1980s saw the publication of a critical survey of South African black writing, compiled by Piniel Viriri Shava: *A People's Voice – Black South African Writing in the Twentieth Century* (1989). In his book there is an attempt to rectify the imbalance between white and black writers. The survey claims to 'draw attention to the rich and diverse literary contribution that black South African novelists, poets and dramatists have made' (Shava 1989:cover page). It foregrounds writers such as Oswald Mbuyiseni Mtshali, James Matthews, Peter Abrahams and Alex La Guma, but almost predictably omits women in general. In his criticism of the book a few years later, Mbulelo Mzamane (1991a:133, 134) draws attention to a 'most telling indictment', that '*A People's Voice* turns out in the end to be no more than an African male-voice choir'. With the omission of black women's writings in general, there was no likelihood that Indian women's writings would have had any chance of being included in Shava's critical study.

## A Female Tradition

An important development in the 1980s was the publication of anthologies and collections of women's poetry and short stories and feminist literary criticism. Susan Brown, Isabel Hofmeyr and Susan Rosenberg edited the feminist publication *LIP from Southern African Women* (1983), which was the first feminist anthology. It included a lone short story by Sherin Ahmed, entitled 'Good Girls Don't Work', but no real attempt beyond this to find more Indian women's voices is evident. *Vukani Makhosikazi: South African Women Speak* (1985) edited by Jane Barrett et al., *Women in South Africa: From the Heart* (1988), edited by Seagang Tsikang and Dinah Lefakane, and *Women in Southern Africa* (1987), a collection of essays edited by Christine Qunta, followed with further inclusions of women's writings and views. Although Indian women were not included, the volume is an important one as it dealt with 'outstanding African women' from 1500 BCE. Further examples of anthologies of women's writings that were published at this time were Ann Oosthuizen's *Sometimes When it Rains: Writings by South African Women* (1987), which included a short story by Fatima Meer entitled 'Amaphekula' (Terrorist), and Nohra Moerat's *Siren Songs: An Anthology of Poetry Written by Women* (1989).

Critical recognition increasingly emerged for women writers, many of them white. The theme of 'recovery', of retrieving a suppressed or lost tradition, of 'finding a voice', underlined this critical, excavatory work. In a climate of feminist ferment there was an attempt to unearth unknown women writers, to criticise the literary establishment for its neglect of women writers and to develop anthologies, collections and critical works on women's writings. Some of the women writers who have been 'recovered' in this process and are now more widely known are Bertha Goudvis, Francis Bancroft and Daphne Rook (see Clayton 1989a:6).

The eighties also was the time when black women's writing was coming into its own after the earlier lone attempts of Noni Jabavu (*Drawn in Colour* in 1960 and *The Ochre People* in 1963), Bessie Head (*When the Rain Clouds Gather* in 1969) and Miriam Tlali (*Muriel at Metropolitan* in 1975). The achievement of Ellen Kuzwayo, with her autobiography, *Call Me Woman* (1985), symbolised this breakthrough. Elleke Boehmer (1995:225) highlights the wider political significance of this black South African woman's autobiography:

in the 1980s, during the years when government repression was at its height, autobiographies by black women first began to appear in significant numbers in South Africa, a development marked in particular by Ellen Kuzwayo's path-breaking *Call Me Woman* (1985). On the one hand, black South African women struggled to withstand the system of multiple discrimination that was apartheid. On the other, they tried to stake out a place for themselves in the always still male-dominated liberation movements. The autobiography allowed them to give shape to an identity grounded in these diverse experiences of endurance and overcoming. The life-story was also seen as a way of forging political solidarity, reaching out to black women caught in similar situations.

Apart from Ellen Kuzwayo's autobiography, writings by Emma Mashinini, Miriam Tlali, Caesarina Kona Makhoere, Sindiwe Magona and Gcina Mhlope became well known. Lesser-known writers, and from an earlier time, such as Paulina Dlamini (nineteenth century), and composers and performers of *izibongo* (Zulu praise poetry), such as Princess Magogo, began to receive new critical attention, encouraged by the work of critics such as Liz Gunner.

Cherry Clayton, also using Kuzwayo as an example, argued in *Women and Writing in South Africa: A Critical Anthology* that the experience of authorship was important as it gave black women a voice, maintaining that the critical recovery and restoration of 'lost' or 'minor' women writers would revise 'an explicit or implicit literary canon' (Clayton 1989a:6). 'Claiming a voice' was, indeed, achieved for many black women through their writing. This notion of 'recovery' was indicated by some of the titles that were used (and the substantial work they signalled); for example, *Let it be Told*, by Lauretta Ngcobo (1988), was a collection of essays on black women's writings. Writing helped black women to question and explore their reality. Tsitsi Dangarembga fictionalises this 'process of expansion' in the figure of Tambu in her novel *Nervous Conditions* (1988). The novel concludes with Tambu speaking of her desire to tell her story, which is also that of the other women in her life:

Quietly, unobtrusively and extremely fitfully, something in my mind began to assert itself, to question things and refuse to be brainwashed, bringing me to this time when I can set down this story. It was a long and painful process for me, that process of expansion. It is a process whose events stretched over many years and would fill another volume, but the story I have told here is my own story, the story of four women whom I loved, and four men, this story of how it all began (p. 204).