THE VINTAGE BOOK
OF SOUTH AFRICAN INDIAN WRITING

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INTRODUCTION

THIS IS A UNIQUE ANTHOLOGY IN MANY WAYS. Firstly, the key aim is to celebrate 150 years of Indian immigration to South Africa (although there is evidence that Indians were here far earlier than 1860). Secondly, it is at an auspicious moment in the history of South Africa and with great delight that this text is able to showcase the rich texture and quality of a growing collective oeuvre which has begun to merit a place alongside the most flourishing literature of the world. Thirdly, the anthology attempts to include prose writings – both fiction and non-fiction – created during this period by South African Indian writers working in English. A limited range of South African fiction is explored and due to the confines of space, poetry and drama were not included.

It is a mammoth task to select from a wide repertoire of writings concomitant with the enormous, yet rewarding, mission of doing the reading for this anthology. Given the history of South Africa and the circumstances of the Indian diaspora, fictional writing took its first steps much later in the 1950s and it seems that only in the past three decades has this sub-genre of writings flourished. However, there are writings that depict the earlier years of the immigrants – Aziz Hassim's debut novel has its roots in the Mughal empire in India, the story of the feisty Votti Veeramah Somayya is set in 1890, Achmat Dangor's story covers the time of the British Raj at the end of the 19th century, Ansuyah Singh's narrative is set during Gandhi's sojourn in South Africa while Devarakshanam Govinden and Raazamah Pillay give us insights into the pioneering days of the immigrants in Natal. Recent writings alone form a major part of this anthology – it is like an unstoppable assault on the senses, the excitement of new themes, the emotions (often Janus-faced, still looking to the past and forward gazing), the imagination and the spirit of new writers who have emerged on the literary landscape.

The notion of 'writing' in this anthology takes on a necessarily complex description, limning more than an identity, but a network of multiple contradictions, sketches and inscriptions. It is obvious that the stories transgress the disciplines that the academe has traditionally constituted, which include the divisions of economics, anthropology, history, philosophy, literary criticism and sociology. Even with no Marxist leanings, it is not difficult to detect that indenture, like slavery, was an economic venture for the colonial masters and that apartheid South Africa was an advanced capitalist society underpinned by the statutory oppression and exploitation of black people for white benefit. It would be highly irresponsible to forget to locate cultural analyses within the historical

context of colonialism, the organisation of production and the appropriation of surplus. After all, where the disenfranchised not the 'surplus people'? How else would one understand the forced removal, dislocation and destruction of vibrant Indian communities like Cato Manor, Riverside, Stella Hill and the Warwick triangle in Durban and the creation of townships like Chatsworth, Phoenix and Lenasia as reservoirs for cheap labour? This expropriation created surplus land and value for a minority based on race. The issue of class is even more problematic since it transcends race. There was a significant merchant class (albeit small in comparison with the *girmitiyas*) among the immigrants and the exploitation by the merchants of their fellow compatriots is no different from middle class capitalists in any third world context. Hassim's *The revenge of Kali* (2009) highlights the social contradictions present in the exploits of the Grey Street merchants during the politically difficult 1950s and 60s, thus reinforcing the fact that the Indian identity forms a heterogeneity that is forever irreducible and difficult to grasp. The paradox is evident when the capitalist agenda of some in the merchant class is juxtaposed against the revolutionary potential of the 'Coolie dynamites', the saboteurs, the Red Square orators, the Communists and the Umkhonto we Sizwe cadres[1]. Hence, the world that is captured in these stories, especially the biographies, is intricate, complex and multi-levelled. There is no proper way to read the world of any community; it would be naive to read narratives in terms of rationality and averages as if it were a textbook. One must fill the vision of literary form with its connections to what is being read: history of indenture, political economy and brutality of apartheid, the happenings in the world and the journeys of the exiles. It has to be read against the debates around the nature of the aesthetics and of 'high culture', of the value of writings not conceived in exclusive and elitist forms, of an unquestioning academe that privileged the canon and of writers (both black and white) who did not see value in engaging with the difficult postcolonial questions of education and class.

When the seminal text, *South African Indian writings in English*, emerged in 2002, the exclusive nature of the project was critiqued as tantamount to a 'coolie ghettoizing' given the need to reconcile the ravages of apartheid on the literary history landscape with its unfortunate racial enclaves of white writings and black writings. The critique is valid – projects like this may reinforce the exclusivity of contemporary South African literary history based on race. However, I still maintain that this exercise is relevant to current literary debates around South African writings, the continued need to challenge the dominant ideas of literature and culture and the imperative to address matters of race, identity, place and ethnicity within the new nation-state. The categories of diaspora versus domicile, global versus local, colonisation and indigenous cultures, and neocolonialism and new cultural formations are all relevant, especially in postcolonial developing contexts. The shift of marginalised writings to the

centre, an objective of this project, is a strategy to strengthen and enrich the South African literary historiography and is necessary for the creation of a culturally rich and tolerant society.

A re-thinking of writings within the new democratic dispensation after decades of repression, is not possible without profound understanding, resulting from in-depth cultural studies, of what precisely needs to be revived, recreated and excavated. The rhetoric of witness of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is a step towards healing and has encouraged writers to engage with history and the 'writing of the self' in a more candid manner and within a safe space. There is validity in Antjie Krog's argument that if the TRC 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[2]. The subaltern speak for themselves in these stories, there is a 'talking back', a restoration of memory, bringing to light the blanked-out areas of their identity and in the case of the prisoners and exiles, of their lives. Many of the activists and stalwarts of the liberation movement stress their essential humaneness in their self-narratives, there is a recovering of a consciousness, and a reflection of their role as interventionist historian. Then there is the question that many of the activists raised with poignant elegance in their autobiographies and articulated so honestly by Mandela[3]: 'the question each of us raises on occasion when we are alone with our own thoughts: what did we do to the people who loved us, our spouses, children, family? What price did they pay for the choices we imposed on them?' The autobiographical impulse of the nation is evident in the large number of life narratives that have emerged post-1994 in an attempt to recover the past – the contributions to this anthology include works by Indres Naidoo, Gonarathnam Naidoo, Ismail Meer, Ahmed Kathrada, Sam Ramsamy, Zarina Maharaj, Pregs Govender and Mac Maharaj. Tender reflections on growing up in Indian ghettos are provided in the writings of Jay Naidoo ('Coolie Location'), Zuleikha Mayet ('Behind shop counters'), Neela Govender ('Acacia thorn in my heart') and Ronnie Govender ('Saris, Bangles and Bees').

Language is central to the emergence of the postcolonial voice. It is hoped that readers are not misled into believing that English is the only language used by South African Indian writers or that English is the only language of literary excellence in South Africa. Further, the englishes used in the peripheries of the empire were subjected to Eurocentric notions of English. Ironically, it is the periphery that has become the site of some of the most exciting and innovative literatures of the modern period. Language purists sometimes unattractively label Indian English as 'Hinglish', as if the English spoken in the United States of America or the United Kingdom can be considered as the norm. The 'privileging norm' characteristic of English Studies in postcolonial contexts, continues to

deny the value of the writings of the other, the 'uncanonised', those relegated to the margins. However, South African literary history is noted for elements of the margins that courageously threatened the exclusive claims of the centre. The converse is also true, as Edward Said[4] cautioned, where the oeuvre of some black writers is a mimicry of the white centre in their desire to be incorporated and in an attempt to become 'more English than the English'. It is the skill of writers like Ahmed Essop, Ronnie Govender and Imraan Coovadia that adds legitimacy to the literary discourse through asserting difference from the imperial centre, in emphasising the authenticity of the native's use of English, and in depicting the South African daily reality – a far cry from the 'boxwallahs' and the memoirs of the memsahibs.

The tendency to homogenise any writings and to make sweeping generalisations in the context of this anthology will be considered perilous. A second source of the same danger is the tendency to find just what we set out looking for. I find broad similarities among a wide range of works by South African Indian writers, but I hope that the similarities are illuminating ones, not based on ignorance of differences. Gayatrie Spivak[5], like Michel Foucault, cautions against unifying differences and striving towards a unity of discourse and contends that commonness can only be built on and out of difference – the place where indeed all human beings are similar, is seen to be lodged in their being different. For example, Ahmed Essop's reflection on the social and political realities of life in Johannesburg, in terms of mood, is not different from the stories of the Drum Decade set in Sophiatown. However, Essop skillfully catches the peculiar flavour of the oriental slums of Pageview, Fietas and Fordsburg with its strange mixture of gangsters, religious cranks, easy girls, roving males and the odd intellectual.

The post-1994 realities of internal political dynamics and reconciliation permeate the oeuvre of Ronnie Govender. The social phenomena of violence, racism, poverty, ethnicity and illiteracy are beginning to be construed as significant in stories that explore people living within the world that apartheid created. Govender's stories portray the particularities of Indian life, the Hindu temple rituals and festivals, the Muslim shopkeepers' rapport with the Zulu customers, the young Indian female factory worker, the boorish white policemen, the violence flamed by racism and the joy and optimism of racial harmony.

Farida Karodia[6] foregrounds really strong women – 'Women always had the power to change and create. They are the most important elements in my stories. I come from a family with very strong women. That was the influence on me. It was a natural progression to write about strong women.' The writings of Fatima Meer, Zarina Maharaj and Pregs Govender also provide a re-thinking of conventions and roles, enabling women to challenge the power structures and patriarchal norms of South African society. It is worth acknowledging that the majority of contributions to this collection are from women.

The dialectic of place and displacement is a defining feature of many stories. An interesting concept is the cartographical representations of Durban, more specifically the Grey Street complex. By employing de Certeau's theory[7] on the various representations of space, a lens is created to reveal the extent to which the repertoire of displacements is represented in these narratives in terms of material history and conditions in Durban. A host of writers have written about Grey Street: Imraan Coovadia, Aziz Hassim, Phyllis Naidoo, Ravi Govender and Mariam Akabor. The segmentation of the city according to race and the subsequent racial tensions mirror the political history of that era and is reminiscent of Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue* (1959) and Richard Rive's *'Buckingham palace', District Six* (1986).

Does the past still manifest itself in the works of new writers[8] who have debuted on the literary scene? Recent South African literature seems to be obsessed with the ambiguities of transition: with the tension between memory and amnesia, and between speech and silence; with the remaking of identities caught between stasis and change; and with the role of culture in limiting or enabling changes of understanding. Much of the new writings continue to be underpinned by the past, however, there is also a move towards new social or historical perspectives that point optimistically towards reconciliation and non-racialism. The significance of the post-apartheid writings lies not only in the texts itself, but also the human activity taking place around it, and they include reconciliation, discourses on racism, African nationalism, gender politics and affirmative action. Eternal vigilance is needed to ensure that minds are never enslaved by stereotypes and prejudices. When Makhanya, editor of the *Sunday Times*, penned his diatribe 'Everyone has their Indian' (9 July 2006), Pallo Jordan articulated his rebuttal succinctly: 'As whose Indian was Babla Saloojee detained, tortured and finally murdered by the apartheid regime in 1964? As whose Indian was Billy Nair charged and sentenced to a 20-year term on Robben Island? As whose Indian was Ahmed Timol detained, tortured and murdered in 1971? As whose Indian did Mac Maharaj take charge of and lead Operation Vulindlela in 1988?'

Events of the past should be interpreted in a creative and imaginative way and literature enlightens it best. The stories of our compatriots give meaning and purpose to our lives for it is through reading their experiences and views on life that our culture is enriched with intertextual significance. The life writings as depicted in the second part of the anthology explore the historical memory and introduce us to that which is unconscious in the South African society. A democratic society creates spaces for a plurality of stories and the stories in turn provide the base for the rich tapestry of the unfinished business of a collective South African history.

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Notes

1. Activists would include: 'Coolie dynamites' (Indres Naidoo, Reggie Vandeyar, Shirish Nanabhai, Laloo Chiba); the Saboteurs (Billy Nair, Ebrahim Ismail, Natvarlal Babenia); the Red Square orators (Mohambry Naicker, Gonarathnam Naidoo, Yusuf Dadoo); the Communists (Ahmed Timol, Babla Saloojee, Mac Maharaj); and the Umkhonto we Sizwe cadres (Lenny Naidu, Krish Rabilall, Ameen Cajee, Kista Moonsamy, Sadhan Naidoo).
2. Krog, Antjie. 1998. *Country of my skull.* Johannesburg: Random House.
3. Mandela, Nelson. 2007. Foreword. In: Padriag O' Malley. *Shades of difference: Mac Maharaj and the struggle for South Africa.* New York: Viking.
4. Said, Edward. 1984. *The world, the text and the critic.* London: Faber.
5. Spivak, Gayatri. 1991. Remembering the limits: Difference, identity and practice. In: Osborne, P (Ed) *Socialism and the limits of liberation.* London: Verso.
6. Chetty, R. 2003. Resistance and reconciliation: Post-1994 South African Indian writings. In: Bennett et al. *Resistance and reconciliation. Writing in the Commonwealth.* Canberra: ACLALS.
7. de Certeau, M. 1984. *The practice of everyday life.* Trans. Berkeley: Univ of California Press.
8. New writers include Kogi Singh, Devi Rajab, Praba Moodley, Pat Poovalingam, Nazia Peer, Shirin Ahmed, Sumayya Lee, Naresh Veeran, Shanthee Manjoo, Andrew Ragavaloo, Neelan Govender, Fiona Khan and Prithiraj Dullay.

CONTENTS

THE WEDDING

IMRAAN COODAVIA

"MR. BLUSHING UR-UR MAN IS STILL HERE?" Khateja inquired pleasantly the following morning when she came in from an early stroll by the field where the cow was sleeping, wet and shining amid the plants.

"Yes. He is still here in this place. There has been no change in the situation."

Yusuf fully expected a second uprising.

But he steeled himself; the apparition of a rickshaw revolved in his mind, to say nothing of some peace and quiet once he'd ejected this daughter.

"And he is still wishing to marry me? That is his desire?"

"And why not? Are you not my daughter, the child of Yusuf Haveri, fine stock?"

"Of course, papa. Of course. Well, fine."

"Fine?"

"I will marry him."

Yusuf said, "My own darling!"

He said, "My chicken!"

He was overwhelmed by a tide of affection. He flung his arms about her and spoke down to her gorgeous crown, enchantingly parted right along the middle.

"I knew you would see what is sensible for you after all these years. Only last night I was telling your mother how I suspected you would come morningtime not downcast and sulking and pulled up at all, but in fact you would be happy at how you could be married up to a good man. 'In fact she will be looking forward, she will have a certain amount of anticipation inside of her heart,' these were my exact words. Ask, ask if you don't believe."

"Yes, papa." Khateja freed herself from Yusuf's effusive arms. "You were perfectly correct. From the very beginning I should have listened to your opinion, that was my big mistake. Now it is clear in my head."

Within a month (she calculated) she'd be returned directly back to her village, he'd actually offer his whole money supply only to get her off his bleeding hands – there'd be ample, oh, oversufficient time to settle accounts.

Then they'd all see, yes, the little joy in their lives would disappear under her exceedingly careful ministrations, how they'd suffer the worms! She'd half a mind to learn some magic on the side: not soul-damning stuff, just the hemorrhoids at a distance, diarrhea, ingrown toenails, malignant breasts, warts,

that type of thing. This whole one village would rue their treachery, yet they'd never be able to pin their miseries on her. Their miseries and laughable village tragedies that would haunt their whole lives.

And the lives of their village-children's village-children.

("Leave me alone," she'd say. "I am just a poor sad woman abandoned by her husband. And I must be accused like this. I must be made into the scapegoat for what you have brought on your own heads. Shame! It is a little too much now.")

"I will marry Mr. Nassin," she repeated dutifully.

"You must be getting married very quickly now, Mr. Nassin. Who knows but she might well change her mind if there is a big delay. I know my daughter. Unfortunately she is what-what fickleness itself, that is her only real fault. But nobody on this earth is perfect, that is the sad truth. The important point is that we can't be too careful."

"Yes, yes."

"Under the circumstances. So we have arranged for the nika'a tonight. Ahmed has gone to fetch plates from the next town. Shireen is cooking, *samoosas, biryani,* everything fixed up" – why not justifiable exaggeration? – "Khateja too is helping, getting the tables straight and all, going for the knives and forks and whatnot so there is weight off our backs as far as the preparations are concerned. A weight off our backs. She is happy about this now, sure to be a good wife, mother's blood in her. Very good girl actually. Twenty fine years. Ha, I could even sign a guarantee, in a manner of speaking, of course!"

This very day, Ismet reflected, he would be shacked up with Khateja. That was how things had turned out – and why not? Tonight was as fine as any other night.

How would he explain to Rashida how he'd gone in the morning and returned three days later with a wife at his side and a couple of village in-laws on the side? Maybe her feathers would be a little ruffled, since she was always one who wanted to be consulted on important decisions. But surely he'd receive the same help from above that had already smoothed his way so miraculously, was that asking too much?

Certainly not. He anticipated no insurmountables. Maybe strained introductions and then settle in to domestic bliss. His mother was no monster that she would block up her ears to what he would tell her of these remarkable events. She knew some things about these signs and messages. She would sympathize and take Khateja into her heart straight, that was his prediction.

"No need, it is fine," he agreed. "Tonight. Only thing. . ."

"Anything." Yusuf vowed precipitately.

"I need clothing, jacket, trousers."

"No, no, you are fine as it is, perfectly all right."

"At least a clean shirt."

"No," Yusuf countered. Where on earth would he find a correct-fitting shirt

for this fruitcake? "Absolutely not. On no account. I do not even want to hear of this again. Why, you are looking so handsome I hear the girls next door whisp-whispering, 'But we are truly jealous. If only this Mr. Nassin were not marrying Khateja we would take an interest ourselves. And what nice clothing, what a good shirt, what good trousers, you must just take one look, really make the man in this case.' Yes, that's what they are saying. Mustn't be embarrassed now, fine young fellow you are. No need for a new shirt. No need whatsoever. In fact, I want them to say, 'Look at this Mr. Ismet Nassin. Doesn't even change his shirt and still he's the most handsome, best-dressed man we have ever encountered. How fortunate is our Khateja, and even more her old father, this chap Yusuf Haveri over here, to have this well-dressed son.' That's what I want them to be saying. Make me proud of my new son. What a man indeed!" He reached forward and pinched Ismet's cheek firmly. "Ha!"

"Well, if you're sure."

He was blushing again. No one, not even his own mother, had thought him so comely, and here was a sizable village lining up to marry him on the strength of his looks virtually. It went to show: India was a big place, and it was never possible to say with certainty what was sitting up just around the next corner.

In Bombay many women wouldn't give him time of day. And he'd just about had enough of that sort of behavior. Sick to his stomach of the Bombay situation, the Bombay maidens and their airs and put-ons.

Here was a besotted village, charmed by his every mannerism. Every little thing he did! Well, he wasn't going to let it go to his head. Though he must admit that being smacked across the cheeks by an angel, being found so attractive in the village from the advent, it made reflection necessary. Thought about his place in the greater scheme of the world. It raised the question of destiny.

(And when there was sufficient justification, it was equally foolish not to consider destiny, *ne*, as it was worthless in the opposite situation to speculate foolishly without two real hopes.)

"And, er, son, there is the matter of the money."

"What about it?"

"We will be needing some to pay for the ceremony today. Also to give to relatives, friends who come and all. For good luck in the future."

In for a penny.

"Well," Ismet said doubtfully, "I can wire Bombay Savings if it is an urgent necessity."

"It is an urgency, my son, you know, cash on hand and all that. A hundred and ninety-five now. Two hundred. The rest can follow later if it is necessary, week, two weeks not a problem. After all" – Yusuf leaned forward and stared deeply into Ismet's eyes and took his hands firmly in his own – "we are family now, *ne*? What is a week when we are together for all life?"