Afrindian Fictions
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Are Indians Africans Too, or
When Does a Subcontinental Become a Citizen?

In January 2003, the Indian government sponsored a convention of expatriates from the Indian diaspora. Sixty-three countries were represented. Participants included heads of state from Mauritius and Fiji, Nobel laureates V. S. Naipaul and Amartya Sen, as well as diasporics of Indian origin from Malaysia, the United Kingdom, the United States, the Caribbean, and South Africa. At the conference, antiapartheid activist and writer Fatima Meer rejected the designate of Indian diaspora, arguing that South Africans of Indian origin had fought for acceptance too long and too hard to so easily abandon the South African as the primary signifier of cultural identity (quoted in Waldman).¹ For Meer, identifying as diasporic Indian would necessarily privilege the Indian aspect of South African identity and consequently erase this community’s struggle for recognition in South Africa. Meer identified a problem—that of national longing and belonging—that surfaces with regularity in the global South Asian diaspora but resonates with particular force in the polarized racial climate of South Africa.²

Afrindian Fictions: Diaspora, Race, and National Desire in South Africa argues that Indians desire South African citizenship in the fullest sense of the word, a need for national anchorage that is a consequence of their erasure in both the apartheid and postapartheid consciousness.³ This longing for belonging is asserted through an “Afrindian” identity.⁴
The term suggests both an Africanization of Indian selfhood and an Indianization of South Africa. The former is achieved by an affiliation with the indigenous population and an attachment to the African land, while the latter is demonstrated through tracing the changes wrought in South Africa by the Indian presence. Changing oneself as well as being an agent of change in order to claim a South African national identity is the central dialectic underpinning Indian fiction in South Africa.

Yet my analysis of South African Indian fiction does not merely analyze the themes, preoccupations, and generic shifts in a neglected body of work. Afrindian Fictions also challenges some of the normative assumptions of postcolonial/diaspora criticism. Although diasporic literary studies have traditionally celebrated cultural fusion, the field has become increasingly codified in terms of the attention it has given to a particular “contact zone”: migration from the third world (Africa, the Caribbean, South Asia) to the first (the UK, the United States, Canada) is often commemorated as the exemplary type of intercultural mingling. Postcolonial scholarship, including trends in both South Asian and South African studies, also inclines to be preoccupied with the relationship between the white colonizers and the nonwhite colonized, thus unintentionally reifying the dominance of the West and of whiteness.

Afrindian Fictions unsettles that paradigm of racial interaction and focuses instead on how different nonwhite constituencies interact with each other in non-Western geographies. It asks, in other words, what happens when migration occurs over an East-South axis rather than an East-West/North-South one. If postcolonial literature has traditionally challenged the hegemony of colonialist metanarratives, South African Indian writing challenges the tendency in postcolonial criticism to create metanarratives of its own. In subverting the dominance of the East-West migratory story in diaspora studies as well as the black-white dyad of South African scholarship, South African Indian fiction counters the internal canons formed within postcolonial literature.

Afrindian Fictions helps develop a new framework of racial contact and diasporic exchange based on the movement of Indians to South Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; their impact on the collective psyche of a land torn asunder by the repressive machinery of apartheid; and, in turn, the influence of the South African political landscape on the construction of an identity that occupies another place in the black-and-white map of South African race relations. Through an analysis of fiction from the 1970s onward, I trace the specificity of the Indian presence in South Africa and also construct an interpretive lens with which to view the intersection of diaspora, postcoloniality, Indianness, and apartheid.
My attentiveness to political occasion, particularly to the rapidly changing scenario in South Africa in which Indian fiction is composed, underscores the overtly political nature of South African Indian writing itself.

The aesthetic richness of South African Indian writing is also nourished by developments in postcolonial literature in general and by South African and South Asian diasporic literature in particular. Indian fiction reveals many of the concerns of mainstream South African literary discourse articulated by writers such as J. M. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Alex La Guma, and Zakes Mda among others. These include “certain dynamics of South African society, such as tensions between the generations, class divisions and aspirations, political alliances, clashing accounts of tradition, and so on” (Attwell 180) as well as the themes of oppression under apartheid, racial solidarity, and anxieties about the new nation. South African Indian writing further reflects South Asian diasporic issues expressed by “canonical” writers such as Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, and Hanif Kureishi. Transnational identities, generational conflicts, and return to roots are dominant concerns here. Because South African Indian fiction is intimately shaped and conditioned by postcolonial literature, it is an exciting new field within that body of writing; yet its difference from the postcolonial norm enables us to look at two important subfields in postcolonial studies—South African literature and South Asian diasporic literature—through an alternative hermeneutic lens.

My intervention also fills the gap in critical studies on South African Indian fiction in particular and South African Indian literature in general. There is very little literary scholarship available on Indians in South Africa. This may be because there has been a surge in fiction published by South African Indians only in the last two decades following the imminent and actual demise of apartheid. However, it must be remembered that literary publication often has little to do with literary proliferation. South African Indians have been narrating their stories since the time they were transported from India as indentured labor in the middle of the nineteenth century, yet their voices are only being heard now.9

The reasons for the paucity of scholarship on Indians in South Africa have much to do with Indians occupying a middle place in a dichotomous racial model that had no room for shades of gray, both in its oppressive and oppositional modes.10 The Indian presence in South Africa disturbed what Loren Kruger describes as “the binary black/white opposition that has structured antiapartheid, as well as apartheid, discourse” (“Black” 115). This rupture has been barely recognized as many, if not most, studies of apartheid and its legacy in postcolonial South Africa still conceive of South African race relations as unfolding across a black-white axis.
Rosemary Jolly similarly argues that “as critics, teachers, and students, we need to forge a language beyond apartheid that refuses to hypostatize South Africa as the model in which the colonized black and the settler white eternally confront each other in the ‘ultimate racism’” (371). The Indian presence complicates the binary of settler and indigene by introducing a third state of national being: that of postcolonial diasporic. Yet the antiapartheid movement could not encourage such subtleties for fear of diminishing the effectiveness of a unified onslaught against segregation. The specificity of Indian identity was often erased from the grand narrative of the freedom struggle that sought to incorporate all nonwhite people under a singular “black” identity forged by the commonality of white oppression.

Jolly further warns us that “there are . . . marked differences within the black community of South Africa, which includes the Xhosa, the Sotho, the Zulu, immigrants of Indian heritage, and the Cape ‘coloreds’ of Malay heritage, to name but a few. The differences among these groups are elided, and the hegemony of apartheid maintained, when the groups’ literatures are consigned to the monolithic category ‘Black South African literature’” (372). Afrindian Fictions takes up Jolly’s challenge to extend our responses to South African culture beyond the dichotomy of African victim and European oppressor, explode the homogenizing impulses of a unitary black identity, and explore the diversity within “black” literary expression.

One must not be quick to ascribe the sin of omission solely to South African historiography and literary criticism. Students of the phenomenon known as the Great Indian Diaspora are just as likely to erase South African Indians from the diasporic imagination. As Vijay Mishra points out, “the homogenization of all Indian diasporas in terms of the politics of disarticulation/rearticulation with reference to Britain, America or Canada has led to the fetishization of the new diaspora and an amnesiac disavowal of the old . . . what is striking is the relative absence of critical cultural histories of this diaspora” (“Diasporic Imaginary” 427). Similarly, Makarand Paranjape asserts:

> While the writings of the old diaspora are utterly marginalized, they find a new currency when they re-enter the world of discourse via the new diaspora. . . . The subordinate culture of the old diaspora can only be recognized if it reinvents itself in the image of the dominant culture of the metropolis. (10)

The issues that we typically associate with diaspora are those pertaining to
Indian diasporas in the West, including unsettling the power of whiteness, challenging the perception of one’s alleged cultural and religious backwardness in the economically developed regions where the migrant has relocated, maintaining emotional and financial ties with the home country, and fearing assimilation into “corrupt” Western culture. Only when the old diaspora reveals those issues—usually when migration reoccurs from South to North—do we give this diaspora some critical valence.\textsuperscript{12} 

Since the South African Indian diaspora also manifests diasporic anxieties that are altered or complicated by apartheid, we often fail to recognize those issues as diasporic, a critical blindness exacerbated by an already narrow definition of migratory exchange in literary scholarship. South African Indians—though displaying what Emmanuel Nelson defines as a “shared diasporic sensibility... issues of identity, problems of history, confrontation with racism, intergenerational conflicts, difficulties in building new supportive communities” (xv)—are also actively engaged in the life of the nation, consciously identifying as South Africans first and Indians next despite their relative anonymity in the national spectrum. If South African Indians themselves resist being cast in the role of Indian diasporics, Meer’s emphatic declaration quoted in the opening sentences of the introduction being a testimony to this rejection, then it is easier to explain why South Asian diaspora studies have long disregarded a presence that sees Indianness as a secondary allegiance.

South African Indian fiction is only now being recognized as a distinct literary entity. Thus postcolonial scholarship still has enormous holes to fill in its knowledge of this oeuvre. Scholars such as Loren Kruger and Betty Govinden have commented on the erasure of South African Indian literature in South African and South Asian “literary bibliography” (Kruger, “Black” 137, n11; Govinden, “Learning Myself Anew”). A new effort at redressing this absence usually means a token incorporation of this body of writing in both fields of critical study.\textsuperscript{13} While books on white South African writers such as Nadine Gordimer and J. M. Coetzee have been published from the 1980s onward, there has been an interest in black South African writing only recently.\textsuperscript{14} Despite the proliferation of texts studying South African literature in more inclusive ways, the works of South African Indian writers remain neglected.\textsuperscript{15}

For example, Christopher Heywood’s recently published survey of South African fiction, entitled A History of South African Literature (2004), claims that South Africa has five distinct literary groups: “Khoisan, Nguni-Sotho, Afrikaans, English, and Indian.” Yet Indian writing is not analyzed in much detail here. As Kruger points out, even Michael Chapman’s magisterial examination of South African writing, entitled Southern African
Literatures (1996), ignores “the important work of writers whose oblique position vis-à-vis this [black and white] conflict should not exclude them from South African literary history. No South Africans of Indian descent appear in his list of authors” (“Black” 137, n13).

The numerous books, anthologies and journals commemorating the “new” South Africa either erase the Indian presence or incline toward nominal recognition. Modern Fiction Studies produced a magisterial special issue entitled “South African Fiction after Apartheid” in 2000; no article on Indian writing appeared here.16 Derek Attridge and Rosemary Jolly’s Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid and Democracy, 1970–1995 (1998) does not include an essay on Indian writing, even though the collection as a whole reflects at length on the nature, tone, and composition of contemporary South African writing.17 Nahem Yousaf’s Apartheid Narratives (2001), again, has only one essay on Indian “apartheid narratives.” Theodore Sheckels’s The Lion and the Freeway: A Thematic Analysis of South African Literature (1996) mentions only one South African Indian writer, Ahmed Essop.18

The news from South Asian diaspora studies is only a little more heartening. Scholarship, including books and essays, on Western-based writers such as Bharati Mukherjee, Amitav Ghosh, V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, and Hanif Kureishi abounds.19 Books studying literary production in these diasporas have also been recently published.20 Yet no book-length studies of the South African Indian diaspora—either of individual writers or of the literature in its totality—exist. Additionally, many anthologies and collections on the South Asian diaspora only recognize non-Western diasporas as well as the South African Indian community in cursory, rather than comprehensive, ways.21

However, in the last few years, some scholars have begun to craft alternative trajectories of diasporic exchange. Much of this scholarship centers on Indo-Caribbean writers; perhaps the singular success of V. S. Naipaul drew attention to this presence. For example, Brinda Mehta’s Diasporic (Dis)Locations: Indian Women Negotiate the Kala Pani (2004) is a groundbreaking book that uses the “discourse of kala pani,” or crossing the “black waters,” to think about the gendered specificity of the Indian experience in the Caribbean. Marina Carter and Khal Torabully’s Coolitude: An Anthology of the Labour Diaspora (2002) offers the idea of a “coolie memory” that unites Indians of indentured origin all over the world, but mentions South African Indians only in passing (215). Both texts, however, offer extremely useful techniques for thinking about Indian-black relations in non-Western regions.

Closer to my project geographically is Loren Kruger’s (2001) essay on Achmat Dangor, where she emphasizes the need to craft South-South
models of diaspora through the South African Indian presence. While I am deeply indebted to scholars such as Mehta, Carter, Torabully, and Kruger, I push their ideas further in order to construct a model of diasporic encounters based on an East-South paradigm in South Africa. I deliberately use the phrase “East-South” rather than the more common “South-South.” The phrase “South-South” highlights the similarity of economic “underdevelopment” but elides the heterogeneity of different geographies. “East-South” is more attentive to the cultural specificity of and the internal diversity within economically “undeveloped” regions of the world.

I also build on some of the critical essays that reflect on the “older diasporas,” Vijay Mishra’s term for what he calls the diasporas of “classic capitalism” that came into being through the British Empire (421). These include Mishra’s seminal essay “The Diasporic Imaginary” and Makarand Paranjape’s expansion of Mishra’s work. While this scholarship is extremely useful, it has two limitations for my project: Like Coolitude, it claims that all indentured immigrants share a common consciousness. The South African Indian population, with its admixture of slaves, laborers, and traders, disrupts the formulation of a homogenous “coolie” self- hood. Mishra and Paranjape also do not really take into account the role of political circumstance in reconceptualizing some of the common anxieties of indentured migrants all over the world.

My extensive comparative focus on South African Indian fiction that foregrounds its ever-shifting shape will enable further scrutiny of the textual representation of nonnormative diasporic interactions as they have played out in South Africa and in Indian diasporas in other neglected geographies. It will also engender a literary interest in other peripheral groups in South Africa that fall outside of the dominant black-white pattern, such as the writings of the Cape Malay/Coloured community. Given the importance of South Africa and the South Asian diaspora in postcolonial studies, the excavation of a body of writing that bestows wholeness and complexity on these very important fields as well as introduces the world to an emergent, exciting, and aesthetically dense body of literature becomes a compelling necessity.

**Retheorizing the South Asian Diaspora and Race in South Africa**

The impact of South African Indian literature on postcolonial studies can be further explained by outlining the broad issues underpinning this fiction. Analyzing these literary themes reveals the dialectic of sameness and difference from South Asian and South African literary discourses
that gives South African Indian fiction its distinctive texture. First and foremost, Indians rupture the polarized arrangement of race on which apartheid was predicated and which postapartheid South Africa has maintained. The Indian presence in South Africa invites us to address the question of what it means to be Indian African in a land divided into an unyielding binary of indigenous African versus settler African.

The South African Indian diaspora is rendered distinctive by the racial tensions engendered by apartheid and preserved even after the end of segregation. Despite its simplistic structure, apartheid created an intricate racial situation: Indians were inserted in a geographic location controlled by a powerful European minority settled in the midst of dispossessed Africans. Indians have had to contend with the forces of whiteness even as they struggled to forge community with the Africans. The triangulated relationship between European settler, African indigene, and Indian diasporic is unique to certain parts of Africa, and involves a reworking of the more common formula for racial interaction in South Africa provided by the authors of the influential *The Empire Writes Back*: that of white settler and black native locked in an unending combat.24

Despite this tripartite configuration of races, the Indian relationship with blacks—in all its energy, joy, frustration, and mutual distrust—dominates South African Indian fiction. While whites are present, especially in apartheid-era fiction, as a structuring and mediating presence, South African Indian fiction is equally—perhaps even more—concerned with describing Indian relationships with black Africans, tracing racial solidarity in the apartheid period, and mourning its rupture in the postapartheid period. Khal Torabully’s reflections on “Coolitude” in other labor diaspora societies are apposite here:

Coolitude also seeks to emphasize the community of visions between the slave and the indentured labourer, shared by their descendants, despite the fact that these two groups were placed in a situation of competition and conflict. As such coolitude may be seen as an attempt to bring the past and present of these groups into contact and to go beyond past conflicts and misrepresentations. (quoted in Carter 150)

Despite recognizing the need for harmony between Indians and blacks, “coolitude” serves as a limited model for Indian-African interaction in South Africa as apartheid, and its residue in our postcolonial lives and times, permanently conditions human relationships. Indian-African relationships are also complicated by the fact that in Africa, unlike other parts of the world, blacks are not descendants of slaves—that is, forced
migrant labor—like most Indians, but indigenes. Two dispossessed groups grappling with each other’s presence in a land that historically belongs to one community but also has the other community forcefully staking ownership of that common space creates a situation distinctive to Indian-black relationships in Africa. Indians claiming ownership of land tilled by their indentured ancestors may mimic the violent appropriation of apartheid and colonialism or it may be a politically subversive move that gives subcontinentals, a group traditionally denied national belonging, claims to composite citizenship. This illegibility of political effect reflects the complicated history that Indians and Africans share.

The Indian presence in South Africa not only disrupts the binary of black indigene and white settler, but also extends migratory interaction beyond the dominant paradigm in South Asian diaspora studies: that of white native and nonwhite immigrant negotiating a shared (Western) space. The questions of diaspora, especially those of national identity, minority belonging, cultural selfhood, and multiple allegiances, are refracted through an East-South prism in South Africa as well as complicated by the presence of apartheid. How does the rhetoric of colonialism, with its insistently hierarchical racial schema, determine the relationship between Indians and black Africans? How does the institutionalization of apartheid in 1948 bring Indians and blacks together even as it forces them apart? Is assimilation, engendered by Indians claiming a black identity during apartheid, less problematic than it is in the United States or the UK, where assimilation implies integration into white culture? What happens to solidarity when white oppression, the only force binding two dispossessed groups, ceases to be a factor in race relationships?

Indian fiction thus reflects on the specifically South African problems of diasporic identity such as establishing links with the black population while preserving Indianness, locating oneself within a binary racial formulation, and coming to terms with a legacy of migration based on indenture and slavery as well as trade. Indian writers also tend to be extraordinarily aware of political circumstance, a consequence of the machinery of apartheid that invaded the consciousness of all it compassed in totalizing ways. In other words, there is a direct and determinate relationship between politics and identity in South African Indian writing. The atrocities of apartheid ensured that Indians always had material with which, and against which, they could create a literary sense of self.

Muthal Naidoo has further observed a dual focus to the articulation of Indian ethnicity in South Africa: “On the one hand, the consolidation and assertion of an Indian identity and culture, and, on the other, the desire to cut across ethnic boundaries and form alliances with other population
groups” (30). Despite their puncturing of racial categories, Indian authors often strategically mobilize an alternative identity, particularly during the apartheid period, in order to be absorbed within a greater community—be it black, Coloured, or in some cases even white—through which they can then seek political franchise. Relatedly, if there is a restrictive articulation of selfhood in this writing, it is usually as South African and not as Indian.27

Indian racial and cultural identity, what one might call “Indianness,” is therefore slippery.28 In South Africa, Indianness is altered beyond purity, complicated by the desire to find a political voice only enabled through identification with a larger, non-Indian, community. Yet the contradictory pull of being Indian and the concomitant reluctance to sacrifice Indianness at the altar of a greater communal identity result in a multifarious designation of the Indian self. Consequently, what it means to be South African is also problematized. If Indians can absorb themselves into a black/Coloured/white identity, the lines drawn across communities on the basis of race, religion, and culture become increasingly blurred. The hazy contours of Indian identity in South Africa invite a deconstruction of the rigid apartheid and postapartheid categories of black, white, mixed race, and Indian. However, Indian fiction is not just preoccupied with asserting Africanization through racial affiliation. It also actively seeks to Indianize South Africa by interrogating the systemic erasure of Indians in public discourse, inserting Indian cultural practices into national life, and infusing literary conversation with Indian linguistic and cultural codes. Many writers, for example, refuse to italicize certain Indian words, indicating the naturalization of Indian languages in the national psyche.

Indian writing thus asserts a South African identity that never erases the particularity of Indianness even as it claims a primary affiliation with South Africa. The theme of longing for belonging is particularly germane in this diaspora as “India” occupies an inaccessible space.29 Paranjape argues that the old diaspora recognized that “physical return was virtually impossible [therefore] an emotional or spiritual renewal was an ongoing necessity” (9). In the case of South African Indian fiction, even though the “Mother Country” is an icon charged with mythic resonances, there is rarely a desire to return even in a “spiritual” sense. India, then, exists as an empty symbol. The proclamation of a South African national identity, as well as the articulation of a permanent bond with an everyday South Africa rather than with an imagined India, dominates the thematic concerns of South African Indian fiction. The critical genealogy of Indian writing traced in this book asserts, above all, the Indian allegiance to South Africa.
The Indian commitment to South African life arises from anxieties about national belonging as well as from the community’s extended stay in the country. Any literary narrative of Indian identity, therefore, must be contextualized against the history of subcontinental arrival in South Africa, their dispossession under colonialism and apartheid, and the political struggles they face in the democratic present. On November 16, 1860, the SS Truro arrived in South Africa, bringing 340 Indian laborers to work in the sugar fields in the British province of Natal. In her summary of the history of Indians in Africa, Arlene Elder explains that the earliest indentured Indians transported to South Africa were largely of the Hindu faith. Many of these laborers elected to remain in South Africa after the period of indenture had lapsed and acquired land, becoming “artisans of various sorts, moneylenders, small shopkeepers and traders” (116).

Loren Kruger adds that in addition to arriving as slaves well before indenture, many Indians chose to migrate to the African continent, where they could set up lucrative trading practices, making a vital distinction, therefore, between “indentured Indians” and “passenger Indians,” all of whom would be codified as a single entity under the taxonomy of apartheid (Black 112). Elder describes the passenger Indians as “mostly Muslims,” who migrated to South Africa to establish what they thought would be profitable business enterprises. This community flourished commercially and spread its population to the Transvaal and Cape Colony (116–17). The white settlers, apprehensive of Indian financial prosperity, consequently promulgated divisive laws disempowering Indians.

The distinction between indentured Indian and passenger Indian also has important repercussions on the so-called collective consciousness of the South African Indian community. South African Indian identities are always configured by multiple determinants such as indenture, migration for commercial purposes, language, religion, gender, and class. As a vastly heterogeneous community, speaking in tongues as varied as Gujarati, Tamil, Hindi, and Urdu, and also belonging to different religious faiths, South African Indians are marked more by difference than by similarity. All this makes it difficult to characterize the lives of Indians with a prescriptive label such as “the South African Indian Experience.”

One cannot talk about the history of Indians in South Africa without mentioning the most famous South African Indian: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Gandhi arrived in South Africa in 1893 as a young lawyer. He returned to India after twenty-one years, leaving behind one son and
his family in South Africa. Gandhi has often been criticized for failing to forge links with black Africans. Whatever his deficiencies, it is indisputable that Gandhi radicalized the South African Indian community by creating the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) in 1894 and the newspaper the Indian Opinion in 1903. Both entities served as forums of protest against the treatment of Indians in South Africa.

Historian Surendra Bhana also credits the NIC, and by extension Gandhi, with gestating Indianness as a sensibility:

[T]he Natal Indian Congress (NIC) sought to weld together the diverse cultural and religious immigrants from the Indian subcontinent into a single, coherent, and secular organization. In the process of the NIC's creation, “Indianness” came into being and subsequently became firmly embedded in South Africa's politics. In the early years of the NIC’s existence, “Indianness,” in its restricted sense, was central to the organization's efforts to win rights for the immigrants. (“Indianness Reconfigured” 100)

In addition to unifying the Indian population through the idea of a shared Indianness (that was, as Bhana points out, problematically dominated by a certain class), Gandhi also agitated against indenture and to have Indian marriages recognized by the law.

The impact of Gandhi on South African Indians, particularly in their response to political oppression, should not be underestimated. Later events in India, especially his humiliation of the British Empire through simple acts of defiance, also rendered Gandhi a symbol of hope, of what nonviolent resistance could achieve. The South African Gandhi opened up a space for political awareness among the Indian community, a social consciousness that underpins every text discussed in this book. Christopher Heywood says that “part of the Indian literary heritage in South Africa entails adopting, negotiating, and escaping the Satyagraha [Gandhi’s strategy of nonviolent resistance] tradition” (231). In the fiction I examine, not only do we encounter the concept of Satyagraha, but Gandhi himself appears repeatedly as a mobilizing trope, a motif that distinguishes South African Indian fiction from its global counterparts, as no other Indian diaspora can claim Gandhi the way the South African one can.

Elder reports that “according to the 1980 census, there are 795,000 Indians in South Africa, more than on the rest of the African continent” (117). The 2001 census states that Indians in South Africa now number 1.1 million, or 2.5 percent of the entire population (“South Africa
Are Indians Africans Too?

An overwhelming majority of South African Indians claim South African nationality by birth and not by legal change of citizenship. Yet, as social anthropologist Rehana Ebr-Vally notes, until 1961, subcontinentals in South Africa were considered to be Indian “citizens” who were merely living in South Africa. In 1961, tired of India’s complaints about the treatment of Indians under apartheid, the National Party conferred citizenship upon South African Indians. Indians now came exclusively under white South African jurisdiction and the Indian government had no locus standi to protest the mistreatment of “its” citizens. Not until 101 years after the SS Truro brought into Natal the first wave of indentured labor were Indians seen as South Africans under the law (Ebr.-Vally 84).

Indians, and all other nonwhite people, continued to be steadily disenfranchised following the institutionalization of apartheid in 1948. Various legislation marginalizing Indians included the Pegging Act (1943), which barred Indians from owning land in white areas. Although Indians were also subject to the vagaries of the Immorality Act (1950) prohibiting sexual relations between the different races, they were hit hardest by the Group Areas Act (1950), which appropriated Indian property in prime locations and relocated Indians to arid areas. Indians may have been dispossessed by the apartheid regime, but a certain group of business-minded Indians managed to acquire vast amounts of wealth during the segregation years. These rich traders and merchants exemplified the stereotype of the rapacious Indian that then became the stereotype for Indians in general. The perception of Indians as white stooges was further aggravated by the segregationist government deciding to grant privileges to a chosen few by amending the constitution in 1983 to include “separate and subordinate houses” for the Coloured and Indian populations. As Anne McClintock and Rob Nixon point out, “if the Coloureds and Indians were to be persuaded that they were entitled to white privileges, they could not be lumped together with the disenfranchised blacks under the category ‘nonwhites’” (346). However, the Indian community overwhelmingly opposed the government’s effort to fracture the will to power of nonwhite insurgency.

In that vein of resistance, many intrepid Indians, such as Fatima and Ismail Meer, Yusuf Dadoo, Monty Naicker, Indres Naidoo, and Ahmed Kathrada, actively participated in the antiapartheid movement. Thousands of other anonymous Indians engaged in antigovernment uprisings throughout the apartheid years, including the Soweto demonstrations in the late 1970s. Kogila Moodley says “Indians [also participated] in philanthropic activities outside the group, especially on behalf of Africans. These include Indian doctors offering lower cost medical attention to
African patients, businessmen raising bursaries for African university students, building a school in KwaZulu and Indian manufacturers helping to set up factories to be run by Africans” (454). As even this brief recapitulation reveals, Indians have a long history of political activism and fraternity with black Africans.38

Despite active solidarity during the apartheid period, the relationship between Africans and Indians has been historically fraught, especially in the province of KwaZulu Natal, where approximately 80 percent of the Indian population resides. As Ashwin Desai states, “by the end of the 1940s there were numerous potential points of conflict between African and Indian. At the level of the labour markets, Indians and Africans competed for jobs and joined racially exclusive unions to defend their interests. At the level of trade, Indian monopoly in the 1930s was challenged by an increasing number of aspirant African traders” (9). The tension between Indians and Africans was enhanced by the “in-between” position of Indians in the apartheid schema. Smitha Radhakrishnan points out that even though “Indians were denied citizenship rights . . . the hierarchical system of apartheid also offered Indians certain privileges over Africans due to their status as the buffer group. These privileges included a higher standard of education than Africans’, relatively better housing and health care, and the earmarking of middle management and clerical jobs” (“Time” 267).39

Mutual hostility between Indians and blacks reached its peak in 1949 with the Cato Manor riots, where “50 Indians and 87 Africans had been killed. Thousands of Indian stores and dwellings were destroyed or damaged” (Desai 12). In another explosion of festering relations between Indians and Africans, Phoenix Ashram, a commune built by Gandhi, was plundered and looted by Africans in 1985. The relationship between Indians and Africans was further vitiated by the elections of 1994, which saw an embarrassing number of Indians vote for the National Party, the political organization that instituted apartheid in 1948. Scholars interpret the 1994 Indian vote as fractured across class and reflecting deep anxieties about economic and political opportunities under a black government (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, Desai and Maharaj). The election of 1999 saw some Indians abandon the National Party and vote for the Democratic Party instead (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 27).

Indians are now actively participating in South African political life as never before. Historian Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie points out:

Under the new government, led by the ANC since 1994, several Indians occupy high-profile positions in cabinet, provincial and local gov-
ernment. President Mandela’s cabinet had no fewer than five Indian cabinet members, a couple of Indian deputy ministers, and his personal adviser was an Indian . . . Thabo Mbeki’s cabinet of 1999 has four full cabinet ministers who are Indian . . . the Speaker of Parliament is an Indian. The Chief Justice of the country is an Indian. (27)

Even though Indians have made rapid advances in postapartheid South Africa, certain trends, however, suggest that the new nation is not necessarily as multicultural and egalitarian as it imagined itself to be.

According to Dhupelia-Mesthrie, Indian insecurity in democratic South Africa stems from apprehension over “declining welfare grants, an increase in crime rates and a perceived decline in education as resources are shifted within the province [KwaZulu Natal]” (28). Thomas Hansen claims that the postapartheid period saw “a restructuring of the labour and employment laws in order to strengthen and empower the African majority. These measures resulted in massive job losses and the economic marginalization of the Indian community that for years had inhabited a relatively cushioned position in South Africa’s economy” (“Melancholia” 297). Affirmative action, in particular, is an area of great contention: “A common refrain of Indians is that ‘for years apartheid discriminated against us as we were too black, now we are not black enough to gain from affirmative action’” (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 28).

Race, then, is still a major determinant of government-granted privilege as well as a marker of Self-Sameness and Otherness. As Desai somberly reflects, “the emergence of the ‘Rainbow Nation’ signaled for many the beginning of new things. However, under the rubric of the rainbow it became apparent that the past was imposing itself on the present. For those who envisaged the loosening of their ethnic clothing they soon found it sticking more closely to their bodies as the political settlement unfolded” (108). Though the end of apartheid heralded a better world that had profound consequences for cultural production, among other things, for South African Indians, in many important ways, the more things changed, the more they remained the same.

**South African Indian Identity and Fiction Today**

As the brief history narrated above reveals, Indians have been systemati-
cally erased in the national consciousness by the apartheid regime that operated primarily on a black versus white register. This binary thinking
that froze people into uncrossable identities continued in the postapartheid period even as the new South Africa claimed to welcome, indeed celebrate, difference. As Radhakrishnan claims, “South African Indians gained citizenship but lost certain material privileges . . . [they are now] caught between the historical power of a white minority and the contemporary power of the African majority” (“Time” 263) and that the “post-apartheid state took care to not alienate white citizens, but according to the majority of South African Indians I interacted with . . . there was no similar explicit effort to include Indians” (268).

The spillage of apartheid ontologies into the postapartheid present is not surprising. In violently hierarchical and racialized societies, where “core universal values of equality, citizenship and justice were denied [to dispossessed groups,] . . . the granting of minimalist citizenship does not mean that these distinctions can now simply be erased” (Ahluwalia 510). Indians, therefore, have a profound unease about their place in South Africa, an apprehension exacerbated by their religious, linguistic, and cultural difference. Correspondingly, Afrindian Fictions rests on a simple argument: Indians desire South African citizenship in the most complete meaning of the term. I use citizenry not only in the juridical sense but also as implying national belonging and commitment to the nation-state. National belonging does not extend in one direction; rather, composite citizenry suggests that the citizen owns the nation just as the nation owns its citizens.

Here I echo C. L. R. James’s notion of “participatory” citizenship and “the good life [which is] that community between the individual and the state” (quoted in Mehta 131). According to Kent Worcester, James also:

[A]scribed the exceptional character of social life in ancient Greece to two main factors: mass participation in the institutions of the city-state and the dense emotional and political bonds harmonizing the individual with the wider community. Since . . . citizens . . . had an authentic voice in the polity, they felt an intense attachment to the city-state. (166)

South African Indian fiction exposes the thick “emotional and political bonds” that Indians share with “the wider community” in order to argue for national belonging. Pal Ahluwalia’s comments on citizenry in an Australian context are also apposite here. Calling for the necessity of creating “a single concept of post-colonial citizenship,” Ahluwalia argues that “this is not a process that can be decreed formally by legislation but is one that is tied integrally to the imagination. It is a process that has to recognise that becoming an Australian is not about conquering but about belonging to a political community of equal and consenting citizens” (504).
If citizenry is a “process,” facilitated by acts of the “imagination” rather than solely by law, literature then assumes a central role in acquiring national selfhood. In wholeheartedly embracing South African citizenry, Indian writers subordinate the transnational cosmopolitanism that has often characterized East-West diasporas by anchoring themselves firmly to the nation-state. **Afrindian Fictions** reinscribes the primacy of the nation in diaspora studies, a field that has increasingly normalized global migrancy and a worldly nationless sensibility as the predominant form of diasporic culture. While diasporas can be nationalistic in their aspirations, the diasporic’s patriotic zeal is often directed toward the maintenance of the home country.

The South African Indian presence reveals an intense nationalism that is tied to the host country. Indians in South Africa also demonstrate how transnationalism (roots in multiple locations) and nationalism (the proud proclamation of a national identity in the “host” country) are not two mutually exclusive states of being.

The first half of the book studies Indian fiction during the apartheid period, while the second half studies Indian fiction following the dissolution of apartheid. Emphasizing the symbiotic relationship between genre and theme, I argue that Indian writers tended to use short fiction, including story collections and novellas, to assert national belonging during apartheid. Material and ideological exigencies determined the provenance of form, as writing short fiction made economic sense because of the limited opportunities to publish under apartheid; the diversity of the short story collection also encapsulated the oppositional impulses of racial solidarity and ethnic specificity that Indians characteristically negotiated during the high point of segregation. The changing social scenario following the official end of apartheid in 1994 made the novel a more attractive form in democratic South Africa.

Less subject to the pressures of political solidarity, Indian writing becomes highly experimental in the postapartheid era, constantly bursting the boundaries of South African fictional convention by using historical, epic, romance, comic, and mystery novels to discuss themes of belonging, citizenry, racial identification, and the preoccupations of the new nation. While these tropes were also present in apartheid-era writing, the shift in political circumstance yields significant changes not only in genre but also in theme and ideology. Indian fiction during the apartheid period unhesitatingly identifies with black Africans in order to challenge the segregationist imperative and to accrue the voice and power of mass movements. The fictional representation of this interracial harmony comes undone following the end of apartheid.

Many Indian writers recognize their culpability in maintaining racial division even as they critique black Africans for an ethnocentrism of their
own. Although such a conceptualization suggests a pessimistic vision of race relations in contemporary South Africa, Indian fiction becomes more subtle—generically, thematically, and ideologically—in the postapartheid period. This variety necessarily engenders a more nuanced vision of race relations than was allowed by the dictates of the antiapartheid imperative that insisted on a common black identity to combat white oppression. Moreover, Indian criticism of the new South Africa emerges from emancipatory citizenship earned in the old South Africa. In their systemic oppression as well as in their participation in resistance politics, Indians acquired the right to call themselves South African during apartheid and, therefore, the right to critique the nation-state in the postapartheid period. Holding the postcolonial nation accountable for the failure of its promises, then, makes Indians more South African, not less.

I highlight the theme of national belonging through the idea of an “Afrindian” identity. As the term suggests, Indianness exists in South Africa in an Africanized state. In the apartheid period, Indians proclaim their African identity through race. In addition to affiliating with black Africans to attain political voice, some Indian writers foreground South Africa’s history of racial cross-fertilization to underscore the biological Africanization of Indian identity. In the transition and postapartheid periods (1990 onward), racial affiliation incorporates a spatial affiliation, particularly asserted through place. Many Indian writers highlight their bond with the land, thereby asserting their rootedness and belonging in the African soil. Yet another way of claiming citizenry emerges from appealing to the effects of the extended periodicity of the Indian presence in the African continent, something only East-South diasporas, which emerged from colonial economies, can do. Postapartheid fiction also asserts the Indianness of South Africa by revealing the hybridization of the national consciousness and by infusing the cultural imaginary with Indian themes, allusions, and cultural referents. Fiction composed in the democratic present thus signals to a movement from a tentative articulation of selfhood to a rambunctious celebration of the Indian presence in South Africa. All these literary gestures have the same agenda: to procure full and complete national belonging for Indians.47

Chapter 1, “Indians in Short: Collectivity versus Specificity in the Apartheid Story,” studies the proliferation of the short story in apartheid-era Indian fiction. I situate three short story collections—Jayapraka Reddy’s On the Fringe of Dreamtime (1987), Agnes Sam’s Jesus Is Indian (1989) and Deena Padayachee’s What’s Love Got to Do with It? (1992)—against literary developments within black writing in general. The apartheid story is marked by the necessity to challenge the segregationist prescriptive. For
Indians, however, subscribing to the antiapartheid imperative was complicated by the existence of contradictory high anxieties: the neuroses engendered by their erasure from the public imagination and the alienation bred by racial, religious, cultural, and linguistic difference. Indians, therefore, felt the need to assert their South Africanness by proclaiming a shared blackness. However, a unitary black identity also risked effacing the Indianness already made fragile by migration and public invisibility. The variety provided by the short story collection offers an excellent opportunity for conveying these contradictory impulses of collectivity versus specificity.

I continue to study short fiction under apartheid in chapter 2, “Essop’s Fables: Strategic Indianness, Political Occasion, and the ‘Grand Old Man’ of South African Indian Literature.” The relationship between political occasion and ethnic identity reflects not only the investment of Indians in South African public life but also the instability of ethnicity during moments of political change. The changing Indianness encountered in Ahmed Essop’s work enables us to examine key issues in diaspora studies such as assimilation, citizenry, and national belonging, and how these everyday concerns of migratory communities are altered by the unique context of apartheid. Essop’s novella The Emperor (1984) cautions Indians against retreating into ethnic enclaves. The Hajji Musa collection (1978, 1988) reveals the interplay of different nonwhite cultures in the supposedly “Indian” area of Fordsburg. In Noorjehan and Other Stories (1990), published in the year that saw the beginning of the end of apartheid, Indians actively seek to absorb the white oppressor into the “new” multiracial South Africa, thereby earning their own place as participatory citizens rather than as diasporics.

A preoccupation with the role of Indians in the new nation also characterizes transition-era (1990–1994) fiction. Chapter 3, “National Longing, Natural Belonging: Flux and Rootedness in Achmat Dangor’s Kafka’s Curse,” focuses on South Africa’s evolution to a multicultural democracy. Kafka’s Curse can be read as a short story cycle and as a novel. Its compositional structure encapsulates the shift in South African Indian fiction, particularly the move from realistic short fiction in the apartheid period to longer, more inventive narratives in the postapartheid period. The novel is dominated by the motifs of racial metamorphosis, transgression, and boundary crossing. In its relentless documentation of the possibility of movement, Kafka’s Curse reveals the untenable natures of taxonomies that depend on strict boundaries and argues that all South Africans are in the state of flux typically associated with migratory populations. Yet the South African version of hybridity that emerges from centuries of covert
racial fertilization is characterized by neurosis and anxiety and is radically different from the intercultural fusion celebrated by diaspora theorists such as Homi Bhabha and Salman Rushdie.48

The book then moves to the postapartheid period. Each chapter examines a different shift in Indian fiction in the democratic present, always situating literary turns against larger cultural and political changes. Chapter 4, “The Point of Return: Backward Glances in Farida Karodia’s Other Secrets,” contextualizes Karodia’s writing against two important literary movements in postapartheid South Africa: returning to the apartheid past in order to understand the postapartheid present and participating in a new culture of introspection and psychological meditation. A literary sense of return orchestrates Karodia’s rewriting of her own fictional narrative, Daughters of the Twilight (1986), in order to absorb the changing scenario of the present into her articulation of Afrindian identity in Other Secrets (2000). Literary return enables Karodia to thematize issues relevant to Indianess in postapartheid South Africa and also functions as a metaphor for the changes taking place in Indian identity and Indian writing from the apartheid to the postapartheid periods. The historical sense suggests a return to the past in order to plug the holes in national memory. By schematizing the psychic, cultural, and social lives of Indians under apartheid, Karodia’s critical vigilance reveals how Indianess has altered itself to a South African context. The literal sense of return celebrates the exile’s arrival in South Africa, a coming home that allows her to reconfigure the various facets of her identity enabling the emergence of a diverse Afrindian self.

While Karodia’s fiction returns to the apartheid past, the parameters of historical recovery are pushed back even further by the two novels studied in chapter 5. “Lost in Transplantation: Recovering the History of Indian Arrival in South Africa” examines the migratory journey of Indians as indentured labor and as traders through two historical novels: Praba Moodley’s The Heart Knows No Colour (2003) and Imraan Coovadia’s The Wedding (2001). A preoccupation with narrating the act of migration has characterized all South Asian diasporas. The South African Indian recuperation of the migratory past demonstrates how the unique circumstances of Indian arrival in South Africa alter our understanding of diasporic paradigms. Descendants of indentured and passenger Indians differently articulate shared concerns such as egalitarian citizenship, memory, hidden histories, relationships to the British Empire, the Indian contribution to South African life, their oppression preceding apartheid, affiliation with black Africans, and the emergence of Afrindian identities. Yet, like other South African historical novels, Moodley’s and Coovadia’s
Are Indians Africans Too?

writings also have a presentist agenda: to garner these themes to affirm the South Africanness of Indians and the Indoanness of South Africa in the here and now.

The last two chapters celebrate the literary inventiveness made possible in the postapartheid period. The final chapter, however, takes a very different turn in showcasing yet another important moment in democratic South Africa: the rupture of race relations. Chapter 6, “Citizen Other: The Implosion of Racial Harmony in Postapartheid South Africa,” examines the postapartheid fiction of Ahmed Essop through the lens of Africentrism. As power changes hands from black to white, those inhabiting in-between states are assailed for being alien and foreign. *The King of Hearts* (1997) reflects on the fraught relationship between Indians and the other races during the postapartheid era, while *The Third Prophecy* (2004) problematizes the accommodation of the Indo-Islamic community within the contours of a secular nation. Like his apartheid-era writing, Essop’s postapartheid fiction also comes back to the instability of ethnic identity in the time of rapid political change, even as it foregrounds the theme of unbelonging, alienation, and dispossession to expose the falsity of a nation’s sense of self. The failure of postcoloniality reveals a disillusionment with the new nation-state that characterizes not only postapartheid South African writing but also most other postcolonial literatures.

The breakdown of racial solidarity and of postcoloniality itself is also reflected in a brief conclusion based on a study I conducted in Durban, South Africa, in December 2005. “New Directions or Same Old? Afrindian Identity and Fiction Today,” reflects on subcontinental identity through a critical analysis of a seminar with the South African Indian literary community. The writers attending this meeting discussed issues consistently raised in this book: rage at an inward-looking Africentrism, a sense of unbelonging in the rainbow nation, despair at the insularity of South African Indians, and frustration over disavowal of the Indian past. “Every Indian has a story to tell,” claimed a participant, “but no one is interested in listening to us.” Since I want this book above all to have listened to the unheard stories that Indians have always had to tell, *Afrindian Fiction* closes with interviews I conducted with important South African Indian authors, letting the writers tell the story of their stories in their own voice.