Afrindian Fictions

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In an interview with Rajendra Chetty, Ahmed Essop claims that his fictional oeuvre is marked by a focus on the diversity of the human condition rather than an obsessive rumination on political repression: “I felt that in my writings I should present a comprehensive whole, rather than selecting one aspect, the apartheid aspect, the aspect of oppression” (South African Indian Writings 352). From this assertion, one might think that the Grand Old Man of South African Indian fiction relegates apartheid to just another part of Asian life in Africa. Such an assumption would be erroneous. As the carefulness of his rhetoric indicates, Essop stages a gesture of rebellion rather than one of dismissal: “That [apartheid] was one aspect of our lives. It was not to constitute our entire life” (352–53; emphasis added). Essop depicts the amplitude of daily life in the South African Indian community in rich, evocative, and humorous detail to make a political statement: He refuses to allow apartheid to colonize his consciousness and take from him the fullness of life. Despite this disavowal of the centrality of segregation, apartheid and its aftermath still determine the shape of Essop’s fiction.

The smattering of literary criticism that has engaged with Essop’s work in some detailed way also does not view politics as the thrust of Essop’s writing. South African novelist Christopher Hope claims that an all-encompassing satire drives Essop’s fiction:
What Essop does . . . is to gently satirise all the major ethnic groups. . . . He is, if you like, as disenchanted with his own community as with others, black, white, mixed-race, and others. Over all of them a kind of gentle ruefulness plays, and that is so rare in South African writing and so singular that I really can’t think of anybody else who does it in quite this way. (Hope and English 103)

Although astute in his estimation of the expansiveness of Essop’s satire, Hope does not link satire to political intent. Moreover, his assessment of Essop’s writing as “bleak” and “gentle” misses the palpable political anger that fuels Essop’s prose. Similarly, even though Robyn English concedes that Essop “makes a very effective mockery of the bizarre divisions of South African society” (99), she argues that Essop is “a writer who has turned his face against the overtly political style of many of his contemporary novelists” (99). These readings are symptomatic of other interpretations of Essop’s work which claim that an “overtly political” consciousness does not govern his fiction in the way that it influences other South African writers. The refusal to centralize politics amid the plethora of other issues that Essop raises—marriage, women’s rights, Islam, and sexuality—is an effort to recognize the internal diversity in South African writing during segregation. Important though that endeavor is, South African writers cannot but be influenced by apartheid. Essop may be far too subtle a writer to engage with politics in a crudely explicit way. However, the architecture of apartheid casts a giant shadow against which his work unfolds.³

In order to uncover the political texture of Essop’s fiction, this chapter examines the connection between Indian identity and social upheaval in Essop’s apartheid-era writing.⁴ 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 inner-city suburb of Fordsburg. If Essop seeks an articulation of solidarity based on white oppression in the first two texts, he rewrites his own rejection of white people in Noorjehan and Other Stories (1990), published in the watershed year that saw the beginning of the end of apartheid. Essop’s Indians in this collection actively seek to absorb white people into the “new” South Africa, thereby earning their own place as citizens rather than as diasporics.

Essop’s work thus stands as a defiant testimonial against the closed exclusivity with which Indian diasporas in non-Western geographies have sometimes been characterized. In an essay comparing the “old” or “exclusive” Indian diasporas in Fiji, the Caribbean, and Africa to the “new” or
“border” diasporas in Canada, the United States, and the United Kingdom, Vijay Mishra claims that the former “were diasporas of exclusivism because they created relatively self-contained ‘little Indias’ in the colonies” (“Diasporic Imaginary” 422). Even though Mishra laments the lack of scholarly attention paid to the “old” diasporas, he still privileges new migration by suggesting that Indian diasporas in the West are marked by movement, flux, and change, unlike the old diasporas that are suspended in a state of eternal stasis. In showing how Indian identity changes according to South African political circumstance, Essop reveals the possibilities for fluidity and exchange embedded in all diasporic domains, old and new. The changing Indianness encountered in Essop’s work also speaks to the instability of Indian identity, indeed to the instability of self-knowledge, even during the period of antiapartheid resistance that demanded the presentation of a unified front. Essop reveals that Indianness is contingent on political circumstances and cannot be pinned down. His writing thus counters conceptions of Indianness as a static monolith, bent on maintaining a purist sense of self.

The relationship between politics and migratory identities also demonstrates the uniquely South African characteristics of the Indian diaspora as well as the impact of the Indian presence on South African conceptions of race. Segregation afflicted every aspect of South African life. Thus, the “usual” issues that characterize diasporic communities in other geographies—assimilation, a minority’s will to power, maintaining “old world” cultural paradigms, and affiliations with other disaffected communities—take on a different hue. The debate around assimilation, for example, resonates differently in South Africa. The term has usually evoked nonwhite adaptation to the norms of the white majority in Western geographies. In South Africa, assimilation often involves a calculated integration with the disenfranchised black population and does not carry the derogatory connotations that integrating with white populations may elsewhere. South African Indians acquire political power and national belonging through a strategic assimilation via the politics of identification. Moreover, the diasporic desire to retain the old culture is subsidiary to the antiapartheid imperative. Indianness cannot help extending itself outward to embrace its African Other despite—or perhaps because of—the paradoxical presence of segregation.

Hybridity, a term that postcolonial studies initially normalized as the fusion of white and nonwhite, also takes on a different tone in South Africa. The defiant mixing of blacks and Asians and their relegation of whites to intruders and invaders asks us to subordinate whiteness in our
formulation of cultural hybridity in South Africa. The migratory selfhood ineradicably altered by apartheid not only reflects an East-South model of diasporic encounters but also foregrounds a South African manifestation of Indianness that disturbs the polarized racial categories of apartheid. Yet Indian identity in South Africa is not simply driven by apartheid. Essop’s early fiction—spanning little more than a decade—also reveals how quickly Indian identity adapts to a political scenario that changes from the certainty of apartheid to the uncertainty of transition.

The Afrindian identity Essop adopts shows the extent to which Indianness has Africanized itself as well as how this Africanized Indianness is not constant but always emergent. AbdouMaliq Simone’s thoughts on the mutability of Coloured identity are pertinent to understanding the changes in Indian identity that Essop’s fiction traces: “Rather than thinking about ethnicity as some immutable essence, it is more accurately conceptualized as the locus of relations among differences whose content and boundaries are incessantly shifting—what Amselle describes as a ‘fluid space of composition, decomposition, and recomposition’” (161). This chapter demonstrates how Indianness composes, decomposes, and recomposes according to political circumstances, exposing the extreme fluidity of diasporic identity in highly charged, rapidly changing political scenarios. If diasporics eventually “settle down” in the host country, Essop’s transitional Indianness reveals that rootedness in South Africa does not evoke the stability implied by the terms “settle” and “rooted.” Instead, Indians make themselves more South African by marking their presence with the flux involved in adapting communal selfhood to the political moment.

Essop’s changing Indianness always goes back to the desire for a citizenship denied to all nonwhites, but especially to Indians because of their “foreign” origins. Whether it is decrying Indian insularity in The Emperor, revealing the dialectic nature of Indian-African interactions in The Hajji Musa collection, or helping fulfill Mandela’s dream of an egalitarian South Africa that welcomes even the white oppressor in Noorjehan, Essop’s fiction depicts Indians as active agents of national change. But this ability to effect change alters Indians as much as they alter South Africa. Essop prepares Indians for democratic belonging by asserting their South Africanness through acts of political solidarity and by redefining the term “South African” to include a changing Indianness. The emancipatory citizenship acquired by Indians through their resistance to apartheid and by their participation in nation-making in the transition period allows Essop’s later fiction to challenge the direction taken by the postapartheid state and hold it accountable for the failure of its promises.
Essop’s slim novella *The Emperor* was published in 1984 at a time when the antiapartheid movement was acquiring a momentum that foreshadowed the eventual demise of segregation. The *Emperor* is also an allegory of ancient Indian history, particularly in its retelling of the story of the Indian king Ashoka (286–231? BCE), who famously turned to a life of Buddhist pacifism after confronting the human costs of empire building. In Essop’s novella, Dharma Ashoka entertains similar megalomaniacal aspirations. The newly appointed principal of an Indian school in Lenasia, he proceeds to rule the institution with an iron fist. Multiple acts of rebellion erupt as a consequence of his autocracy, including the disappearance of Mr. Ashoka’s son Deva. The novel ends with Mr. Ashoka surveying the spoils of his imperial plunder, but, unlike the character’s historical predecessor, the fictional Ashoka is not given a second chance. Essop’s emperor hangs himself, a suicide described in very stark terms in the closing sentences of the novel.

The novel thus deviates significantly from historical analogy even as it uses history to structure its narrative concerns. Essop’s rejection of historical veracity can be seen as not just an abjuration of archival truth but also as the relegation of Indian history to secondary status in South Africa. The Indian past—here the historical narrative of Ashoka—can be transplanted to South Africa, but that past can never perfectly allegorize its African surroundings. Instead, stories from India must adapt to the South African circumstances in which they are recomposed. Essop uses Indian history as an allegorical meditation on Indians in South Africa, but Africanizes that history by changing Ashoka’s story to reflect the segregationist scenario.

*The Emperor* is first and foremost a critique of Indian isolationism. Essop encourages Indians to discard the isolationist stance encouraged by apartheid and instead celebrate a politics of inclusion and interaction. To that end, Mr. Ashoka functions as an emblem of separatist Indian doctrine, whereas Zenobia, the English teacher, functions as an emblem of Indian interaction with the other races. In elaborating on Mr. Ashoka’s isolationism, Essop criticizes the structuring principles of Hinduism that can be pressed into the service of apartheid, an analogy that justifies the exclusion of the Indian community from other disenfranchised groups on the basis of maintaining a distinctiveness of culture. The novella reminds Indians that they are South Africans first and Indians next. In order to fully participate in South African life, Indians need to expunge aspects of their Indianness that prevent the articulation of a broader political
identity. Like Jayapraga Reddy, Agnes Sam, and Deena Padayachee, Essop
warns us about the perils of an excessive exhibition of ethnic identity.

The Emperor also posits a parallelism between repressive Indian
social customs and the repressive machinery of apartheid South Africa.
Mr. Ashoka is the principal of the Aryan High School, although he later
changes its name to Ashoka High School. The term Aryan brings to mind
the philosophy of racial purity on which much of apartheid was predi-
cated, as well as reminds us that the Aryans came to ancient India as
conquerors and settled into north Indian culture. In decrying Indian
absorption with racial purity—who else but ethnic absolutists would com-
memorate the “Aryanness” of Indians by naming an Indian high school
Aryan High School—Essop situates Indian preoccupation with caste and
color as startlingly similar to apartheid’s obsession with racial codifica-
tion.

The link between apartheid and Hindu social morphology in The
Emperor is reiterated through an article written by Mr. Ashoka and Dr.
Whitecross, the superintendent of schools, entitled “Differential Educa-
tional Criteria for the Twentieth Century.” At the heart of the article is
the assertion that “It should be evident to all clear-thinking teachers that
the official policy of Differential Education as practised in South Africa
follows closely the unique system evolved in India by its sages” (177). The
fact that the Aryans supposedly established the caste system endows the
structure with greater legitimacy in the eyes of the Europeans, who also
claimed to descend from the Aryans. The ancient history of differentiation
gives the rhetoric credence as “noble truth.” Finally, the language of dif-
ferentiation is couched in the language of civic reform: It stands for law
and order. Multiculturalism would yield nothing but lawlessness.

The analogy between segregation and subcontinental social stricture
is also important in terms of blurring the boundaries between ideologies
in the apartheid and postapartheid period. As I have shown in chapter
1, the disruption of racial harmony that characterizes the postapartheid
period can also be located in the apartheid period, where it is subsumed
by more pressing issues, such as the need for racial solidarity. In the post-
apartheid period, many black Africans foreground this charge of Indian
ethnocentrism and insularity. In writing a text that is a scathing critique
of Indian insularity, Essop almost seems to be warding off such criticism
by highlighting how he himself does not support ethnic insularity. This
anticipatory gesture further legitimizes his critique of black ethnocentrism
in the postapartheid period.

Essop seeks to mobilize Indians into political action by showing how
they participate in the very system that oppresses them. To become South
African, Indians need to eradicate hierarchical aspects of Indianness. Essop thus unequivocally condemns what has often been considered the heart of diasporic identity: the desire to maintain the distinctiveness of originary cultural paradigms. Instead, *The Emperor* claims that the unique social scenario in South Africa overpowers the usual diasporic impulses, especially the desire to retain the premigratory culture. Rowland Smith suggests that Indian characters such as Ashoka reveal themselves—like many of their community—to be essentially guests, eager to adapt to the ethos of their hosts who hold power. To share genuine power in the host state outside their self-contained communities is neither conceivable nor desirable. This trait distinguishes Essop’s fiction from that of black South African writers. The world they create may reflect the wonderland-absurdity of apartheid law but its centrality to South African life is never at issue. (69)

This reading is part of a theorizing of migratory possibilities that boxes Indians settled in non-Western regions into sealed ethnic enclaves and thus denies them agency and authority. Smith endorses the perception that Indians themselves do not want to be considered South Africans as they remain in a state of suspended animation, eternally poised to return to a mythic India.

Essop’s writing, however, challenges this stereotype. Indians have been present in South Africa for centuries. Their memories of an India to which they can easily return have been irretrievably lost. The oppressive structure of apartheid also radicalized Indians into political action and therefore to an enduring commitment to South African life. In claiming that Indians “are eager to adapt to the ethos of their hosts who hold power,” Smith suggests that Indians are also eager to assimilate into white culture. Certain characters may hold segregationist views, but they are invariably the objects of satire, which even Smith concedes. Instead of marshaling a cast of characters who cannot imagine what it is like to command “genuine power” outside of the hermetic confines of the Indian community, Essop seeks to activate Indians into political solidarity so they can earn their place in the annals of the nation as fully empowered citizens.

Nowhere is this critique of Indian isolationism more clearly articulated than in the allegorized figure of Dharma Ashoka. Mr. Ashoka is a purist, racially as well as educationally and culturally:

During his inaugural presidential address he made this policy statement: . . . What happens in the outside world of politics and economics
Mr. Ashoka argues that bringing politics and economics into the purview of education will result in a jeopardizing of its purity, always a loaded word in apartheid South Africa. After he takes over the position of principal, Mr. Ashoka continues to impose a discriminatory structure onto the schooling system: Boys need to socialize apart from girls, and teachers are prohibited from teaching outside a rigorously structured curriculum.

If Ashoka represents the exclusionary aspects of South African Indian culture, then Zenobia, the English teacher, partakes of multicultural proclivities and refuses to categorize according to rigid taxonomies. As a teacher, she “made her range beyond the prescribed play, poem or novel to other literatures and cultures, from ancient Greece, to Persia, to India, to China” (40). Essop uses education as a metaphor for the isolation versus interaction debate set up in the novella and, through Zenobia, stages a rebellion against the separateness of apartheid. In refusing to succumb to the pedagogical dictates of Mr. Ashoka, Zenobia makes the world—ancient Greece, Persia, India, and China—into her classroom. Zenobia is set up as a viable alternative to the doctrinaire isolationism of the Indian community: what the Indian community should become as opposed to Mr. Ashoka’s representation of what the Indian community should discard. Once again the uniqueness of diasporic exchange in the South African scheme of racial oppression comes into play here. While nonwhite communities have had to rally against white racism all over the world, the imperative to align with black Africans is unique to segregationist South Africa. Not only are blacks the largest ethnic group here, but South Africa is their land historically. By affiliating themselves with the indigenous inhabitants of South Africa, Indians can validate their own sense of belonging.

Essop seemingly disturbs his binary formulation of protagonists (Ashoka/Zenobia = Isolation/Interaction) by introducing a third Indian character, the hedonistic Prince Yusuf: “He was the most handsome man Mr. Ashoka had ever seen in his life. He was enclosed in fashion’s best: there was an expensive, hand-tailored, dark brown check suit; a beige shirt and matching tie decorated with rust-coloured proteas” (86). Proteas may ring alarm bells, as it was the national flower of apartheid-era South Africa. Prince Yusuf represents another type of Indian, who is urbane, sophisticated, and ready to use his Indianness as a gateway to white life. He opens a fragrance store in downtown Johannesburg that caters to every imperial fantasy of Eastern stereotype:
The façade and arched doorways [were] ornamented with gold Islamic calligraphy and foliate patterns in multi-coloured mosaic. . . . The interior of the salon radiated a soft aura of beauty and mystery, contrasting strongly with the carnival vulgarity of the other shops in the street. (97)

The store is a riot of color with ornate Islamic calligraphy. The inside suggests quietude and mystery, again tropes associated with the Islamic Orient. The contrast with the “carnival vulgarity” of the other stores that populate the street is significant. Essop’s use of the word “carnival” is highly suggestive, revealing, as it does, a moment when social borders and taboos may be subverted.16 Prince Yusuf refuses to partake of the carnival potential of his surroundings and remains, like Mr. Ashoka, a symbol of Indian isolation as well as a fetish of simplistic racial stereotypes.

When Prince Yusuf challenges the separation of races, he does so by establishing predictable relationships with white people. Mr. Ashoka’s friendship with Prince Yusuf opens new vistas for him. In following Yusuf to social gatherings in white women’s homes, Mr. Ashoka observes how bored European women approach the East as if it embodies the exoticism denied to them in their own lives. One of them tells him: “All my life I have been dying to meet a learned Indian gentleman. You belong to a cultured race of such ancient lineage that I can only tremble in your presence” (107). Despite the possibilities that the mere fact of interracial interaction in the highly regulated environment of apartheid suggest, Eleanor reduces Mr. Ashoka and Yusuf to symbols of a culture that is at once alien and exotic rather than an everyday part of South African life. This is asserted again a few pages later when Eleanor claims that “‘Persians, Indians, you are all the same, coming from the divine Orient’” (111). The taxonomy of apartheid that relegates all Asians to an undifferentiated mass that somehow doesn’t belong in South Africa is reiterated here. The word “divine”—evocative of a realm different from the earthly, the daily, the South African—confirms that even after a century in the African continent, the common perception of Indians is that they belong to the “divine Orient” and not to South Africa.

Eleanor then professes that she will be Mr. Ashoka’s disciple, learning “truth at your feet” (112). Another woman is equally enthusiastic: “‘How wonderful to be in a harem,’ Anne-Marie yearned biting a toasted buttered roll, laden with grilled shrimp, ‘to be bathed in perfumed water by jeweled black eunuchs and have poets read their poetry to you. I wish I lived in Arabia’” (113). If the excesses of Arabia attract Anne-Marie, Essop is quick to point out the excesses of her world, comprised of “toasted buttered roll, laden with grilled shrimp.” Anne-Marie sighs for a harem
where she will be waited on by black eunuchs. Of course, the irony is that she is being waited upon by black eunuchs: Yusuf and Mr. Ashoka. In allowing white women to reduce them to Oriental stereotypes, “black” men, Essop suggests, have been castrated. Mr. Ashoka’s interaction with Eleanor and Anne-Marie may defy the segregationist imperative, yet such contact tends to be hierarchical and stereotypical, with the Indians catering to the Orientalist expectations of their white audience.

The racial interaction articulated above can also be theorized in context of the debate around assimilation that characterizes all migrant societies. Assimilation has traditionally suggested integration into the norms and paradigms of the dominant group. In South Africa, assimilation is a more complicated issue. Assimilating into black culture is politically liberating, even though it means an erasure of particularity; assimilating into white culture in South Africa, unlike Indian diasporas in the West, means assimilating into a minority culture. In Western diasporas, Indians cannot shun alliances—however strategic—with whiteness. Living in the West necessarily means a daily negotiation with white people. In South Africa, even though whites are a gateway to power, as they are in the West, diasporics can abjure contact with white people, as they are not the majority.

Thus, if Indians were seen as middlemen—interpreters between white and black—Essop argues that Indians should climb down the ladder of racial hierarchy and join hands with the disenfranchised. This is, again, a common rhetorical trope that we encounter in South African Indian fiction (Reddy’s story “Friends” and Padayachee’s “The Finishing Touch” come to mind here): Indian writers are extremely clear that aligning themselves with whites will compromise their claims to egalitarian citizenship. This rhetoric of identification also distinguishes the Indian diaspora in South Africa from its other global cognates. There are few places in the world where Indians allied with other nonwhite groups the way they have in South Africa, allied to such an extent that they undo the specificity of nomenclature by calling themselves black. We see the emergence of not just an East-South model of diasporic exchange but a uniquely South African one.

The Prince Yusuf encounter, however, is more cautionary than diversionary. Stridently critical of Indian racial isolation, Essop nevertheless reminds us that there is a wrong kind of racial interaction and a right kind of racial interaction. The former never repudiates the gradations of apartheid, but instead actively participates in their conservation through cultural pandering and exclusivity—the only black people we encounter in the Prince Yusuf section are servants in the white women’s homes. The latter is diffuse, egalitarian, and takes from many worlds, as Zenobia’s
global pedagogy reveals. Again, this allows for an alternative mode of racial interaction: one that pushes Europeans into the background rather than attempting to negotiate with whiteness.

After warning us against the dangers of the wrong kind of racial interaction, Essop returns to the dominant theme of this novel. Through the allegorized figures of Ashoka and Zenobia, Essop not only represents the warring factions of isolationism and interaction, but also injects this debate into contemporary arguments on Indian education. An article on the theme of education in the Teacher’s Chronicle, presumably authored by Zenobia or her cohort, claims that education is diverse not divisive:

By education is meant . . . the development of the capacity for abstract thought; the maturing of the range of human sensibilities, sensuous and sensual, intellectual, aesthetic, emotional, intuitive; the refinement of the perception of life values; the animation of the creative faculty where fusion of the imagination and the intellect gives birth to new structures and forms. (179)

Essop’s characters often assert political collaboration and resistance through essays, manifestos, and newspaper reports. As we have already noted in chapter 1, the blurring of documentary and fiction is an important literary technique in apartheid-era writing. The more usual strategy is to combine factual occurrences into fictional genres. Fact thus masquerades as fiction. Essop, however, inverts that literary strategy: He inserts interjections that appear to be nonfiction into fiction. Fiction thus masquerades as fact. The slippage of fiction into fact not only gives Essop’s writing more credibility by allowing parts of it to appear “real,” but also shows us how apartheid-era fiction can be structurally complex without compromising the political efficacy of revolutionary writing.

If Mr. Ashoka’s view of education, as articulated in his manifesto with Whitecross, is that education should be sealed from the tawdry world of politics, Zenobia’s side claims a symbiotic relationship between education and political contingency. The “new structures and forms” borne out of the humane education they demand can be seen as an allegory for the Afrindian identity that South African Indians have to carve for themselves by interacting with the world outside, educationally, professionally, and socially. Although Zenobia loses the disciplinary hearing that Mr. Ashoka has manufactured against her for protesting his authoritarian policies, the court still recognizes her right to dissent. The popular support surrounding Zenobia, moreover, leads Mr. Ashoka to realize that his totalitarian tactics have failed.
Unlike the historical Ashoka, who finds redemption through his conversion to Buddhism, Essop’s Ashoka is damned. When Deva vanishes toward the end of the novel, Mr. Ashoka blames himself for his son’s disappearance: “Or—the thought came to him with the certainty of an apocalyptic illumination—had the god taken his son away from him because he was tainted, irredeemably tainted, in this incarnation? Yes, his beloved Deva would never return home while he existed. He would only return once his father’s bad aura was no longer a presence” (188). Mr. Ashoka then hangs himself. The novel ends on the imminence of that action with the words, “he entered the strong-room and pushed the heavy steel door until it closed on the light” (189). Depressing though the last words of the novel may be, the ending is not hopeless if we continue to think of Mr. Ashoka as a figure of isolation.

Essop claims that South African Indians should abjure—indeed, kill brutally—all feelings of separatism, authoritarianism, and purity in order to seek political empowerment with other disenfranchised constituencies. That Mr. Ashoka’s death is a suicide and not a murder suggests that the repudiation of oppressive discourses has to result from an internal self-change rather than through an external stimulus. Mr. Ashoka’s use of the rope from the flag of the apartheid regime as a noose underlines the fact that it is his untenable desire for racial purity that kills him. Although the metaphor of flag as noose might be heavy-handed, its prior history in the novel makes it an apposite vehicle for Mr. Ashoka’s death. As a dutiful servant of the apartheid regime, Mr. Ashoka had flown the flag on all important occasions, despite the outrage from students and teachers alike.

In having the Indian dictator kill himself using the fetish of white Herrenvolk—must not only die a violent death in order to be eradicated, but that this revolution should be achieved through a process of active self-realization. The Emperor holds Indians, and Indians alone, culpable for reinforcing apartheid-era boundaries, even as it reveals how many Indians refused to participate in racial divisiveness. In his next collection Essop shows us the vibrant racial exchange and political resistance that are possible when Indians and black Africans actually cross racial boundaries and engage in mutual symbiotic interactions.

**Effacement and Revelation in Hajji Musa and the Hindu Fire-walker**

Even though most of Essop’s other work does not engage with politics in
the allegorical way of The Emperor, apartheid still underpins his fiction. Discussing the stories in Hajji Musa and the Hindu Fire-walker (1978, expanded and republished 1988), Rowland Smith affirms the above assertion: “Essop’s distinctive trait in these early stories is his ability to create both the minutiae of Johannesburg’s exuberant Indian community and to suggest the continued menace of the larger outside world before which that self-protecting oriental enclave is humiliated and powerless” (65).19 While Smith emphasizes the omnipresence of apartheid in this collection, the phrase “self-protecting” once again foregrounds the Indians-as-guests mentality that Essop constantly repudiates, while the label “humiliated and powerless” bestows Indians with a lack of authority. As I demonstrate in my reading of this collection, Indians are able to negotiate an identity that accommodates ethnic difference and authors agency for itself.

Smith also locates a dual imperative to this collection in its focus on the particularity of the Indian community and the ever-present threat posed by the structures of apartheid. I would add yet another thematic preoccupation: the interplay of nonwhite races in supposedly Indian areas. The sheer diversity of races, and the subjection of whites to foreigners and aliens, enables the articulation of an alternative mode of racial interaction, always incipient but never foregrounded in The Emperor: one that decents whiteness and instead focuses on the relationship between Indians and other nonwhite constituencies. If The Emperor calls for the subordination of whiteness to the periphery of South African life, The Hajji Musa collection actually performs this relegation.

Essop is concerned with themes as varied as passing (“The Hajji” is about a character who leaves Fordsburg and is able to “cohabit with a white woman” [2] because of his fair skin and gray eyes), false prophets (“The Yogi” satirizes a man who claims to be a Hindu saint), female sexuality (“Two Sisters” examines the sexual psyches of two Indian women), and Indian gangsters (“The Visitation,” a novella, spends most of its pages describing the relationship between Mr. Sufi and Gool the Goon). But I am not merely interested in a thematic recital of this collection; I am interested in how claims to Indian identity are curated in a way that may be peripheral to plot but are actively engaged with the macropolitics of life under apartheid.

As Essop maps the heterogeneity of Indians in Fordsburg, he describes the Indian settlement as a permeable culture in which people of different ethnicities interact so closely that it is often impossible to know who is of what race. In the story “The Hajji,” the lead character travels to a white area for some work. Unnerved by his Otherness there, he climbs into the blacks-only section of the train back to Fordsburg: “In the coach with the blacks he felt at ease and regained his self-possession. He was among
familiar faces, among people who respected him” (8). If home—represented through the idea of ease, belonging, and familiarity—exists for the Indian community, it is configured not as a return to an imaginary India, but among the “familiar faces” of the indigenous Africans.20

Imagine a person from India in the United States claiming citizenship through the idea that home is among the “familiar faces” of the Native Americans. Although Tilo, the protagonist in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni’s The Mistress of Spices, falls in love with Raven, a Native American, the novel pairs Tilo and Raven as victims of colonial dispossession rather than suggesting that Tilo becomes more American through her association with the original inhabitants of the land. Divakaruni’s short story collection, Arranged Marriage, also implies that Indian women often acquire belonging, agency, and empowerment through their relationships with white men.21 The recognition that black Africans are the original owners and inhabitants of the land powerfully distinguishes the South African Indian diaspora from its Western counterpart, where whiteness is given ownership of space even as that authority is constantly challenged by the immigrant presence.

The affiliation with the African population is further emphasized in a story entitled “The Yogi,” where the eponymous character, Yogi Krishnasiva, is persecuted under the Immorality Act for having sex with a white woman. The Indian community is outraged, not because of the Yogi’s arraignment but because of the Yogi’s penchant for white (rather than black) women: “I tell you he no like black woman. He black but he don’ like black. He like wite goose meat” (30). Here, too, Indians situate themselves as black rather than Indian. In the story “Black and White,” the main character, a young Indian woman named Shireen, taunts her white boyfriend by pointing to the sea of faces around her and proclaiming, “I belong to everybody . . . to everybody, you understand. That is to blacks only, black boys only. Whites not allowed” (93). In reversing the vocabulary of apartheid (“whites not allowed”), the title of the story (“Black and White”) also reconstitutes race relations alongside a black-white axis, but one in which Indians refuse to succumb to the divisive nomenclature of apartheid that situated them in a separate racial category from blacks. This story also decenters whiteness. If Fordsburg is an allegory for South Africa, this is a South Africa where the different nonwhite races rejoice in their interplay and where the entry of white people into the scene of quotidian carnival is regulated.

Similarly, in “Gerty’s Brother” the Indian narrator says that the street Vrededorp, “as everyone knows, is cleft in two by Delarey Street; on one side it is colonized by us blacks and on the other side by whites” (122).
This sentiment of “us” versus “them” originated from the Black Consciousness movement, which called for rejecting alliances with all white people. It suggests the remarkable commitment to South African life that Indians have and also underlines the kinship between Indian diasporic and African indigene, one that is marked by an alienation from whiteness and by similarity of oppression. As we have noted in The Emperor, the rejection of whiteness is an important characteristic of the Indian diaspora in South Africa, where, because whites are a minority, Indians can forswear alliances with Europeans even as they desire white economic privilege. However, what makes South Africa even more different is the necessity of alliance with black people.

While the Indian characters align themselves with the black heritage of South Africa, we are also pointed to the diversity of the Indian community in this collection. Essop thus observes the dialectic of Indian identity in South Africa: Not only does Indianess alter its nomenclature and selfhood in its intense affiliation with blackness, it also, as we have already noted in Reddy’s story “The Marketplace,” reveals how other South African ethnicities have been shaped by the Indian presence in their midst. In a story entitled “Dolly,” the character Bibi is the daughter of an “Indian father and a Dutch mother” (38), and Mrs. Cassim in “Two Sisters” is “half-Chinese” (44), signaling the subterranean amalgamation of Indians with other races. These details are submerged within the main narrative and are not central to the mobilization of plot, but their thematic and political consequences cannot be denied: They disclose the impurity, rather than the inviolability, of Indian identity in South Africa.

Yet Indianess is never eclipsed in this collection. Story after story evokes the cultural changes that Indians have engineered in everyday South African life. Mr. Das Patel, a character who returns in many stories, owns an Indian café in Fordsburg. Essop describes this café as “eternally smelling of sweetmeats, sub-tropical fruit and spiced delicacies” (28). The phrase “eternally smelling” implies that Indians have brought their sights, smells, and sounds into South Africa forever. Characters with names like Soma, Aziz Khan, and Nazeem populate this establishment. The building that houses the café is called Orient Mansions. The slumlord Mr. Sufi in the novella “The Visitation” names his tenement Nirvana Mansions. The Hajji, in the story by the same title, affectionately recalls his days in the Islamic Institute (8). In “The Betrayal,” possibly Essop’s most politically fraught story, Dr. Kamal, who heads the Orient Front, has been schooled in India and has been a “professed disciple of Gandhi during his political life” (20). When the characters in “Two Sisters” dye their hair blonde, the narrator remarks that “they looked rather odd as blond hair did not
accord with Eastern features” (40–41). Essop notices nothing untoward in the intermingling of Indians and Chinese, but blonde hair does not go well with “Eastern features.” Essop stresses the artificiality involved in Indians trying to be white: They need to dye their hair blonde. While there is nothing “natural” in the Indian claim to whiteness, their claim to blackness is presented so matter-of-factly that it often fails to register on our consciousness.

In other stories, devout Muslims agitate against pictorial representation (“Film”), the corruption of Muslim women (“Aziz Khan”), and conduct Gandhian missions of passive resistance (“Ten Years”). In the story “Red Beard’s Daughter,” the character Red Beard “chews paan (betel-leaf). He had never worn a Western suit in his life. . . . When he was dressed, smelling of attar and with a red fez on his head, he looked like some sort of gnome” (99; emphasis added). Essop reveals how Indian identity is rigorously maintained in diaspora, but this identity is often juxtaposed with the articulation of a common black identity and therefore is rarely insular, as a similar projection of ethnic specificity might seem elsewhere.

Hindu cultural identity is similarly inserted into everyday culture. In “The Visitation,” Mr. Sufi visits Yogi Krishnasiva, whose room is described as “faintly lit by a flame-bud burning in an altar table in a clay bowl, before a brass figurine of the dancing god Shiva. Several incense sticks bloomed and smoked from a small porcelain vase” (201). In another story, “Hindu fruit and vegetable hawkers were starting their old trucks in the yards, preparing to go out for the day to sell to suburban housewives” (3). However, when a sprightly young Indian publishes a magazine (Glitter) aimed exclusively at the Indian community, he is denounced by the Orient Front as being a pawn of the whites and Glitter is accused of being “a racist newspaper financed by whites to undermine and divide the blacks” (228). Like other apartheid-era Indian writers, Essop negotiates the dialectic of assimilation versus cultural specificity with aplomb.

Compiled during the height of the antiapartheid and Black Consciousness movements, Essop’s earliest fiction suggests that Indians defied the strictures of apartheid by refusing to separate the races.22 Theodore Sheckels claims that while Essop “advocates community and generosity,” in The Hajji Musa collection he “shows characters and a community sadly rejecting them” (53). Yet Essop does celebrate community—the individualized Indian manifestation as well as the larger black political identity. Though Essop’s narrative strategies may seem subservient to the trajectory of plot, they have political implications, revealing that even while Indians rarely erase their Indian identity, they seek social kinship by aligning themselves with the disenfranchised blacks.
By emphasizing effacement and revelation as political strategies that insist on the South Africanness of Indians as well as the Indianness of South Africa, this book sets the stage for Essop’s subsequent narratives of Indian identity in African spaces. In making whiteness liminal, Essop points to the vibrancy of interracial exchange. This is an important departure from theories of hybridity that insistently focus on the joy of transforming whiteness and infusing it with a new vigor by the ethnic presence in its midst: Homi Bhabha’s “interstitial Third Space” comes to mind here (Location of Culture 36). Instead Essop argues that his nonwhites have no need for whites. Lest this sound almost like inverse racial prejudice, one should add that anticolonial resistance often operates on a continuum that starts with a rejection of those in power and what they represent. The later stage almost invariably involves a realization that a negotiation with the former oppressor is necessary. In his next collection, Essop revises his own stance on white people and actively absorbs them into the fabric of the nation.

Engaging Whiteness in Noorjehan and Other Stories

Noorjehan and Other Stories was published in 1990, the year that signaled the beginning of the end of apartheid. In this collection, very often, an Indian or Indian culture superintends political awakening in a white person. This may bring to mind the “Magic Negro” paradigm in film. “The ‘Magic Negro’ is a term coined in the 1950s describing Hollywood’s portrayal of black men as characters who, although disabled, have supernatural powers that allow them to save lost or broken white men” (Baldwin, abstract). The “Magic Negro” is never a textured character, existing only to evoke an epiphany in a white person. However, Essop’s Indians are less altruistic. Not only do they exist as developed characters, but they also engineer awakening in white people in order to procure citizenship for themselves.

Essop thus affirms the contribution of Indians to the antiapartheid movement and also to the nascent nation. As Vasu Reddy points out, “Noorjehan shows the Indian in moments of politicization and crisis of conscience where questions of identity straddle the divide of the changing African landscape” (86). The significance of the publication date of this collection cannot be overemphasized. It is 1990. While apartheid is in the process of being dismantled, many South Africans are preoccupied with the question “Now what?” Almost everyone recognizes that for South Africa to be a multicultural “rainbow nation,” whites—who constitute roughly 10

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percent of the population—have to be brought into its purview. Essop therefore rejects the racial insularity of the Black Consciousness movement—indeed, the racial insularity he himself advocated in his earlier work—and seeks solidarity with white people also. In locating Indians as active agents of nation-making, Essop heralds their arrival into South African citizenry. Notice also how Indianness pivots from effacement to exhibition here. In Essop’s earlier work, Indians proclaimed their South Africanness by dissolving Indian identity into a nonwhite melting pot. In Noorjehan, Essop suggests that Indianness sparks an epiphany in white people that makes Europeans more South African in their rejection of racial supremacy and by joining hands with the dispossessed to create a new South Africa. Thus, if Indianness—an ontological state that has been historically thought of as not belonging in South Africa—is used to make white people more South African, then Indianness itself is always already South African.

“One The Metamorphosis," a crucial story in Essop’s agenda of incorporating white people into the national domain, hinges on the radicalization of Naomi Rosenberg, a Jewish woman who finds spiritual solace in political opposition. She joins an organization called Pharos and becomes an active member of the antiapartheid movement. Naomi slowly develops a curiosity about South Africa’s Indian community:

Her interest in Gandhi led her into the worlds of Indian and Islamic history and culture. Mr. Habib, in compliance with the Islamic tenet that the quest for knowledge and its dissemination is a moral obligation, allowed her the use of his extensive collection of Oriental books. Her interests even embraced China and she read Confucius and Lao Tzu—and came to realize that Oriental civilizations were largely unknown to whites, just as African civilizations were unknown to them. (33)

Rescuing Islam from its negative connotations of fanaticism and militancy, Essop gives us another, less well-known aspect of Muslim theology: its dedication to the “quest for knowledge.” More significantly, Essop brings together Oriental and African civilizations in a bond of mutual dispossesssion. As victims of white ignorance, both Asians and Africans represent the unknown that the whites have to learn about in order to earn, rather than simply acquire, citizenry in the new South Africa. This reverses the dialectic of diaspora encountered in some parts of the West, where the whites are the self-proclaimed autochthonous majority. In South Africa, whites are settlers and a minority; thus, like all other minorities, they need to be integrated into the auspices of the nation. The shepherding of one
community into national belonging is often done by the larger community. The distinctiveness of Essop’s effort lies in the fact that it is one minority that extends the privilege of citizenry to another, acquiring citizenship for itself in the process.²⁷

This theme is reiterated in the story “East West,” where, again, a white person comes into political consciousness through his interactions with the Indian community and with Indian belief systems. This story revolves around an Afrikaner security officer named Borg who enters the world of Tolstoy Farm and becomes a Hindu as well as an anti-apartheid activist.²⁸ Founded by Gandhi to instill the values of nonviolence and passive resistance in its members, Tolstoy Farm sought to eradicate arbitrary categories of racial difference by welcoming the world into its confines. Ranjit, the spiritual head of Tolstoy Farm, tells Borg:

“People who come to Tolstoy Farm eventually come to appreciate that the entire universe is a manifestation of the divine Creator and that those who see the world in terms of difference only end by making their own moral and spiritual development very difficult. I am sure you know something about Gandhi?” (62)

The name Gandhi always signals an awareness of political responsibility, particularly through nonviolence. Gandhi also represents self-realization, resistance to oppressive structures, and the erasure of difference. Once again, a white person undergoes a process of self-awakening with the help of Indians. Gandhi, Ranjit, and (despite its Russian name) Tolstoy Farm all facilitate the change in Borg.

In highlighting Borg’s transformation, Essop underlines the importance of Indian spirituality on the psyche of white South Africans and the urgent need for a culture of love, tolerance, and nonviolence. In suggesting that the new South Africa be modeled along Gandhian principles of satyagraha, Essop claims that an Indian—indeed, the founder of the Indian nation—encapsulates the essence of the new South Africa. This suggests more broadly that Indians encapsulate the essence of South Africa, once again highlighting the Indianness of South Africa. Even though the title of the story foregrounds the usual binaries of East-West/nonwhite-white interaction, the unfolding of the story reshapes the dynamics of racial relationships along an East-West-South axis. Anywhere in the West, an Indian would probably not have been shepherding the white person into national citizenry; rather, it may have been the opposite. The agency Essop gives his Indians in nation-making emerges particularly from the South African context. Quoting Paulo Freire, Njabulo Ndebele says that “only
the oppressed can free themselves and their oppressors from the shackles of the past. But for the oppressed to feel that the moral high ground belongs to them, they have to experience themselves as having the power to be magnanimous, generous and forgiving” (158). Even though Ndebele firmly believes that the oppressed do not “feel that power in our country at this point in our history” (158), Essop’s characters not only reveal the ability to heal and reconcile but also the power that comes with being “magnanimous, generous and forgiving” (158).

However, the facilitation of whiteness into political awakening is not as easy as the conversions of Naomi and Borg intimate. In “Fossil,” Jason, a liberal white English professor confronts the fate of whiteness in a manner suggestive of a nervous breakdown. A nameless, presumably Indian, student brings about Jason’s radical realization. The student, who is described as “a handsome youth, with black curly hair . . . his face was dark brown in shade and his black eyes glittered” (103), wants to write a dissertation on Peter Abrahams. One of South Africa’s best-known writers, Abrahams was catapulted into instant fame by his novel Mine Boy (1946), with its evocation of the gritty reality of mine life. That an Indian student claims Abrahams as the subject of his thesis is important: Once again, Indians identify themselves with the cultural heritage of South Africa. They refuse to succumb to the divisive taxonomy of apartheid as well as to the divisive taxonomy of the English canon. Jason, however, scoffs at the idea of a noncanonical writer like Abrahams being a worthy subject of scholarly discourse and rejects the student’s proposal outright.

After the student leaves his office, Jason rushes after him, his mind a tumult of conflicting emotions:

Jason’s head was now throbbing in pain and was affecting his vision. In the foyer he did not find him and he rushed out to the portico. He was suddenly arrested by the bright sunlight that flooded the wide steep flight of steps at his feet. He put his hands on one of the columns to steady himself. The light on the steps fused them in a molten mass that seemed to come up like a threatening fire towards him, wave upon wave. (104)

In describing Jason’s awareness of the limits of his own tolerance, Essop inverts the rhetoric of the apartheid state. The word “arrested” has powerful resonances in the South African psyche. The fact that Jason is “arrested by the bright sunlight” brings to mind the black people regularly arrested for crimes against the state. That it is “bright sunlight” that is the active agent of arresting suggests two contradictory things: Jason is
confronting his whiteness and coming to terms with his complicity in
the structures of apartheid that have imprisoned him and prevented him
from seeing clearly, but “bright sunlight” could also allude to the dissipa-
tion of the cloud of apartheid and his realization that to live in this better
world, Jason must abandon his lack of political commitment. The phrase
“threatening fire” is also significant. Whites will be arrested and threat-
ened by the new world order that the end of apartheid heralds, and they
must come to terms with this loss of privilege through an acknowledgment
not only of political culpability but also of political commitment. Even as
Essop introduces a new rhetoric of inclusivity in this collection, which
hinges between the apartheid and postapartheid periods, he indicates that
Indians have already earned their place as national subjects and citizens;
now it is the turn of the oppressors to prove their South Africanness.

Intensely preoccupied with the nature of race relations in South
Africa, Noorjehan and Other Stories celebrates South Africa’s imminent
arrival into global citizenry by ending with the story “Pilgrimage.” Upon
embarking on a tour of Europe, the narrator encounters Liu Chih, a Chi-
inese woman, in Greece. Together they survey the magnificence of the
Parthenon: “As we climbed the steps and entered the colonnade, I looked
up at the sky flecked with moving clouds and felt as if the temple was ris-
ing and carrying Liu Chih and me to the Orient—of Confucius, Buddha,
Kalidasa and Shah Jehan (141). The triangulation of Europe, Asia, and
Africa heralds South Africa’s return to the international community after
decades of isolation and also reflects back to the internal dynamics of
South Africa (white/European, Indian/Asian, and African/black) that need
to achieve a similar harmony. The collection may end on a note of hope,
but familiarity with Essop’s later work tinges the narrator’s perception of
being transported to the Orient with a prescient gloom.

Since their arrival in South Africa in 1860, Indians have been threat-
ened with repatriation to India. In that context, the phrase “carrying Liu
Chih and me to the Orient” is freighted with consequence. It is also
significant that this triangulated harmony of the races can only take place
outside of South Africa. Essop’s later work describes the birth of a new
South Africa in which the old issue of Indian “unbelonging” once again
rears its ugly head. Even though Essop celebrates Indian arrival into South
African citizenry in this collection, he also reveals the tenuousness of that
claim to national belonging.

Noorjehan and Other Stories shows how Indians negotiate the politi-
cization of white people, thereby further earning their place in the new
nation. In drawing an expansive and egalitarian blueprint for the future,
Essop imagines a new South Africa where even the former oppressor
is welcome. Essop’s Indians reject racial solidarity based purely on the commonality of oppression and instead incorporate white people into the purview of the nation. The Noorjehan collection celebrates the overt Indianness of the Indian community. Indeed, Essop suggests that it is this public evocation of Indianness, especially the Gandhian values of nonviolence and peaceful resistance, that will heal the nation. By having Indians evoke racial epiphanies in white characters using Asian associations such as Gandhi and Islamic scripture, Essop situates Indians, as well as the sensibilities and cultural effects of the subcontinent, as firmly entrenched in South Africa. Indians are South Africans not only because they have been disenfranchised or have fought against the apartheid movement, but also because they have helped integrate the nation by bringing white South Africans into its sanctum. Noorjehan reclaims an Indian-ness that was overshadowed by more pressing circumstances in Essop’s earlier fiction and uses that Indianness to author national agency for its constituents. This transitional collection sets the stage for the elaborate open performance of Indian identity in the postapartheid period as well as subtly anticipates the breakdown of race relations in the democratic present.

A study of Essop’s apartheid-era fiction reveals that segregation radicalized Indians, who found political voice, social agency, and national belonging by participating in the resistance movement. This will to power is highlighted in The Emperor and The Hajji Musa collection. The former explores the consequences of racial alienation on the psyche of those who allow themselves to be isolated. Voluntary isolation, Essop warns, furthers the separatist agenda of apartheid by fracturing the power of mass movements. The latter celebrates the vitality of interracial contact and the political potency that Indians accrue by affiliating themselves with the black population. The racial camaraderie articulated above, as well as Indian involvement in the antiapartheid movement, justifies their inclusion in the nation as fully empowered citizens, an empowerment even more deeply etched in the national psyche by their participation in nation-making as Indians, rather than as blacks, in Noorjehan and Other Stories.

By showing us how much Indianness shapes itself according to political circumstances, Essop’s apartheid-era fiction reveals the extent to which Indians are invested in being full citizens of South Africa. Unlike the newer diasporas, which maintain links with the homeland through technology and elaborate networks of communication, we do not see a retreat into a mythic India in either Essop’s fiction or South African Indian writing. Essop’s apartheid-era prose demonstrates not only that Indianness
is conditioned by political occasion, but also how its responsiveness to social context exposes the instability of ethnic identity. Diaspora theorists may have characterized Indian diasporas in non-Western geographies as sealed ethnic enclaves, but Essop questions the validity of this critique. That Indianness is characterized by flux also demonstrates that ethnic identity never fully comes into being; rather, it is always dependent on external stimulus for its existence. R. Radhakrishnan’s comments on ethnicity are instructive here: “[I]dentities and ethnicities are not a matter of fixed and stable selves but rather the results and products of fortuitous travels and recontextualizations. . . . [H]ow identity relates to place is itself the expression of a shifting equilibrium. . . . [E]thnic identity is a strategic response to a shifting sense of time and place” (in Braziel and Mannur 121). Essop’s fiction demonstrates that Indian identity strategically adapts to the demands of the moment, a fluidity that refuses to situate Indianness in absolutist models of being. Different political junctures require different manifestations of ethnic identity. Essop’s fiction thus upholds the complex nexus between Indianness and South African political occasion. As the next chapter also demonstrates, it is precisely this fluidity that allows Indians to assert their rootedness in South Africa.