Afrindian Fictions

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Despite the end of legislative apartheid in 1994, South Africans remained preoccupied with the segregationist past, especially with resurrecting the stories buried by the ideologically slanted record keeping of apartheid. While the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) is the prominent example of returning to the apartheid period, this backward glance can also be traced through literary production.¹ A survey of fiction published in South Africa over the last ten to fifteen years confirms this claim. The Smell of Apples (1995) by Mark Behr; Deadly Truth: A Novel Based upon Actual Events in South Africa under Apartheid (2000) by Israel Heller, Zelda Heller, and Janice Rothschild Blumberg; Mother to Mother (1998) by Sindiwe Magona; and The Madonna of Excelsior by Zakes Mda (2002) are only some examples of a long list of texts that go back to the apartheid past. According to Rob Nixon, “many writers feel that post-apartheid literature plays an invaluable role by preventing, through restless exploration, the closure of history’s channels. . . . [T]o revisit history can be a regenerative endeavour. . . . [T]he result has been not just a return to the past but a return in a more personal key” (“Aftermaths” 76–77).

If return was an immediate consequence of the dismantling of the apartheid past, then another important repercussion of freedom was the innovation in literary production including generic experimentation,
growing confidence in the articulation of minority issues, and an “exca-
vation of . . . “repressed history” (Fainman-Frenkel, “Ordinary Secrets” 62). In opening the book’s section on postapartheid fiction, this chapter
uses Farida Karodia’s novel Other Secrets (2000) to analyze the concep-
tual stakes involved in retrieving the apartheid past as well as the liter-
ary inventiveness made possible in the democratic present. While later
chapters demonstrate even more changes in South African/Indian literary
production as democracy takes hold, this chapter discusses the initial
changes following the arrival of freedom.

One of these changes is the discovery of secret stories. Literature
may serve as the custodian of untold histories, yet literary voices from
the apartheid period have tended to be white and/or male. The most
famous examples that come to mind are Nadine Gordimer, André Brink,
Athol Fugard, and J. M. Coetzee, writers recognized all over the world.
The names of nonwhite men, such as Alex La Guma, Mark Mathabane,
Zakes Mda, and others, could be added here. Nonwhite women’s voices,
doubly silenced by apartheid and patriarchy, are among the recently exca-
vated Other underpinning postapartheid literature’s revisionist impulse.
But even this utopian project of recuperation is shot through with holes.
According to Betty Govinden, “the theme of ‘recovery’ of finding a voice,
has underlined South African women’s writing in recent years,” yet “Indian
women writers have to date been largely neglected” (“Against an African
Sky” 84). Govinden claims that the process of recovery will always leave
someone behind. Here Indian women are the forgotten figures, the other
Others, in the public act of literary remembrance.

Govinden further points out that even the titles of postapartheid
women’s texts commemorate the uncovering of a hidden history. Other
Secrets, Karodia’s most celebrated work and the primary focus of this
chapter, uneartns buried life stories. The “Other” in the title refers to the
double Otherness of Indian women and pointedly underlines their erasure
from apartheid discourse. “Secrets” refers not just to the secrets kept by
the novel’s main characters, but also to the secret that Indians constitute a
viable community in South Africa and to the relative secret of their disaf-
fection during the enactment of apartheid laws in the 1950s and 1960s.
According to Ronit Fainman-Frenkel, “one of the ‘secrets’ that Apartheid
attempted to conceal is the number of people who fell between, or formed
the interstices of, its systems of classification on one level or another”
(“Ordinary Secrets” 54). Yet another secret that the novel excavates is the
precarious racial identity of people who do not belong to any of the rigid
categories prescribed by apartheid.
Karodia’s project of recovery, of uncovering the “secreted” voices of Indian women, is further complicated by the fact that her novel “unveils” the trauma of another disaffected group: Muslim Indian women in segregationist South Africa. While Muslim women’s writing has become an increasingly important body of work in postcolonial literature—Monica Ali’s *Brick Lane* (Britain and Bangladesh), Kamilla Shamsie’s *Kartography* (Pakistan), the novels of Assia Djebar (Algeria) and Mariamma Ba (Senegal) are all important examples—the work of South African women of Islamic origin is virtually unknown internationally. Writers such as Karodia, Fatima Meer, and “Cape Malay” novelist Rayda Jacobs help fill this gap not only in South African literature but also in postcolonial studies in general.

*Other Secrets* reveals the hidden history and psychic anxiety of the Islamic Indian community through the trope of return, a backward glance made possible by the opening up of South Africa following the end of apartheid. By rewriting her apartheid-era novella *Daughters of the Twilight* (1986) and transforming it into the postapartheid novel *Other Secrets* (2000), Karodia enacts a form of literary return. The difference and distance between her two novels also metaphorize some of the changes taking place in Indian fiction and identity following the end of segregation, especially the movement of the subcontinental sense of self from the childlike/adolescent state of being that we have seen in earlier South African Indian fiction to a multifarious adult identity.

Karodia altering her own narrative also suggests a new self-reflexivity and self-analysis that has characterized South Africa following the first elections of 1994. As Shaun Irlam remarks, “the literature of the New South Africa bears abundant witness [to] the emergence of a culture of introspection . . . [that] . . . records a steady retreat from the strident, public, and political character of writing to a more private, introspective, and confessional mode” (698). The apartheid period was marked by writing that often described and recorded oppression rather than analyzed its psychic ramifications. Karodia thus reworks her earlier novella in order to infuse her prior rendition of political oppression with the “introspection” associated with the arrival of freedom.

Literary return is also a methodological innovation closely associated with postcolonial literature: the rewriting of a canonical narrative in order to insert marginal perspectives or to correct its problematic politics. The most well-known examples include *Jane Eyre/Wide Sargasso Sea, Wuthering Heights/Windward Heights, Scarlet Letter/Holder of the World, She/Of One Blood* and, closer to the South African home,
Robinson Crusoe/Foe. Karodia reworks her own writing rather than a colonialist metanarrative; however, the effect of this rewriting is similar to the postcolonial project of appropriation, recovery, and rectification. In infusing Other Secrets with psychological reflection and fully fleshed-out characters, Karodia refuses to allow her later writing to subscribe to the formula of apartheid-era writing. She thus corrects the “mistake” of bland social realism.

The “introspective mode” fuels a historical sense of return. Karodia turns to the apartheid past in order to plug the holes in national memory. Again, this form of return is an immediate result of the changes in the political climate following the demise of segregation. Apartheid created a normative repository in which Indians were consistently erased, marginalized, and misrepresented. The postapartheid period allowed a critical reflection on the apartheid past as well as a resurrection of hidden histories. Other Secrets proffers an alternative archive, one that records the physical and psychic trauma of the unknown victims of apartheid. Irlam points out that the TRC asked “every South African” a crucial question: “[W]ho were you during the decades of apartheid?” (712). Portraying issues such as the fear of assimilation, adherence to an orthodox Islamic orientation, and the dual consciousness engendered by the tug of different cultures, religions, and value systems, Karodia answers this question and gives voice to a group whose everyday state of being has been virtually excised from national recollection. Thus, as Kruger claims, Karodia situates her characters “at the intersection of the collective experience of oppressed minorities and the autobiographical re-collection and gathering-in of that experience” (“Minor” 71).

Karodia’s mediation of history is also anchored to this book’s examination of Afrindian identity. Irlam calls for a “need to explore the articulations (and disarticulations) between recent autobiographical literature and emergent concepts of national identity” (712). By schematizing the psychic, cultural, and social lives of Indians under apartheid as well as revealing the biological intermingling of Indians with other races, Karodia’s critical vigilance reveals how Indianness has altered itself to a South African context. This Africanized Indianness is infused with a sense of national belonging by its insertion into the postapartheid consciousness through the vehicle of the novel. Going back to the past is thus intimately tied to claiming citizenry as well as (re)defining South African national identity in the present.

Historical return further enables a reflection on how apartheid vexes our notions of diaspora, particularly themes such as the generation gap
and the maintenance of religious and cultural identity. Karodia raises the issue of desire for assimilation on the part of second-generation diasporics in Other Secrets through her protagonist, Meena, and the sense of placelessness from which she suffers. Longing for belonging characterizes diasporas everywhere. In South Africa, the desire to belong in national terms is doubly aggravated by the structures of apartheid that denied a sense of “South Africanness” to nonwhites by separating them into ossified racial categories instead.

Other Secrets also frames the forgotten rehabilitation of Indians under the auspices of the infamous Group Areas Act. The Group Areas Act forcibly expatriated many nonwhite communities from bustling, viable living spaces and moved them to arid, isolated quarters. While it was easy to segregate Indians in urban areas, semi-rural communities, like the one in which the Mohammed family lived, posed a problem, especially because nonurban Indians did not constitute large enough numbers to warrant coralling a location just for them. The act may have created an ethnically sealed space for Indians, yet, despite its best attempts, the segregationist government was unable to relocate semi-rural Indians, as they were too scattered a community to isolate in an “Asiatic” location. Plotting her narrative against the Group Areas Act allows Karodia to centralize the theme of return not only in order to rewrite the omissions, slips, and gaps in historical measurement but also to claim place for a community that had historically been denied a topography of its own.

The literal sense of return celebrates the exile’s return to the homeland, a “coming home” embodied in the novel’s protagonist and the novel itself and made possible by the change in political dispensation in the 1990s. The postapartheid period saw the return of the many exiles, Karodia included, whose passports had been arbitrarily rescinded by the white government. Meena’s return from exile in Other Secrets allows her to reconfigure the various facets of her identity, thus enabling the emergence of a variegated self, the existence of which was often subsumed under the pressing exigencies of the antiapartheid imperative. Karodia’s publishing history, shared by so many other nonwhite South Africans, confirms that the novel itself has been invested with the possibilities of return. Daughters of the Twilight was published by the London-based Women’s Press. Other Secrets, however, was published by Penguin South Africa. In bringing the novel back to its origin, Karodia shows us how South African Indian fiction has also returned home.

Literal return, like historical recovery, also reconfigures some of the normative assumptions of diaspora discourse across an East-South axis.
As an Indian, Meena is in a state of diaspora in South Africa. As an exile from the apartheid regime, she is also in a state of diaspora in England where she relocates. If a sense of displacement characterizes all diasporas, the circumstances of apartheid exacerbate the homelessness of Indians by creating yet another diaspora: that of political exile. In this double diaspora, home is not a mythic India but an everyday South Africa. Other Secrets reveals how the South African Indian diaspora is similar to Indian diasporas in the West, how those similarities—such as the generation gap, national anchorage, and minority unbelonging—are aggravated by apartheid, and how radically different the South African diaspora is from other diasporas. These various traits of diaspora are not contradictory, but rather exist comfortably with each other. Even though the issues characterizing South African Indian life are framed by a larger rhetoric of migration, political circumstances simultaneously distinguish them from mainstream diasporic discourse.

Yet the novel’s ending, in which Meena is suspended in an airplane somewhere between Africa and Europe, suggests that both text and character are unable to affiliate with any one location, a disavowal of anchorage that may locate Karodia within a dominant paradigm in postcolonial studies: that of the restless, rootless migrant. A rejection of place also distinguishes Karodia from other South African Indian writers who are harnessed firmly to South Africa, either by racial affiliation or by invoking their ties to the land. Analyzing the novel through the trope of return ultimately reveals not only the complexity but also the impossibility of return. Does the protagonist’s inability to come home suggest the eternal unbelonging of Indians in South Africa? Or does it reveal, instead, recognition of the multiple loyalties engendered by the powerful intersection of apartheid, exile, and Indianness? Other Secrets invites us to explore how Afrindian identity complicates the act of rewriting, historical recovery, and the migrant’s arrival home. Each aspect of return helps us unravel a different facet of Indianness in the immediate aftermath of freedom.

Rewriting Her Own Fictional Past: Othering Daughters

Almost a decade and a half after she published Daughters of the Twilight, Karodia published her magnum opus, Other Secrets. Both texts are narrated by Meena, an Indian Muslim girl growing up in apartheid South Africa. Novella and novel revolve around the strict adherence to Indo-
Islamic identity that Meena’s father demands, the rape of her elder sister Yasmin by an Afrikaner, the family’s forced relocation to the backwater of McBain, and Yasmin’s decision to abandon the child of rape. Daughters of the Twilight ends at this point. Other Secrets, however, consists of a tripartite structure entitled “Daughters,” “Mothers,” and “Other Secrets.” The “Daughters” section reworks Daughters of the Twilight, while the other two sections extend the dangling narrative of the earlier text.

After the death of her father, Abdul, Yasmin takes Soraya and Meena back to England. Following years of struggle, Meena becomes a successful romance writer. Following the dissolution of apartheid, she returns to South Africa, where she confronts the inevitable deracination that has resulted in her taking on an assimilated English identity. Meena stumbles upon the titular secret after her return home: Yasmin is not their father’s daughter but rather the daughter of a white man whom her mother was unable to marry. Other Secrets pointedly highlights the racial cross-fertilization characterizing the apartheid era.

In traversing the distance between Daughters of the Twilight and Other Secrets, the most pressing question that comes to mind is why Karodia rewrote her own narrative. Karodia has claimed that the “Daughters” section of Other Secrets preserves the structural integrity of its predecessor (South African Indian Writings 347). However, a careful mapping of one novel onto the other reveals changes that have important consequences for the thematic provenance of both texts. Minor differences include the age difference between the sisters. Yasmin is two years older than Meena in Daughters, but four years older in Other Secrets. The later novel emphasizes the gulf between Yasmin’s worldview and Meena’s, a gap enhanced by their difference in years.

Karodia also alters the father’s background in the later novel. In Daughters of the Twilight, she states that Abdul was an indentured laborer (Daughters 24), but in Other Secrets his reasons for migrating to South Africa are unclear. The novel hints that Abdul was a passenger Indian who came to South Africa to trade rather than in servitude (Other Secrets 5). Passenger Indians were more likely to be Muslims than indentured Indians, who were primarily Hindu in religious orientation. Since adherence to Islamic orthodoxy is central to the conflict in the novel, altering Abdul’s origins coheres better with the motor of Islamic identity.

Daughters of the Twilight is also less preoccupied with biological integration than its successor. We are not quite told of Yasmin’s patrimony in any direct way in the earlier book. Karodia might have felt a greater need to foreground the theme of racial intermixing in the postapartheid climate in which Other Secrets was composed. The racial solidarity that
characterized the apartheid period exploded after the end of segregation. Indians in particular were made to feel their foreignness even more. By adding the sexual boundary crossing undertaken by many South Africans in Other Secrets, Karodia argues for the deconstruction of divisions across ethnicities in the postapartheid period. Karodia, like Dangor, appeals to a common history of cross-fertilization that makes Indians uniquely South African. To be South African, according to these writers, is to always find the Other in your bloodline, heritage, and ancestry.

Meena also does not visit Johannesburg and encounter a group of young radicals in Other Secrets, as she does in Daughters of the Twilight. Although she meets South African activists in London, the later novel focuses on the emotional texture of its protagonist’s psyche rather than on her overt politicization, thus signaling an important shift from the social realism of the apartheid period to the ruminative mode of the postapartheid era. Finally, Daughters of the Twilight contains a scene of reclassification, depicting in elaborate detail the humiliating procedure necessary for a change in racial categorization. In Other Secrets, Meena’s reclassification is dismissed in a sentence: “I had finally decided to have myself reclassified as Coloured, in order to keep my teaching post” (185). By relegating the process of reclassification to a single terse phrase, Karodia refuses to give the agonizing procedure narrative space, thereby defusing its importance in her imaginative world. The negation of the significance of this boundary crossing also anticipates Meena’s occasionally cavalier attitude toward her assuming an assimilated English identity. Paradoxically, it further signals Meena’s repudiation of apartheid taxonomies by not taking ethnic categorization seriously anywhere.

According to Chetty, Other Secrets “explores the mother-daughter relationship in the running crisis of the apartheid situation, updating it to include new family alignments in the post-apartheid South Africa” (Indias Abroad 143). The “new family alignments” include the reimagined dynamics of not just the Mohammed family but also the family of Indians in South Africa. The relationship between Karodia’s two novels allegorizes the initial stylistic and thematic changes in Indian fiction in the postapartheid period. As it was written in the 1980s, a decade that saw the urgent need to unite the nonwhite population in order to dismantle apartheid, Daughters of the Twilight relies on the effacement and strategic revelation of ethnic identity in order to garner political agency. Other Secrets rarely imposes erasure on itself, especially in the later sections of the novel, even as it discusses the forced invisibility of Indians under apartheid. This is because the need to seek political franchise by absorbing Indians into a larger constituency is less urgent in the postapartheid era.
Acutely aware of the disavowal of Indians in the apartheid fantasy of racial ordering, Karodia inserts Indians into South African life by returning to the past and broadcasting their disaffection under apartheid in *Other Secrets*. Unlike its predecessor, *Other Secrets* demonstrates a confident, if conflicted, articulation of Afrindian identity, especially in the second half of the novel. This is reflected in a change in both style and tone. *Daughters of the Twilight* refuses to embrace narrative closure by leaving characters dangling. The later novel discusses not just the process of assembling a multifarious identity but also the final mosaic of identity itself. Thus, if Indian identity exists in a thwarted, unfulfilled state during apartheid, its particularity often negated by the need for racial solidarity, the postapartheid period reveals the multiple contradictory strands that compose this identity. Appropriately, *Daughters* focuses only on the figure of the girl-child. *Other Secrets* traces the growth of the girl-child to an adult woman, suggesting that Indian identity itself has grown up and assumed all the complexity of adult biographies. Literary return allows Karodia to trace the progression of this identity from past to present as well as hint at its future possibilities.

Because political change is less urgent, postapartheid fiction also often abandons social documentation and becomes more experimental stylistically, favoring genres such as magic realism and the comic style of the big nineteenth-century novel. Size matters too. Big books are hard to come by in apartheid-era prose, probably because all writing deemed to be subversive was banned and apt to be confiscated. Apartheid-era literature needed to be easily hidden. Moreover, certain ethical rationales determined its literary agenda. Political content could not be compromised by psychological meditation; the argument needed to be crisp and clearly stated. As Njabulo Ndebele argues:

What is on display [in apartheid-era writing] is the spectacle of social absurdity. . . . The necessary ingredients of this display are precisely the triteness and barrenness of thought, the almost deliberate waste of intellectual energies on trivialities. It is, in fact, the “emptying out of interiority to the benefit of its exterior signs, [the] exhaustion of the content by the form.” The overwhelming form is the method of displaying the culture of oppression to the utmost in bewilderment. (42)

*Daughters of the Twilight*, in keeping with other apartheid writing, may sacrifice “interiority” in order to foreground “exterior signs.” *Other Secrets*,
in keeping with postapartheid writing, reflects the changes that have taken place with the advent of democracy. Written in the psychologically realistic, emotionally finessed style of George Eliot, it runs 456 pages. Daughter of the Twilight, true to apartheid-era writing, is only 150 pages long. Anthropologist Thomas Hansen points out that in South African Indian drama, by “the early 1990s, the powerful trends towards either political satire or family farces began to reverse somewhat and more subtle and poetic work without explicit or didactic agendas began to re-emerge” (“Plays” 265). A similar shift can be charted in Karodia’s fiction, perhaps even in South African Indian fiction as a whole. In reverting to its own narrative past, Other Secrets discards the explicitly political overtones of Daughters of the Twilight, even though political idiom fortifies its fictional structure. Indeed, after a point, Other Secrets ceases to be about either Indians or South Africans and instead exists in a timeless, placeless zone where the emotional contiguity between women seems to be the text’s primary structuring thematic.

The space between Daughters of the Twilight and Other Secrets does not merely showcase the distance traveled by Karodia as a writer; it also metonymically reveals some of the early aesthetic and thematic shifts in South African Indian fiction from the apartheid to the postapartheid period. As we have seen in the first section on apartheid-era prose, writers such as Jayapraga Reddy, Agnes Sam, Deena Padayachee, and Ahmed Essop favored the short story and the novella that were also written primarily in the mode of social realism. The need to assert solidarity with other nonwhite groups in order to combat segregation was the “categorical imperative” underpinning Indian literature. Even though writers like Padayachee attempted to infuse some fantasy and levity into their writing, psychological introspection was kept to a minimum.

It is in the transition period that we begin to note a change through novels such as Kafka’s Curse that deploy magical realism and fantasy to discuss political transformation. Karodia takes this literary and generic turn even further by infusing her writing with intense psychological meditation. This shift—from documentary realism to introspection, from short prose to big books—is not only indicative of a shift in Indian writing but also suggests an increased confidence in the way that Indians have imagined their place in South Africa today. Karodia’s backward glance at her fictional past in order to flesh out Indian identity reflects not only the growth of a writer but also the growth of a community in self-consciously literary ways.
Excavating Buried Biographies: 
A Historical Return to the Segregationist Past

Literary rewriting further enables the project of historical return. The first two sections of Other Secrets, entitled “Daughters” and “Mothers,” concentrate on revising the apartheid past in order to recover the complexity of Indian identity under segregation, unfurl diaspora across an East-South axis, and assert South African nationality for Indians in the postapartheid present. Karodia infuses the representation of Afrindian identity during apartheid with the psychological introspection that marks the postapartheid period, revealing not only the oppression of Indians but also the emotional and mental consequences of that victimization. Historical return enables the excavation of an Afrindian identity by exposing how Indian-ness, even as it struggles to maintain an absolutist sense of self, is never pure. Instead, Indian-ness actively engages with South African social structures and Africanizes itself. In revealing the history of interracial intimacy, Karodia also demonstrates the biological Africanization of Indian identity. Other Secrets claims Indian belonging in South Africa by remembering a shared story of suffering as well as cultural and cross-racial fertilization.

In Other Secrets, Indian selfhood is initially hesitant, tentative, and prone to erasure, even as this identity is rigorously maintained through the will of the father. That the protagonist is the child of an Indian Muslim father and a Coloured Christian mother also exposes the fragility of Indian-ness. The splitting of identity, religion, and culture engenders a bifurcated selfhood. Meena’s “double consciousness” can be integrated only through the death of the father and a physical withdrawal from South Africa. The identity Meena forges in the end, what she calls the “place which reflected the geography of my soul” (310), is rootless and composite, suggesting both the fragmentation and the restorative capacities of exile.

Other Secrets also raises questions about the place of Islamic Indian-ness in South Africa. Meena’s father, Abdul, who came to South Africa as a passenger Indian at the age of seventeen, “during the height of the Mahatma Gandhi inspired resistance campaigns” (5), is associated with the Islamic Indian-ness that the rest of the family struggles to maintain. For example, Abdul utters the Islamic benediction bismillah before meals (33). Meena and her family also observe Ramadan with the flourish of the devout: “during this month of fasting, like millions of other Muslims throughout the world, we were up before sunrise to prepare and eat the last meal of the day” (64). Here Meena yokes her family to the ummah or
the global community of Islamic believers, extending her identity outside of South Africa not only to India, but also to a pan-Islamic confederacy. Do Indian Muslims jeopardize their already tenuous claims to citizenry by claiming affiliation with the worldwide federation of Islamic believers and asserting ties to an imagined India rather than the local habitation of South Africa? Can a pan-Islamic identity exist comfortably with a South African one, or do the two contradict each other in their demands for allegiance? How does a community already apart because of race, religion, and culture claim a South African identity without compromising its Indian past and without consolidating the demarcations established by apartheid? Abdul’s tenacious clinging to an insular Islamic Indianness raises important questions in this novel and in South African Indian fiction in general.

The preservation of Indianness in diaspora thus often rests in private, especially familial, life. According to Thomas Hansen, “the most precious construction of all, the Indian family [is] the heart of every claim to the distinctiveness of Indian ethnicity in South Africa” (“Plays” 255). Meena’s family is no exception in this regard. Ashwin Desai and Brij Maharaj claim that “the Indian family [in South Africa] continues to be very conservative and extremely authoritarian. The father-figure is inscribed very heavily as the decision-maker and disciplinarian. . . . [L]ike other patriarchs, the father’s role is to enforce a morality aimed to produce ‘acquiescent subjects’” (“Minorities in the Rainbow Nation”). Abdul thus submits to a rigid standard of social behavior, especially where his daughters are concerned.

By giving narrative space to the Mohammed family’s everyday state of being, Karodia interjects Indo-Islamic conflicts into public discourse. She also shows us how Indian identity alters, with the first generation that actually came from India clinging more tenaciously to its Indian roots than the generation that is born and brought up in South Africa. The tensions between Meena and her father also reveal that, though the South African Indian diaspora invites us to construct a new model of diasporic contact, some of its features, such as the generational conflict, are startlingly similar to diasporas everywhere. In highlighting Meena’s conflict and by emphasizing the fact she is not comfortable adhering to a purist version of Islamic Indianness, Karodia creates a space for Meena as a South African. To belong in South Africa, Indianness must be impure.

This impurity is often engendered inadvertently. For example, Meena’s father supplies goods to the African community and Africanizes his store,
revealing how even rigid adherence to religious and national codes is never absolute:

Mohammed’s General Store specialised in dry goods and catered to the African trade. The interior was filled with stacks of blankets which reached all the way to the ceiling; billy-cans hung from the doorway in tight bunches and the three-legged cast iron pots popular with the Africans for outdoor cooking were propped up against the door; beads and colourful bangles festooned shelves stacked with rows of plastic shoes. (46)

While the name Mohammed signals the Islamic orientation of its owner, the store’s contents accommodate its African patrons. Meena tells us that “shopping was a major social event. . . . At Mohammed’s General Store the African customers milled around the doorway or sat on the sidewalk” (47).

Trade propels Abdul not only to Africanize the store but also to defy the segregationist imperative by making the store into a venue where Indians interact, commercially and socially, with the Africans. The word “general,” then, suggests not only the contents of the store but also a thwarting of apartheid rules by refusing to subscribe to racial specificity. Karodia demonstrates how Indians take on identities depending on material circumstances and geographic location as well as economic exigencies. Despite its obsessive record keeping, apartheid failed to archive Indian identity and its dialectic relationship with the land it inhabits. Other Secrets reveals how Indiananness couldn’t but help Africanize itself during the apartheid years, thus inserting this hybrid form of Indiananness into public knowledge in the postapartheid period.

In going back in time, the novel also excavates other hidden histories of the Indian community, particularly highlighting interracial coupling. Much of the first section centers on Yasmin’s rape by an Afrikaner youth. As in the violently racialized societies of the antebellum South or the slave-owning Caribbean, the rape of nonwhite women by white men was common in the apartheid period. In uncovering this history of violence, Karodia shows us how Indian women were also subject to sexual brutalization, thus underlining their affiliation with other disenfranchised communities through a shared story of pain. When Yasmin’s rape results in a pregnancy, she gives birth to a baby girl. The family debates over what to name the girl. They finally decide on “Soraya, after the Empress of Iran” (147).
The child’s name is Persian, but given that Yasmin is not really Abdul’s daughter but the daughter of a white man her mother was unable to marry, it is an exotic name for a child who has no Asian blood in her. The child’s full name, Soraya Fatima Mohammed, emphasizes the connection with Yasmin’s Indian “father.” Abdul’s last name is Mohammed and Fatima is the name of his mother. It is significant that the child is named after Empress Soraya, who led a somewhat fraught life. Also of biracial origin (Iranian father/German mother), Soraya married the Shah of Iran at the age of nineteen and was divorced for failing to produce an heir after seven years of marriage. She died an exile in 2001. Her biography touches the life narrative of the fictional Soraya with a prescient doom.  

The fact that the fictional Soraya is the daughter of a Coloured mother and a white father but passes as an Indian child is significant. Soraya’s secret history reveals that all identity in South Africa is tenuous. The relentless segregation of apartheid invited covert racial mixing that irrevocably compromised efforts at maintaining purity. The mixing of races also suggests that Indians have integrated into other South African ethnicities, blurring the lines drawn between communities. Karodia uncovers the buried stories of interracial sexual encounters and foregrounds the Africaness of Indians by emphasizing the degree of their biological integration with other South African ethnicities. As discussed in the chapter on Kafka’s Curse, the evocation of racial cross-fertilization claims a different sort of citizenry: one that appeals to biological integration rather than racial affiliation or anchorage to land.

Through the story of the relationship between Meena’s father (Indian) and Meena’s mother (Coloured) and Yasmin’s father (white) and Yasmin/Meena’s mother (Coloured), Other Secrets depicts racial interaction not only as a rhetorical gesture whereby Indians identify with blacks, but also as sexual intimacy, a physical embracing of the Other that erases boundaries and hierarchies between nonwhite groups and fulfills Indian claims to South African belonging. The novel foregrounds the racial intermixing, ranging from rape to thwarted romantic liaisons, that characterized apartheid South Africa. A classic “race narrative,” it also evokes the buried history of interracial relationships in other segregated societies such as those depicted in the novels of early twentieth-century African American writer Pauline Hopkins.

However, Indian belonging in South Africa is asserted not only through biological interaction but also by narrating the shared pain caused by legislation such as the Group Areas Act. Few people are cognizant of how much Indians suffered under the act. The first part of Other Secrets is
set against this backdrop of relocation, with the government contemplating “moving Indian traders out of the small towns” (54). This picks up on another widely prevalent perception of Indians. Fainman-Frenkel explains that

> [e]xpropriation, forced removals, and disempowerment were just some of the historical hurdles that the South African Indian community faced under Apartheid as racist stereotyping designated Indians as unscrupulous business people, who posed a threat to white-owned commerce. This stereotype motivated government response and reinforced the division between groups. (“Ordinary Secrets” 60)

Indians were considered a threat to white prosperity and often banned from trading in white areas. According to Abdul’s friend Cassimbhai, Indians had “become the Jews of Southern Africa, hated and envied . . . scapegoats” (67). The comparison with Jews evokes Nazi Germany and the widespread perception of the Jewish community as alien others who had become rich at the expense of native Germans. Like the Jews, many Indians during the time of the Group Areas Act were also in a state of restless wandering, caught between the apartheid imperative to relocate and the regime’s inability to find an area in which to confine this group.

The Group Areas Act, which mandated that each community live in zones of confinement with uncrossable lines drawn across racial categories, then serves as a metaphor for the unstable position that Indians occupied in the apartheid scheme. “Nana said that the rumours about a ‘plan’ to remove Indian traders from small towns to an area specifically created for them would have been laughable, if it hadn’t been so frightening” (69). Karodia points to the irony in perceiving as a threat a community that constitutes less than 3 percent of the population, wields no political power, and is constantly rendered invisible. However, the idea of relocation is not as laughable as it initially seems. Meena and her family are removed from her childhood home; only afterward does the government realize the futility of trying to segregate Indians in their own “Bantustans.” As Meena says, “We had become the first victims of the government’s grandiose scheme to move all Indians out of small towns into one central area, a task so impossible to implement that it eventually had to be abandoned. But for us it was too late. We had already been ‘expropriated’ and had lost everything” (98).

It is important to emphasize, then, that there was no place for Indians, literally and figuratively, in the apartheid imagination. Recovering the story
of Indian suffering under the Group Areas Act allows Karodia to claim space for a community that had historically been denied a topography of its own. The small town Indian community, in all its scatteredness and diffusion, may have eluded governmental efforts at spatial confinement, but Meena’s family’s relocation and the isolation that follows function as powerful symbols of the tenuousness of the Indian community in a system that compartmentalized the world in black-and-white segments. The novel’s referencing of the Group Areas Act emphasizes the twilight zone in which Indian identity unfolds, allows Indians to politically connect with other nonwhites through the rhetoric of disaffection, and carves a place for Indians in the South African imagination. In remembering their victimization by a totalitarian regime, Karodia articulates the ironic South Africanness of Indians.

Finding Home in Homelessness: The Impossibility of Return

The project of historical recovery ends with the first two sections. By the third section, entitled “Other Secrets,” Abdul has died, and Yasmin comes back to South Africa to claim her daughter and to take Meena with her to England. Meena’s South African passport is then revoked and she becomes an exile. The last third of the novel initiates the literal valence of return by tracing Meena’s journey to England and her “coming home” to South Africa after many years of exile. The seamless passage from one section to another, from the twilight zone of apartheid South Africa to the supposedly liberating European cosmopolis, suggests new beginnings and old closures, but such transitions are never hermetic, as past spills into present and present leaks into every possibility of future. In the final section, Meena maps an alternative cartography of self while attempting to excise her Afrindian past from her memory.

Meena’s move to London seemingly reinforces the South-North trajectory of diasporic exchange. However, apartheid blurs the categories of diaspora and postcoloniality. It is one thing to migrate west/northward; it is another thing to be forced to migrate west/northward after you have migrated southward from the east. The idea of double diaspora once again powerfully enters our consciousness. Here, the diaspora engendered by exile (South African Indians in London) is complicated by the fact that the diaspores are already in “exile” from elsewhere (Indians in South Africa). It is in this double diaspora that Meena realizes that South Africa—not
India—is her home. The second diaspora of enforced exile, then, subsumes the longing for India that is a consequence of the original act of migration from the subcontinent. In exile, Meena realizes that she is not Indian but South African.

London, however, does not yield its liberatory promise. Meena’s apprehension that Yasmin and Soraya will become assimilated without ever being accepted in white English society brings back memories of her Nana’s aphorisms: “[P]eople who went to England and became carbon copies of the English were like brinjals—aubergines [eggplants]. Dark on the outside and white on the inside. No matter how hard they tried to be white on the outside, they would always just be brinjals” (318). Nana’s imagistic strategies bring to mind American metaphors for racial confusion, such as Oreos, Twinkies, and Coconuts, demonstrating that Afrindian writing consistently raises issues that are “universal” to migratory selfhood even though identity formation is always complicated by political circumstance in South Africa. Like migrants everywhere, Meena must walk the tightrope between putting down roots and assimilating completely, a conflict that conjures her past life, where her allegiances vacillated between Indian Islam and Coloured Christianity.

Yasmin’s daughter, Soraya, who has been born and brought up in South Africa, resents her forcible uprooting. She is initially disconnected from her English environs even as her mother slides into British society with relative ease. Meena thinks all of Soraya’s problems can be cured by “the warm embrace of her family at McBain and under the heat of the African sun, she would recover her spirit” (344). The smallness of life in McBain and the authoritarian demands of the father once made Meena feel that her world was constricted. Even as Meena turns away from South Africa, she aches to return. When Meena is able to go home in 1992, she is overjoyed. “[W]hen my [South African] passport finally arrived I was ecstatic. I didn’t know whether to laugh at the absurdity of the whole issue, or to cry with joy” (366). Return, Meena imagines, will resonate with the victory of reclaiming an identity and a history elided by the apartheid regime as well as by exilic deracination. “At the time I thought it was the single most significant act of my life. I was finally liberated. The old South African government had stolen my life, my history and my identity. . . . But I was returning. I was coming home. A mist had lifted and I could see the sun again” (367). For the exile home is always what is left behind, a place where deposited histories can be retrieved upon return. But coming home is not easy now that Meena is marked by her years in London. “There had been times when I ached to feel the warmth of the sun, to watch the night
The Point of Return

sky from our stoep—a scene which was uniquely ours. Yet now I wondered if I would want to live anywhere else. London had finally become home” (375). Once again, Meena is poised at the threshold between two worlds, unable to decide which one to step into. It is in the act of returning that Meena is able to find a place for her otherwise transient self.

Meena returns to South Africa following the death of her grandmother, which also necessitates her mother’s departure from McBain. Realizing that she may never see McBain again, Meena is seized with nostalgia. She takes back to England “a bronze plaque with a Koranic verse in Arabic that hung in the front room. . . . The plaque was the only religious item in our house. When the morning sun caught it, the gold lettering still sparkled, highlighting the words. Papa told us that several of the letters had fallen off” (378). Meena’s parents had disagreed about the placement of the plaque and her father had always insisted that “in a Muslim household this room [the front room] is the right and proper place for it” (378). By inserting Islamic iconography into her otherwise secular world, Meena finds the “right and proper place” for Islamic identity in her life. The fact that “several of the letters had fallen off” suggests that the Islam that is present in her life is an incomplete Islam, yet that the “gold lettering still sparkled” implies that the religion is still alight in Meena’s life, albeit in a fragmented, impure way. In imbuing the plaque with talismanic properties, Meena is able to reconcile past and present:

I studied the verse, thinking of my father and my grandmother and the way our lives had unraveled and then, by some miracle, had come together again. I thought about the years we had spent at McBain. There had been both good and bad times. Looking back then, even the bad times seemed to have been an integral part of growing up there. (379)

Meena’s father and grandmother symbolize the claims of her Indian and Coloured roots. Meena can now synthesize the various aspects of her multifarious self. These include her Islamic, English, South African, and Indian identifications. The plural affiliations reveal the heterogeneous identity that is made possible by the intersection of apartheid, Indian-ness, and exile, a complex state of being that can only be appropriately showcased through the introspection and nuance associated with the postapartheid period.

With the death of her father, it might seem that Meena’s Indo-Islamic identity has also died, especially because she leads a resolutely secular life
in London. But Meena realizes that each shard of memory has gone into the making of her composite self and that she can never turn away from who she is. Karodia refuses to provide one single moment that engenders this realization; instead, she demonstrates how exile and return have steadily enabled this epiphany. In coming home after years of separation, Meena can integrate her diverse selves into a composite whole. As Meena herself states: “Perhaps McBain was the kind of place one had to leave in order to appreciate” (369).

Even though Meena might have fused her Indian past into her English present, a later comment about her connection to South Africa strikes a note of disquiet in the harmonious ordering of identities. When Meena’s mother comments on how assimilated into English life Soraya really is, comparisons with Meena’s own English integration surface:

“Don’t you have friends from other backgrounds? What about other South Africans, people who share our way of thinking?” Ma frowned. . . . It was difficult to make Ma understand that because we had lived abroad for such a long time, we had become assimilated into a different culture. We were no longer South African. It was only the childhood memories that kept us connected—and in my case, it was a connection not to South Africa, but to McBain. (426; emphasis added)

Meena realizes that she has been severed from her national origins and that she no longer identifies herself as South African. If the act of returning generates an epiphany on the role of Islam in Meena’s life, paradoxically, it also shows her how disconnected she has become from her South African past.

Significantly, as her plane touches down at Johannesburg airport, Meena conjures up the memory of “the desolation at McBain: the pale-yellow sun-scorched veld dotted with dry scrub. A desolation that, ironically, I had yearned for in those dark days in London” (368–69). All it takes for Meena is to arrive in South Africa to realize the futility of her desire for return. Even though Other Secrets attempts to bestow South African citizenry on Indians, Meena’s deracination and her eschewal of national identification may seem like a rejection of the South Africanness of Indians that other subcontinental writers, including Karodia herself, have claimed. However, Other Secrets also demonstrates the complexity of South African national identity, particularly how the powerful juxtaposition of exile and subcontinental affiliations subverts the idea of a homogenous South African self. To be a product of South Africa’s unique
history is to always be marked by other races, cultures, countries, and continents.

If Afrindian harmony exists, it remains a future possibility hinted through the promise of unlived lives. When Yasmin’s daughter, Soraya, slips into a coma after a car accident, the family finds out that she is pregnant. Soraya, convinced that the baby was going to be a girl, already had a name in mind: “She wanted the baby named Ashleigh Fatima Mohammed” (453). Nomenclature is not accidental here, instead it foreshadows the many worlds the child will be required to intersect. Soraya’s daughter will be brought up in England. Therefore, it is significant that her first name is Ashleigh, its distinctive spelling bestowing the name with a very English air. Yet the child’s name also suggests her Indian heritage that can never be erased. Fatima was the name of Abdul’s mother. It was also the name of the Prophet Mohammad’s daughter, a call to the past that infuses Ashleigh’s name with Islamic possibility. Mohammed is Abdul’s last name, the last name of his daughters and the last name that Yasmin gives Soraya. The patriarchal line ends with matrilineal overtones as Yasmin not only keeps her own “maiden” name but also bestows that name on her daughter and granddaughter. That Yasmin herself is not Abdul’s biological daughter, but rather the daughter of a non-Indian man, invests this final assertion of Indian identity with wider significance.

The ethnicities that Ashleigh Fatima Mohammed inhabits suggest that South Africans are intermixed to such an extent that it is impossible to separate Indian from Coloured or white. Other Secrets asserts further that Indians have participated so much in South African life that they cannot be distinguished from other South Africans and therefore have an equal claim to citizenship. That the child will be brought up in England suggests that this harmony can take place only outside of South Africa, thus anticipating the rupture of race relations in South Africa in the post-apartheid period. Through the character of Ashleigh Fatima, the novel implies that Indians, paradoxically, become more South African when they are not physically situated in South Africa, an assertion already validated by Meena’s recognizing South Africa as home when she is in exile and then realizing that she doesn’t fit in when she returns.

Other Secrets ends with Meena returning to England on an airplane somewhere between Africa and Europe, eternally frozen in a state of limbo. The image of the plane also brings to mind what is often considered the emblematic novel of diaspora: Salman Rushdie’s The Satanic Verses. In The Satanic Verses, the plane in which the two diasporic protagonists are traveling to England crashes and the characters are washed
up on the shores of England. Rushdie’s use of the plane suggests that diaspora involves a violent crashing of one way of life into the other. Karodia refuses to bestow the classic tropes of shock and enigma on migratory arrival.\textsuperscript{26} Arrival, instead, is seen as an impossibility. The fact that Meena is neither here nor there affirms the fundamental impurity of South African Indians as well as the untenable nature of the desire to belong in absolute terms.

It is also fitting that the novel concludes with Meena’s letting go of her past and thinking about her future: “Forbidden Love was waiting. My publishers were waiting. There could be no looking back” (456; emphasis added). Earlier, Meena had asserted that “we all have our own places. I discovered mine much later—a place which reflected the geography of my soul” (310). We do not know what the contours of Meena’s inner life look like, but we do know that the “geography of her soul” is suspended in the indeterminate space between England and South Africa. In her return to South Africa, Meena realizes that she is always returning somewhere else. When in England, she is always turning to South Africa; when in South Africa, she is always turning to England. The ending of the novel then suggests the impossibility of fulfilling the promise of return, especially in the sense of coming home and being at home.

Meena thus assumes the role of the cosmopolitan wanderer—a stock figure in diasporic fiction and theory produced about the East-West encounter—gliding between different geographies, histories, and cultures.\textsuperscript{27} Other Secrets reveals some of the assumptions of mainstream diaspora studies even as it undoes the East-West/South-North model of migratory exchange. The reinforcing of dominant diasporic paradigms also raises the question of whether an East-South model of diasporic can only be assembled in fragments as Europe always intrudes to take center stage. Dipesh Chakrabarty’s comments on the difficulty in “provincializing Europe” (241) are apposite here: “Europe remains the sovereign theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call ‘Indian,’ ‘Chinese,’ ‘Kenyan’ and so on” (223). Since Europe was the prime mover in forging the relationship between India and South Africa, England often assumes prominence in interactions between Indians and other South Africans weakening, though not dismantling, the East-South bridge that South African Indian fiction builds. However, the cosmopolitan “countryless” figure disrupts the totalizing imperatives of the African and European nation-state by refusing to adhere to a hegemonic—or single—form of national identification.\textsuperscript{28} Karodia also reveals the multiple attachments that sustain communities whose roots are as tangled with different groups, histories, and nations as those of South African Indians.
That the novel closes with Meena reflecting on her writerliness further enhances her nebulous, though ultimately successful, quest for place. Meena’s becoming a romance writer is significant, especially when this authorial activity is juxtaposed with what seems to be a rejection of her South African identity. Even though her retreat into fantasy suggests a turning away from immediate politicization and immediate realities, her novels, inspired as they are by the nonwhite men in her life and with titles—such as *Forbidden Love* and *Strangers in Love*—reflecting a defiance of apartheid law, are more steeped in South African reality than they initially seem to be. Although her assertions suggest otherwise, Meena cannot erase her South African past. She may refuse to look back and refuse to return, but South Africa will always infuse her consciousness.

Analyzing *Other Secrets* through the tropes of return enables a reflection on some central issues in postcolonial and diaspora studies—hybrid identities, national anchorage, cosmopolitan affiliations, nostalgia, communal memory, and generational conflicts. The novel also demonstrates how these preoccupations of diasporic postcoloniality are always complicated by the central issues in South African studies such as apartheid, exile, minority identities, and the advent of democracy. The literary valence of return, exemplified in Karodia’s rewriting of her earlier fiction, suggests the author’s desire to accommodate early cultural shifts in the postapartheid present into a narrative about the apartheid past. This has important repercussions for the depiction of Afrindian identity in South Africa. Karodia points to the initial changes in Indian identity, particularly how Indianness is able to articulate itself without the reservations imposed by the antiapartheid imperative that necessitated an erasure of racial specificity in order to challenge the prescriptive of segregation.

Yet the identity that emerges in the novel is never a pure resurrection of Indianness. Instead, Karodia reveals how Indianness has pluralized, hybridized, and Africanized itself. The historical valence of return allows the postapartheid public to remember Indian disenfranchisement during the apartheid years as well as commemorate the Indian struggle to Africanize itself, thereby earning a place for subcontinentals in the annals of the nation. Finally, the character’s return—the literal valence of coming home—explodes the idea of return itself, challenging absolutist notions of citizenship and identity. Being suspended in a nether zone somewhere between Europe and Africa may well be the price to pay for foregrounding a plural identity that nourishes itself on Europe, Africa, and Asia.