Afrindian Fictions

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Ahmed Essop’s later fiction is fueled by a palpable unease at Indian, especially Indian Muslim disaffection, in democratic South Africa. Even though Essop is too skillful a writer to allow rage to overwhelm his prose, his postapartheid writing reveals an increasing anxiety about how democratic South Africa has stripped Indians of full citizenry. This chapter explores Essop’s disquiet at the implosion of racial harmony in postapartheid South Africa, uncovering in the process what minority unbelonging tells us not only about national belonging and citizenship in the “new” South Africa, but also about the postcolonial nation itself. Essop thus takes up what Anthony O’Brien defines as “an opportunity to inquire into the role and the responsibility of the literary intellectual in constructing (establishing or subverting) a discourse of the nation, the new nation” (11; emphasis added).

While Essop’s earlier writing is suffused with hope and promise, especially in his celebration of egalitarian racial interaction, his postapartheid fiction takes on a more ominous hue. Essop may depict interracial harmony in the apartheid years, yet The King of Hearts (1997) reflects the fraught relationship between Indians and the other races during the post-apartheid era, while The Third Prophecy (2004) problematizes the accommodation of the Indo-Islamic community within the contours of a secular nation.
Essop’s articulation of Indian identity in contemporary South Africa demonstrates that Indians seemed to have more political franchise when they had no political franchise. As power changes hands from white to black, those inhabiting in-between states are assailed for being alien and foreign. The failure of multicultural democracy suffuses Essop’s later work with a sadness that even the humor and satire that characterize all his fiction cannot eradicate.

However, despite the difference between his apartheid and postapartheid fiction, certain similarities run through all of Essop’s writing. Essop is intensely preoccupied with how Indians fit into South Africa, the different roles they occupy at different political junctures, and the demands that a rapidly changing social milieu makes on Indian identity. As Lisa Lowe points out with reference to Asian American identity, “the processes that produce such identities are never complete and are always constituted in relation to historical and material differences” (in Braziel and Mannur 136). Closer to home, Thomas Hansen argues that “with a new freedom, which is also a moment of uncertainty, compounded by changing relations among local, regional, and global forces, everybody in the country was left to rethink themselves beyond that overpowering shadow and structuring power that apartheid had imposed on them for decades” (“Melancholia” 298). Apartheid, and the antiapartheid movement, created one set of determinants against which the Indian community developed a sense of self. The transition period (1990–1994) offered more guidelines for communal behavior. Finally, postcoloniality, with what many Indians consider its thwarted promise, is forging yet another aspect of Indian identity.

Even as South African Indian identity unfolds across multiple axes, it exposes the unique link between the sociocultural transformation of Indianness in South Africa and political reality. Essop’s postapartheid fiction always comes back to the instability of ethnic identity in the time of rapid political change even as it foregrounds the theme of dispossession to expose the falsity of a nation’s sense of self. Indian unbelonging in the postapartheid state reveals the difficulty—indeed, the impossibility—in fully settling down. As their foreignness is repeatedly used as a weapon against Indians, we are reminded that subcontinentals in South Africa remain suspended in a state of diaspora, with all the negative connotations of flux and instability that the term suggests.²

Thus, no matter how vigorously Indians asserted their belonging in South Africa in the past, their homelessness is reinforced in the postapartheid present. One of the questions Essop’s later work raises is: How long does a migratory community have to continue to validate itself to indigenes in order to belong? In other words, when do diasporics stop being
in a state of diaspora? Smitha Radhakrishnan argues that “South African Indians [now] face the political task of gaining recognition from the newly formed multicultural state as a key minority group” (“Time” 263). Essop’s postapartheid fiction demonstrates the difficulty—perhaps even the impossibility—in “gaining recognition” as a viable minority. This desire for outside validation also raises further questions about self-empowerment. Is it enough for a disaffected group to acquire composite citizenry in its own eyes or do claims to citizenry need to be authenticated by the majority in order to have social and political effect? Is citizenship a matter of authentication—who validates claims to belonging—rather than simply due process of law?

Essop’s sense of being “out of place,” to use Ian Baucom’s phrase, speaks to the instability of Indian identity and subcontinental claims to citizenship as well as to the instability of Essop’s own fiction. Notice how Indians are self-empowered at a time when they did not have social authority, and how, at the moment of Amandla, Indians are dispossessed by the majority’s inability to authorize their self-empowerment. Notice also how Essop’s fiction moves from joy and celebration in the apartheid period to anxiety and then finally rage at Indian marginalization under the new regime.

The breakdown of racial solidarity also demonstrates how post-colonial states often replicate the behavioral paradigms of their imperial precursors. Indira Gandhi’s Emergency in India, the military coups in Fiji and Pakistan, and the rise of African dictators, such as Idi Amin in Uganda and Joseph Mobutu in the Congo, may be extreme manifestations of the South African case but all reveal a colonialist tendency to shut down democracy, diversity, and dissent. Additionally, as scholars of postapartheid South Africa have pointed out, race continues to be a major interpretive lens through which South Africans approach each other (Radhakrishnan, “Time” 278; Desai 114; Muthal Naidoo 39). South African Indian Muslims—the primary focus of Essop’s work—are subject to another level of alterity, furthering the neurosis of an identity already fractured by centuries of Otherness. So, for example, the celebratory staging of Indian identity—seen elsewhere in this project in the wearing of Indian clothes—reveals how sartorial difference can be a mark of radical Otherness rather than a proclamation of ethnic pride.

Essop’s dramatic about-face in the postapartheid period also marks a significant shift in South African Indian fiction. Even though the rhetoric of racial affiliation may not be in circulation anymore, South African Indian fiction rarely engages with Indian-black hostility in such an explicit and direct way. Often, deteriorating race relations are blamed on
the Indians in order to assert the necessity for “black” solidarity. In a significant departure from his own earlier prose—The Emperor comes to mind here—Essop also places the blame on the majority community: the black Africans. Essop does not uncritically censure black Africans, but rather attempts to comprehend the genesis of their anger against Indians. This also lends credibility to his critique of blacks, a charge that ordinarily might have been dismissed as racist had Essop already not demonstrated his antiracist credentials through his earlier work as well as through his refusal to assign blame to any one side.

Yet Essop’s fiction does not simply show and satirize. He also uses Indian disaffection to seek change. Essop best expresses his literary agenda in an untitled essay in which he argues that “the work of writers may come to be seen not only as a testimony of the times and a revelation of the human condition with its potentials and possibilities, but as an important contribution to the metamorphosis of society into a rational, humane and compassionate one” (in Daymond, Momentum 21). As O’Brien points out, one of the central questions underpinning South African democratic discourse was “how to construct an expressive culture that springs from, responds to, and shapes visions of economic and political democracy deeper than ballot box democracy, parliamentary representation, liberal capitalism, cultural pluralism and the Enlightenment discourse of rights” (2–3). By questioning the practices of the new nation, Essop participates in an “expressive culture” that attempts to extend democracy, citizenship, and national belonging beyond “just” political freedom. Essop’s later fiction thus places him close to South African writers such as Zoe Wicomb (David’s Story), Ivan Vladislavic (The Exploded View and The Restless Supermarket), K. Sello Duiker (The Quiet Violence of Dreams), and Achmat Dangor (Bitter Fruit), all of whose works have expressed some sort of disaffection with the new order. In exposing the failure of multicultural democracy, postapartheid writing such as Essop’s strains toward a radical transformation of South Africa into a truly democratic “nation-space” (Bhabha, Nation and Narration 299).

**After Amandla: Otherness and Unbelonging in The King of Hearts**

Although the new South Africa imagined itself as a tessellation of interlocking cultures, the shifting dynamic between Indians and blacks reflects the violence, hostility, and distrust amid the races after the abolition of apartheid. Freedom might have heralded a better world, but power still
remained unequally distributed. Ralph Premdas’s comments on the tension between Indians and blacks in Guyana can also be applied to a South African context: “[R]esidential, occupational, customary and racial cleavages together established a deeply divided state. Each group feared the other; each disparaged the other through a complex set of stereotypes. . . . [T]he . . . government never succeeded in re-aligning the ethnic vertical cleavages of race, religion, culture etc” (quoted in Mehta 93).

In South Africa, both Indians and Africans felt that the other community had greater access to the constellations of power. The Indians were thought to be invested with economic authority and the blacks with the political hegemony of the majority. This hostility is part of a long culture of conflict between Zulus and Indians starting “from the riots in Durban in 1949, the destruction of Gandhi’s Phoenix ashram in 1985, to the frequent accusations by Zulu leaders, intellectuals and artists that Indians are unpatriotic and racist” (Hansen, “Diasporic Dispositions”).

It may be surprising that we don’t often encounter the strained relationship between blacks and Indians in Essop’s earlier fiction. However, it must be remembered that this conflict was given less importance, and may even have been glossed over, during the apartheid years because of the urgent need to unite against white sectarianism. Published in 1997, three years after the historic election of 1994, The King of Hearts abandons past representations of interracial solidarity, depicting instead the fraught relationships that emerge when ethnic unity is no longer a pressing compulsion.

The title story, “The King of Hearts,” begins on the expectation of a better future. It narrates the story of Alexander King, a white heart surgeon—hence the title—who successfully performs the world’s first heart transplant operation. The story is set in a fictional nation called Saturnia. Originally belonging to the Sircon people, the country has been colonized by the settler Saturnians. King falls in love with a Sircon woman named Tasreen. Invoking the concord of the past, Essop does not distinguish the Sircons by racial categories (black, Coloured, Indian); instead, we are told that Tasreen is a Sircon woman. Only her Islamic name betrays her origin.

The metaphor of the heart takes center stage in this narrative. Essop imagines the country as a giant festering heart: “They were part of a social system that had become bloated and diseased. It seemed that the entire heart of Saturnia needed surgery—especially as its main artery had been poisoned by a social evil committed several centuries earlier” (2). Opportunity arrives at King’s door when the president of the republic requires a new heart. The only heart obtainable is a Sircon one. The public face
of apartheid now has a black heart. Gradually all the senators and law-
makers also need heart transplants (a clever conspiracy on the part of
the president’s wife, who hosts parties and makes them indulge in cho-
lesterol-rich food) and King continues to replace white hearts with black
ones. This is used later on to blackmail the lawmakers into yielding to the
process of complete social change. Essop abandons his own techniques
of stark realism in this collection, thus registering an important shift from
the apartheid to the postapartheid period. It is also significant that Essop
employs the genre of fantasy to narrate this story of racial healing. Essop
refuses to name the geographic terrain of his fabulist world as South
Africa, suggesting that the real South Africa is incapable of sustaining a
racial utopia.

The title story serves as an important caution to South Africans by
serving them the perfect model toward which they should aspire. Like
all perfect models, this too is a chimera. Frederic Jameson’s comments
on satire and utopia are instructive here: “Satire and the utopian impulse
[are] two seemingly antithetical drives (and literary discourses), which in
reality replicate each other such that each is always secretly active within
the other’s sphere of influence. . . . All utopias, no matter how serene or
disembodied, are driven secretly by the satirist’s rage at a fallen reality”
(80). In creating a utopia, Essop indirectly reveals his anger at the dys-
topic reality of the new South Africa.

Most of the other stories in the collection invoke deteriorating race
relations more directly, particularly focusing on the implosive hostility
between Indians and black Africans. Essop creates a bridge between his
apartheid and postapartheid fiction by introducing characters from his ear-
lier writing. This literary strategy—of showing how different social circum-
cumstances impact the same characters—allows us to observe how identity is
changed by material and political happenstance. Essop also creates highly
recognizable characters that embed themselves in our psyches by virtue of
our having encountered them earlier. In the short story “Chess.” The prin-
cipal, Mr. Duma, also clashes with the English teacher Zenobia, whom we
already encountered in the Emperor. Mr. Duma makes Zenobia’s resis-
tance to his dictates a matter of cultural difference: “He was incensed.
Who else but Zenobia could have instigated the pupils to write the letter?
No Christian would object to his sermons, but only a heathen Muslim
woman who had challenged him to a game of chess which everyone knew
was of Oriental heathen origin” (36). Mr. Duma also refers to Zenobia as
the “woman in exotic clothing” and as “the Indian woman” (37).

Mr. Duma uses Zenobia’s Indianness as a weapon against her. His
obsession with her race reveals (a) that he is not Indian himself, giving
his antagonism toward her an ethnic cast and (b) that he imagines Indians (their clothes, their religion, their pastimes) as heathen, exotic, and out of place in the everyday life of South Africa. The aural resonances of the name Zenobia also clamor to be heard. Scholars such as S. E. Dangor argue that “Indians were the first victims of xenophobia in South Africa” (“Negotiating” 256). Suggesting xenophobia, Zenobia becomes a symbol of indigenous hostility toward the foreign. The depiction of Indians as “‘alien’ par excellence; the ultimate ‘Other’” (Brah 168) has characterized most Indian diasporas; indeed, all diasporics, before they settle down, are marked as foreign. In South Africa, this Otherness takes on a tragedy of its own. It shows us not only the thwarted promise of postcoloniality but also how Indians still have not acquired composite citizenry despite 150 years in South Africa and their determined resistance to white oppression.

In resurrecting characters from the past, Essop rewrites his own fiction by imposing on it the consciousness of the present and warns us of the gathering tension between Indians and other nonwhite Africans, especially if the latter continue to view the former as exotic beings who can never belong in South Africa. Essop also shows us how postapartheid era sensibilities often reflect the rhetoric of the apartheid state. Thus, the new nation, even as it claims to herald a better world, is uncomfortably anchored to its segregationist history.

“The Silk Scarf” underlines the hostility between Indians and blacks even more emphatically than the stories discussed so far. Mrs. Nebo, a black African woman whose husband “had already been designated as the Foreign Affairs Minister in the new government to be established after the passing of the Apartheid era” (45), goes shopping in an Indian district. When purchasing a silk scarf she realizes that she doesn’t have enough money to pay for it. She asks the shopkeeper, Mr. Sakur, to take a check. When he refuses to do so, she accuses him of racism. Likening him to the apartheid regime—“you make laws like the white government in this country without consulting the oppressed”—she claims that he is “behaving like the white government’s whose time is up” (48). In her disavowal of Indians as oppressed, Mrs. Nebo constructs a dichotomous model of racial being consisting of the white/government and the black/oppressed. If Indians, as this book has consistently suggested, disturb the black-white model of race relations, here we observe a willed refusal to acknowledge that unsettling of binary categories. The phrase “time is up” signals the end of the solidarity of the past even as it evokes the fragility of Indian claims to South African citizenship in the postapartheid period.

Mrs. Nebo’s companion then accuses Mr. Sakur of being drunk. When
Mr. Sakur tells her that he doesn’t drink because he is a Muslim, she says “you are a fundamentalist . . . we won’t have people like you when the new government takes over” (49). Islam and its imperatives are depicted as having no place in the new nation, a significant contrast to Noorjehan and Other Stories, where the Jewish Naomi Rosenberg is entitled to South African citizenry through her association with Indian Islam.

After Mrs. Nebo has been placated by other traders in the building, who pool their money and gift her the scarf, she tells Mr. Sakur: “[A]s for people like you there will be no place for them in the new democratic South Africa” (50). The interaction described above is a metaphor for contemporary race relations. It reveals the abuse of authority by those in power and their dismissal of Indians as a community whose “time is up” and whose alienation marks them as subjects, rather than as fully empowered citizens, of the new South Africa. If Indians stridently asserted their potential for citizenry in Essop’s earlier fiction, we notice how citizenry is taken away from them in his later work. This raises important questions about national belonging: A marginal constituency may claim composite citizenry, like the Indian community has always done, but if those claims are not acknowledged by those in power (first whites and then blacks), then the empowering potential of such a gesture is undermined. It is not enough for a disaffected group to acquire composite citizenry in its own eyes; the majority must approve claims to citizenry in order for minority assertions of belonging to have social and political consequences.8

The story “Jihad” also reveals the lack of space for the Indo-Islamic point of view in the new order. Revolving around four revolutionaries engaged in military action, the story does not give the radicalized Indian a place in the political milieu. Zaid, a Muslim, expresses his disquiet at killing women and children because it goes against his idea of jihad. His leader, Mr. Fall, then dismisses Zaid’s claim to a South African identity by telling him that “you have no claim to the land as the rest of us have. Indians are immigrants” (55). Mr. Fall secretly plots Zaid’s murder with his wife and some other comrades. Although the racial identity of Mr. and Mrs. Fall is not revealed, the latter is described as “a light-skinned woman” (54), indicating that she is probably of mixed race. That Essop encrypts the race of many of the non-Indian characters in this collection suggests that it is not just blacks who see Indians as the alien, but also other South Africans. Collectively, these groups constitute more than 97 percent of the South African population, texturing the hostility toward Indians with pervasiveness, omnipresence, and menace.

The story ends with the murder of Zaid and with Mr. Fall proclaiming triumphantly “the word jihad has a new meaning. It means liquidating
cowards and traitors” (56). The italicization of jihad is significant. Italics usually suggest difference, particularly the difference of the italicized word from its surroundings. Metaphorically speaking, Zaid himself is the italicized word, different from the surrounding norm of other South Africans. The italicization of jihad also implies that the concept has no room in the South African consciousness, intimating that the new South Africa will not accommodate the cultural practices of the Indo-Islamic community. Again, this speaks to the instability of Indian identity and the Indian desire for citizenship as well as to the instability of Essop’s own fiction, which moves from joy and celebration in the apartheid period to anxiety and then finally sorrow and rage at Indian dispossession under the new dispensation.

But Essop also attempts to comprehend the genesis of this rage toward Indians. Black anger is often directed at the relative wealth of Indians, a wealth—so the assumption goes—earned through the exploitation of black people. In the story “The Councillor,” Mr. Khamsin, a leading light in the South African Indian community, is an unscrupulous businessman. Mr. Khamsin is nominated to the South African Indian Council (SAIC), a political elevation laden with consequence. Members of the SAIC were invariably rich entrepreneurs, a “privileged group [from which] the apartheid system draws some support” (Ginwala 12). Political power begins to send forth its predetermined intoxication. When Mr. Khamsin’s employee, the narrator of the story, quits his job, Mr. Khamsin tries to persuade him that “the future of Indians lay with the whites. ‘Politics is about power,’ he ended. ‘Those who wish to trade with morality will be defeated’” (111). Essop uses Mr. Khamsin as a figure around which racial hatred coalesces, for not only does Mr. Khamsin espouse racial hierarchies, but he also serves white capitalism. Essop does not uncritically assign blame to black Africans, but rather attempts to comprehend the genesis of this rage.

Mr. Khamsin’s trajectory of upward mobility continues in the following story, entitled “The Banquet.” As he ascends the social hierarchy, Mr. Khamsin begins to personify what Hansen refers to as the perception of the “vices of the Indian community: greed, excessive status consciousness, hypocritical family life, vanity and political opportunism” (“Plays” 258). In an effort at maintaining his upward mobility, Mr. Khamsin hosts a banquet at his home, where other leaders of the new South Africa congregate to elaborate on their vision for the future. A political chameleon, Mr. Khamsin now vociferously supports the new government.

The guests agree that democracy has to be Africanized to flourish in the continent. While everyone celebrates the fact that South Africa is “a
rainbow nation that will set an example to the world with Afro-democracy” (115), no one questions in whose image democracy will be rehabilitated. Essop articulates his apprehension that the rainbow nation will be a black nation, with no room for the Indians. Shareef, the skeptical Indian introduced in this narrative, repeatedly tries to defuse the ethnocentric bombast circulating in the room. Professor Ramota argues that “whites have admired Oriental cultures but not African which they labeled primitive. It is now time to demand respect for what is truly African” (116). The assertion that “whites have admired Oriental cultures” hints at an affiliation between Indians and whites from which blacks are excluded. This erases any dispossession Indians might have suffered.

In claiming that it is time to respect the truly African, Ramota speaks in a discourse of apartheid-era purity that situates some groups as authentically African and others as not. We see how discourses that should have belonged to the apartheid past are resurrected in the postapartheid present. Here, a mode of thinking that supports rigid racial distinctions and asserts that Indians do not have a place in the new democratic South Africa is still alive in the national consciousness. Scholars of postapartheid South Africa often claim that apartheid still prevails in the distribution of wealth where fiscal power is clustered in the hands of the whites. Essop’s articulation of Indian disenfranchisement reveals that if the whites have economic power and the blacks have political power, the Indians, caught in the middle, are powerless. Essop, however, doesn’t merely illustrate this “truth.” He also shows us how such revelations irredeemably compromise a democracy’s claim to universal rights by making some citizens more equal than others.

Continuing the conversation, Mr. Hunter claims that “Africans built the pyramids, they invented hieroglyphics. They were the first prophets. Moses was an Ethiopian. Muhammad had black ancestry. Even the Buddha, I have examined his statues in the East. They have distinct negroid features” (116). Stephen Howe explains that “‘strong’ Afrocentrism is accompanied by a mass of invented traditions, by a mythical vision of the past, and by a body of racial pseudo-science . . . from all this follows extreme intellectual and cultural separatism” (2). In that separatist—a dangerous word in South Africa—vein, Mr. Hunter’s sleight of hand reduces Africa to (and only for) blackness.

Yet the mythologizing of the precolonial past has characterized all postcolonial nation-building agendas, not just Afrocentric ones. As such, myth making serves as a powerful tool for engendering pride—what Howe calls “confidence-building or identity-affirming functions” (5)—in a historically downtrodden group. It is when mythology becomes exclusionary that its
role in nation-making is compromised. Gayatri Gopinath reminds us that “the nation . . . is a nostalgic construction, one that evokes an archaic past and authentic communal identity” (in Braziel and Mannur 262). Here we see how some black Africans evoke an “authentic communal identity” by re-creating an African past that has no place for anyone other than black South Africans. The word “authenticity” always rings alarm bells for those who carry the burden of hybrid histories.

Shareef bristles at the willful Africanization of the Asian and responds that “we [should] speak of the cultural achievements of Homo sapiens in Africa, in Europe, in Asia” (116). As a figure outside the dominant racial paradigm, Shareef’s challenge to an Afrocentric universe validates Homi Bhabha’s assertion that “ambivalent margins . . . contest claims to cultural supremacy, whether these are made from the ‘old’ post-imperialist metropolitan nations, or on behalf of the ‘new’ independent nations of the periphery” (Nation and Narration 4). Indians’ rejection of black identity contrasts dramatically with their prior affiliation with Africans in Essop’s earlier fiction. We notice here how the rhetoric of affiliation shifts dramatically as Indians begin to think of themselves as Indians rather than as black. The Indian community may have come of age, but Essop also highlights the detrimental consequences of this arrival into selfhood. It almost always means a rupture in relationships with black Africans. Essop also cautions against the dangers of black ethnocentrism here. Historically, African ethnocentrism has spelled danger for Asians. The example of Uganda is foremost. Idi Amin expelled all Ugandan Asians in the 1970s, claiming that they were rapacious foreigners. The rise of black nationalism in Kenya and Tanzania also led to the marginalization of the Asian community there. Essop warns us not to celebrate a historically disenfranchised community’s will to power uncritically, especially if that power is asserted at the expense of another historically disenfranchised community.

After Shareef leaves the gathering, the people remaining plot to expel him from parliament. Claiming that “traitors are noted for their independent minds” (117), they accuse him of being a fundamentalist, based solely on his attire: “Some people say he is a fundamentalist. Observe his clothing” (117). Earlier Essop describes Shareef as “a tall man in a black robe and white turban, a small beard and an elegant moustache” (113). All this repeats Essop’s fear that the accoutrements of Islam and its worldview will have no room in the new South Africa. Notice the movement in representational sensibility here. Malik in Achmat Dangor’s Kafka’s Curse defiantly wears his djellaba in public; indeed, Dangor’s novel claims that the assertion of sartorial difference has profoundly subversive implica-
tions in its ability to hybridize public culture. Yet Essop shows us how clothes can also be a mark of Otherness. We can always locate agency in the assertion of the specificity of one's cultural identity. However, that agency is considerably undermined when people in power refuse to see sartorial flamboyance as a celebratory staging of difference and instead mark clothing as a fundamental civilizational difference that cannot be transcended.

The last words of the story are: “After several months Mr. Khamsin was called to parliament when a seat became vacant. Shareef Suhail resigned soon after the merchant’s appointment” (118). The story ends on the elevation of a capitalist acolyte, who had profited during apartheid by aligning himself with the whites, to the highest legislative body in the land. As it is assailed for being alien, Indian identity, in Essop’s later fiction, ends up becoming hesitant and tentative and silenced, as the eviction of Shareef from parliament suggests. That the racist succeeds and the man with the integrity to question the perils of ethnocentrism is punished reveals Essop’s bleak vision for the nascent nation: In failing to incorporate minorities into its purview, the new South Africa has not upheld the promise of postcoloniality. Instead, postapartheid South Africa seems to repeat and preserve the mistakes of the past. Ashwin Desai points out that “many laboured under the illusion that apartheid-imposed identities would be broken off after that time. We were wrong. A racial language more insidious than apartheid was born. In its approach to race, development and nation it recodified much that the struggle had undone. It was the language of the rainbow nation” (Arise 114). Democratic South Africa thus maintains the race-obsessed discourse of its apartheid past.

**Where Do Muslims Fit In?**

*Religious Chaos in The Third Prophecy*¹³

The stories in *The King of Hearts* set the stage for Essop’s latest work, *The Third Prophecy* (2004). In the seven years between the publication of the two texts, the African National Congress further consolidated its power and Thabo Mbeki’s government began to use the exclusionary rhetoric of an African Renaissance.¹⁴ As Islamic militancy gained global notoriety, the position of Muslim Indians became even more tenuous in the new South Africa. *The Third Prophecy* evaluates the South African political psyche through the tropological consciousness of a single Indian Muslim and meditates on the nature of Islamic identity in South Africa as well as on the utopian possibilities of multinational democracy. This last, the novel
seems to claim, will never achieve fruition unless it can incorporate the Indo-Islamic constituency within its parameters.\textsuperscript{15}

Although Essop has depicted this crisis in religious accommodation in *The King of Hearts*, *The Third Prophecy* turns inward in much more detail in order to examine how Indian Muslims contribute to their estrangement from the folds of the nation. According to Islamic historian S. E. Dangor, “Indian Muslims are still vacillating between an Islamic and secular, South African identity” (“Negotiating” 264). Essop portrays this schizophrenia inherent in Indo-Islamic identity and also depicts the alienation of the secular Muslim from both mainstream (too Muslim) and margin (too secular).

Does the non-Islamic mainstream exclude Muslim Indians from democratic fulfillment because of their association with religious militancy and social vigilantism or are militancy and vigilantism fueled by Islamic occlusion from the norm? Essop doesn’t answer these questions in any clear-cut way; instead, he suggests that this hostility is mutually reinforcing. The relationship between Muslims and other South Africans, then, is characterized by violence: not only violence in the way each community relates to the other but also a cognitive violence in the way each perceives the other.

Essop’s depiction of the fraught encounter between the Muslims and the secularists has elaborate repercussions for understanding the composition of a multicultural nation that is nevertheless dominated by one race or ethnicity. Paul Gilroy’s comments on ethnic fortification in an effort to consolidate national identity are apposite here:

\begin{quote}
The intellectual heritage of Euro-American modernity determined and possibly still determines the manner in which nationality is understood within black political discourse. In particular, this legacy conditions the continuing aspiration to acquire a supposedly authentic, natural and stable “rooted” identity. This invariant identity is in turn the premise of a thinking “racial” self that is socialized and unified by its connection with other kindred souls usually, though not always, within the fortified frontiers of those discrete ethnic cultures which also happen to coincide with the contours of a sovereign nation-state that guarantees their continuity. (in Braziel and Mannur 66–67)
\end{quote}

Black nationalist discourse, as Gilroy points out, mythologizes an anchored, uniform, organic picture of national identity. Thus, if national belonging is asserted through rootedness, purity, authenticity, and stability, even if Indians think they possess these qualities, other ethnicities refuse
to assign these traits of belonging to them. Essop challenges what other South African writers before him have attempted to achieve by showing the impossibility of composite citizenry.

The Third Prophecy draws titular inspiration from three prophecies uttered on national television by the self-styled seer Mr. Roma, who predicts that a political star will be eclipsed, that the country will fall into chaos, and that it will emerge from this chaos only after a Muslim has been elected president (8). Essop traces the obsession of his Indian protagonist, Salman Khan, with the third prophecy—that a Muslim will become president—and his attempts to fulfill the prediction. Set five years after the transition from apartheid to democracy (i.e., 1999), the novel opens with Salman celebrating his sixtieth birthday. Salman has been minister of education in the postapartheid government since its inauguration. One of ten Indians in parliament, his relationship with Indianness and Islam is ambivalent.17

Salman belongs to a political organization called the African Front, a party clearly modeled on the real-life African National Congress (ANC). Increasingly drawing criticism for its monopolistic grasp on South African polity and despite widely prevalent disaffection with its agenda, the ANC has nevertheless assumed an unassailable centrality in the national psyche. Essop invests the African Front with the same hegemonic impulses. Salman is accepted in the African Front because he is always attired in Western clothes rather than Islamic accoutrements and because he is a non-practicing Muslim, an atheist married to a woman named Elizabeth. In that context his disassociation from the Indian/Islamic community is political pragmatism. Despite his assimilation into a dominant image, Salman cannot believe that the prophecy refers to him: “[T]he black majority will not accept me at present. Perhaps in years to come” (10).

This sentiment, that the mainstream is not ready to accept a Muslim as president, compromises the nation’s claim to have enshrined a representative democracy in its constitution, bringing to mind Gilroy’s comments on “cultural insiderism”:

The essential trademark of cultural insiderism which also supplies the key to its popularity is an absolute sense of ethnic difference. This is maximized so that it distinguishes people from one another and at the same time acquires an incontestable priority over all other dimensions of their social and historical experience, cultures and identities. Characteristically, these claims are associated with the idea of national belonging or the aspiration to nationality and other more local but
equivalent forms of cultural kinship . . . the forms of cultural insiderism [sanctioned] typically construct the nation as an ethnically homogenous object. (in Braziel and Mannur 52; emphasis added)

Essop’s fiction reveals a similar manifestation of cultural insiderism. In order to belong, one must assign unbelonging to someone else—the “absolute sense of ethnic difference” that Gilroy mentions. Ethnic insiderism erases all other histories and affiliations in its effort to create a clearly demarcated body of difference and Self-Sameness. That Gilroy anchors ethnic insiderism to the idea of national belonging is significant. Black ethnic insiderism is used to assert a racial and cultural difference that at once becomes a national alterity. Essop points out how the new nation, despite all its rhetoric of inclusivity, still preserves an insider-outsider dichotomy. While ethnic insiderism is a characteristic of all nations, its presence in South Africa is particularly disturbing because democratic South Africa vowed to never repeat the mistakes of the past.

When a new dispensation assumes power following the second elections of 1999, Salman is demoted from his position of minister of education to the minister of prison, suggesting a movement from light (education/knowledge) to darkness (underworld/underground): “He had now fallen from meridian heights into ‘dungeon darkness,’ a phrase that recurred in his consciousness with searing dismal finality” (35). Prison also has powerful resonances in the South African psyche, bringing to mind the unjust incarceration of black activists by the white supremacist regime. Similarly, Salman’s demotion also suggests the unjust incarceration of apartheid: this time one undertaken by the postapartheid government.

If education, especially in its postapartheid ANC manifestation, also represents secularism, then prison represents the other world secularists must confront in order to come to terms with the limits of their own tolerance. Essop interrogates the role of orthodox religious politics in a secular state, especially one in which the religious Other is also marked with racial difference. In that context, Salman’s first name is no coincidence, evoking as he does a very famous figure whose novel The Satanic Verses grappled with similar questions about the nature of Islam, Islamic fundamentalism, and the secular possibilities of the Muslim religion. Essop mentions Salman Rushdie at least twice. The fictional Salman in many ways is like the real Salman: both secular Muslims who are trying to determine their relationship with the hard-line fringe of their religion. The Satanic Verses controversy was manipulated to declare that the British Muslims who protested against the “blasphemous” aspects of the novel were unassimilable,
reinforcing another parallel between Salman and Salman even as Essop demonstrates how South African Indian fiction is molded by global literary trends as well as local ones.18

Mr. Bengali is the first orthodox Muslim Essop’s Salman encounters. The antipodal opposite of Salman, Mr. Bengali is described as “always dressed in a white cotton shirt that reached his ankles and an embroidered white skull cap. His beard was black and long. He was an outlandish figure in the council chambers of legislators wearing suits” (26). Throughout the novel Mr. Bengali is a figure of fun, at least in the eyes of Salman. This is because he refuses to assimilate to the sartorial, cultural, and religious demands of the larger South African community. The visual difference of Muslims from other South Africans and their consequent alienation from the norm is a theme that we see running through Essop’s fiction. The use of the word “outlandish” (out + landish) further implies that Muslims like Mr. Bengali are out of the land rather than in the land, highlighting once again the unbelonging of Indian Islam in South Africa. The name Bengali also suggests that Mr. Bengali belongs to Bengal rather than to South Africa, although in the earlier Essop, the name Bengali would have suggested that Bengal is as much a part of South Africa as KwaZulu Natal or Gauteng.

The passage quoted above also testifies to Salman’s discomfiture with what he has turned his back on: a more conservative Islam. Later, Salman describes Mr. Bengali to Mr. Khamsin as “always the same, a discordant figure. He is an ambitious man and may have secret designs” (30). “Discordant” again suggests something out of place, while “secret designs” harbors connotations of latent militancy. Although no evidence in the novel suggests that Mr. Bengali has participated in any sort of religious violence, the significance of this conversation lies in the ease with which Salman can accuse Mr. Bengali of militancy based purely on his outward appearance. Through the failure of his own political ambitions, Salman later realizes that it is not just conservative Islam that has no place in South Africa, but also Islam in general..

As the encounter with Mr. Bengali reveals, Salman, the assimilated secular Indian, imposes the rhetoric of difference onto other Indians, obviously in an effort to make himself feel more at home and in place in South Africa. Thus for Indians to belong, they have to abjure their Indianness and embrace the dominant cultural identity. We get exactly the same message from Essop’s apartheid-era novella The Emperor, in which Essop urges Indians to repudiate their Indianness and embrace blackness instead. However, in the postapartheid period, this rhetoric of affiliation takes on a dangerous tone, as it implies assimilating into the dominant
majority. While affiliating with black Africans during apartheid was a gesture of agency and empowerment, in the postapartheid period it becomes a much more problematic assimilation as it erases the specificity of Indianness not for resistance against oppression but to create a homogenous South Africa.19

Later in the novel, a Muslim group called UMAC (Unity Movement Against Crime) begins “a campaign of opposition to the many gangs in the city and its environs” (41).20 The city also erupts in violence. It is not clear that the UMAC is responsible for this spate of criminality, but the president of the republic blames the UMAC and, by deft legerdemain, all Muslims:

This is an organization that is determined to establish a fundamentalist Islamic state. It claims that it is combating crime. It is the state’s duty to combat crime, not a religious movement’s. . . . [I]n fact these very people of Indian and Indonesian origin, voted during the second general election for the predominantly white racist parties, who are now in the ranks of the Opposition in parliament and against transformation. They are always critical of government attempts to redress the wrongs of the past. (41–42)

Even though many Indians voted for the white parties in the first elections in 1994, the election of 1999 saw Indians drift away from the National Party (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 27). As Ashwin Desai and Brij Maharaj point out, historically “two broad strands existed [among Indians]: one sought an exclusive Indian politics and collaboration with the white ruling class as a means for winning concessions for its mainly trader constituency, the other sought to build alliances with other disenfranchised groups, especially with the African National Congress (ANC) and rejected collaboration with the white rulers” (“Minorities in the Rainbow Nation”). There is no recognition of the various histories of Indian political affiliation in the consciousness of the mainstream. Once more a homogenizing link between Indians and apartheid ideology is made. The president’s statement erases the participation of Indians in the antiapartheid movement and situates all Muslims, Indians, and “Malay” as participating in the same divisive ideology. The ambiguous “they” in the last sentence, referring either to the “white racist parties” or to the Indians who voted for them, further forges a connection between Indians and the architects of apartheid. Indians, particularly Muslim Indians, are yet again excluded from the fraternal umbrella of the nation. Essop warns against homogenizing the Indian community and its diffuse responses to political possibility.
Indeed, as Mr. Khamsin points out, “when there is turmoil in the state . . . reason evaporates. All Muslims will be branded as fundamentalists” (45). As we stereotype and generalize, we reinforce parameters of Otherness and unbelonging.

If Essop establishes a binary between Salman (stridently secular) and UMAC (stridently religious), this dichotomy is interrupted by our reenounter with Shareef Suhail. In running through a list of all Indian Muslims who could possibly stake a claim to the presidency, Salman comes upon Shareef Suhail:

In Apartheid times he had been imprisoned on Dragon Island for his political writing. . . . He has not been afraid to criticize the party when necessary. He was a historian of repute with published work on imperialist expansion in the East, and comparative studies of Western and Eastern philosophy. . . . Some newspaper editors said that he had perceived that the administration was moving in the direction of totalitarianism, clearly evident in the monolithic party structure that rejected opposition, or criticism and even descended to defamatory remarks. (72–73)

Shareef—the name means honest—is everything Salman is not. He did not flee the country during apartheid, but rather chose to dissent from within. Unlike Salman, who absorbed himself in medieval European history in the confines of Cambridge, Shareef’s historical imperative is more cosmopolitan and less Western. He studied imperialism in the East as well as “comparative studies of Western and Eastern philosophy.” Shareef is also not ready to be a lackey of the African Front/ANC.

Shareef represents the synthesis of the Indo-Islamic and the secular; however, he is allowed no space in the African Front, not only because of his criticism of its absolutist policies but also because he is a Muslim. In The King of Hearts Essop describes the plot against Shareef as being based on the perception that he is a “fundamentalist” simply because he speaks against black ethnocentrism (King of Hearts 117). In its horror of Islamic fundamentalism, the mainstream rejects even secular Muslims. That an Indian Muslim—Shareef, Mr. Bengali, and, in the black majority’s refusal to accept a Muslim as president, even Salman himself—can always be suspected of harboring fundamentalist aspirations simply because he is Indian (an ethnicity not indigenous to South Africa) and Muslim (a religion not indigenous to South Africa) suggests the dual dispossession of subcontinental Muslims in the rainbow nation and underlines the temporality of Indo-Islamic identity in South Africa. This is a significant contrast
to the somewhat more celebratory evocation of Islamic Indianness in Achmat Dangor’s *Kafka’s Curse*, where he emphasizes rootedness, belonging, and the reclaiming of South Africa by its Islamic Indian constituency. It’s also important to situate these novels during the historical moment of their composition. *Kafka’s Curse* was published just three years after the first election of 1994. *The Third Prophecy*, published ten years after the first election and five years after the second election in 1999, has had more time to reflect on South Africa’s transition to multicultural democracy and the failure of its egalitarian vision.

However, a transformation comes upon Shareef, a transformation Salman remarks upon with wonder:

In parliament Shareef had always looked very distinguished, in a black, dark blue or green Arabian mantle. He was now dressed in a flowing pearl-white shirt with an open neck that displayed his muscular torso and grey pants. His face was clean shaven; in parliament he had a neatly trimmed beard. His appearance surprised and unsettled Salman for a moment. (73)

Shareef’s shedding of his Islamic garments can be interpreted in two conflicting ways. The first is that he rejects the “categorical imperative” of Islam by refusing to *look* Muslim. In doing so he supposedly turns his back on Islamic fundamentalism and fanaticism. Alternatively, Shareef decides not to *secularize* but to *assimilate* into mainstream South African society by discarding what marks him as different in the first place. Shareef’s coded state of being (does he reject fundamentalism or does he integrate into the norm?) metonymically reveals the tenuous allegiances of Indo-Islamic identity in a nation where the confluence of religious and racial difference always means national difference. It emphasizes the illegibility of Indo-Islamic identity, its indecipherable nature giving discomfiture to those who cannot interpret it on their terms, further extending the circle of disaffection.

Just as Shareef and Salman represent different forms of Islamic being, so too are Salman and Mr. Khamsin constantly contrasted with each other. If Salman criticizes Indians for alienating themselves from the black mainstream, Mr. Khamsin fuels racial hatred of another sort by comparing black South Africans unfavorably with South African Indians:

When Indians arrived in this province in the late nineteenth century they had little knowledge of the English language. The majority of them had been farmers in India, but that vocation was denied them by the
white rulers. . . . But the community looked ahead. The youth had to be educated. So they built their own schools, both secular and religious. . . . Now when this country was transferred into the hands of the indigenous people, there were no challenges to face. They found themselves in possession of a country with the best infrastructure on the continent, possessing great wealth. In such a situation there is no appreciation, foresight declines and we have what we have today. (98)

In contrasting Indian industry with black indolence, Mr. Khamsin revives apartheid-era stereotypes of African and Indian. The power of these stereotypes lingers even today, especially in the way these historically disenfranchised communities view each other. Dramatist Kessie Govender has spoken out against this tendency on the part of many Indians to “help prop up the apartheid system. There is a rigid caste system here—no solidarities can be made in Chatsworth. There are Indians who look down upon the whites—never mind the Africans” (quoted in Hansen, “Plays” 260).

Mr. Khamsin regurgitates apartheid ideology that claimed it was the white/Indian people who developed the land and if it were to be handed to black people, they would squander its resources. As Njabulo Ndebele points out, “individuals who have benefited from that flawed environment [apartheid] cannot deny responsibility. To deny responsibility is to affirm indirectly the perception that there has indeed been no change” (157). Essop demonstrates how minorities themselves can contribute to their disaffection by subscribing to the rhetoric of divisiveness. Thus, the allegiance and alliance that characterized the apartheid period is replaced by racial division instead.

The contrast between Salman and Mr. Khamsin is also developed when Salman consults the origins of the word “Khan” in the Oxford Dictionary: “Title of rulers and officials in Central Asia, Afghanistan, (Hist.) supreme ruler of Turkish, Tartar and Mongol tribes and emperor of China, in Middle Ages. (From Turkish kân lord)” (76). The origins of the word suggest that Khans belong as rulers elsewhere—in Turkey, China, and Mongolia perhaps, but not in South Africa. The word “Khamsin” means “Oppressive hot S or SE wind in Egypt for about fifty days in March, April and May (Arab ‘kamsün’ fifty”) (76). The association of Mr. Khamsin with oppression is significant in terms of his dogmatic political vision. The fact that Khamsin refers to a wind in Egypt (i.e., Africa) is even more important. Salman, whose ancestry can be traced back to India, China, and Turkey, has no African roots. Mr. Khamsin, whose lineage goes back to Egypt, is anchored to the continent in a way that Salman can never be.
Salman is then forced to realize that the third prophecy refers not to him, but rather to Mr. Khamsin:

He had played no part in the liberation struggle, in fact had enriched himself in apartheid times. . . . He was not only a master of commerce but also a man who knew how to arrange things to his advantage . . . Mr. Khamsin was the man destiny had chosen to be the future president. He was a devout Muslim, buoyant in temperament, keenly perceptive of political realities, diplomatic in his relationship with others, prudent in making statements, calculating in action, convincing in argument. Above all he possessed the energy to advance towards whatever he wished to achieve. (155)

Mr. Khamsin may seem to have achieved the perfect balance between secular and spiritual imperatives, but his behavior in this novel and in *The King of Hearts* gives us pause.

Muslim politicians have to perform orthodoxy in order to placate the community they represent, but they also have to be slippery and flexible in their beliefs if they nurse larger political aspirations. This leads to a Janus-faced existence, a split consciousness. The Third Prophecy intimates that there is no room for secular Islam, for even secular Islamists are never wholly accepted, despite their assimilation. Neither is there any room for an orthodox Islam. The only Islamist who can succeed in this regime is a consummate politician who can belong to both worlds (the secular and the Islamist) without really being committed to either one. This is not necessarily a bad thing. However, Mr. Khamsin’s expediency, rather than devotion, as a politician and as a Muslim presages Essop’s pessimistic vision for the Indo-Islamic community. Mr. Khamsin’s duality reflects the instability of Indian identity; indeed, it suggests that in order for Indians to survive in a dispensation where one powerful group after the other denies them full belonging, subcontinentals have to take on a chameleon-like aspect in order to exist as viable political and social entities.

The novel ends on a bitter note, with Salman being removed from the cabinet and with Mr. Khamsin being elevated to the ministry of trade and industry. In the very last line of the novel, Salman collapses, a breakdown symbolic of the collapse of his political ambitions as well as the death of secular Islam. This echoes Shareef’s eviction from parliament in *The King of Hearts*. We can also see this disenfranchisement of South African Indians in terms of C. L. R. James’s reflections on citizenry in a Caribbean context: “[T]he good life . . . is that community between the individual
and the state; the sense that he belongs to the state and the state belongs to him. . . . [T]he citizen’s alive when he feels that he himself in his own national community is overcoming difficulty” (in Mehta 131). If an organic connection between individual and state makes the citizen feel alive and partaking of the “good life,” Salman’s collapse suggests the collapse of the nexus between citizen and state, particularly between Muslim citizen and secular state. That we don’t know whether Salman survives further suggests the tenuousness of Islamic Indian identity in the postapartheid present.

In charting a shift in Indo-Islamic consciousness, historians of South African Islam, such as S. E. Dangor, claim that:

There appears to be a gradually emerging consensus that Indian Muslims should develop a distinctive South African Muslim identity that is inclusive of all Muslims in South Africa while at the same time positioning themselves as an integral component of the broader South African citizenry with common objectives. It could be said that unlike British Muslims, Indian Muslims in South Africa no longer feel a sense of dislocation, and are on course for a transition from formal citizenship to what Bottomore calls “substantive citizenship.” (“Negotiating” 265–66; emphasis in original)

If Indian Muslims have been able to carve a distinctively South African Muslim identity, the identity that survives is Mr. Khamsin’s, not Salman’s. This reveals Essop’s bleak vision for Islamic identity in the rainbow nation. Essop’s depiction of Indian Muslim identity challenges Dangor’s optimism about the place of Islam in South Africa. Contrary to Dangor’s celebration of “substantive citizenship,” Indian Muslims seem more occluded from the national norm than before. The Third Prophecy laments the two strikes—of race and religion—against Indian Muslims and critiques the new nation for failing to live up to its own image of egalitarianism and inclusivity.

Indian disaffection in South Africa has somber consequences for the composition of the nation and for national and cultural identity in our postcolonial lives and times. Stuart Hall defines cultural identity as:

[A] shared culture, a sort of collective “one true self,” hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed “selves,” which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. Within the terms of this definition, our cultural identities reflect the common historical experiences and shared cultural codes which provide us, as
“one people,” with stable, unchanging and continuing frames of reference and meaning, beneath the shifting divisions . . . of our actual history. This “oneness” . . . [underlies] all the other more superficial difference. (234)

Hall highlights the “oneness” engendered by a common history based on a shared set of historical circumstances. This oneness makes citizens feel that they belong by giving them a sense of national solidarity. A common history should transcend the “fact” of race, especially in South Africa, where the story of political oppression binds dispossessed constituencies tightly. However, the tragedy foregrounded in Essop’s work reveals that despite the commonality of oppression under apartheid, Indians and blacks are incapable of forging the unity woven by shared suffering. The dominant cultural identity in South Africa is a black one, and national identity is therefore also black.

Indian unbelonging underlines the fact that the new South Africa is not so new after all. The rainbow nation continues to preserve an absolutist sense of racial, ethnic, and national identity as it moves from Eurocentrism to Afrocentrism. Postapartheid South Africa is also infected by xenophobia, as its Indian population is still considered foreign, thus encountering the fear of the alien. Essop also marks the new South Africa’s inability to accommodate the Indian presence, particularly the Indian Muslim presence, whose racial difference is exacerbated by religious difference. Essop’s later fiction thus reveals a disturbing trend in postcolonial societies in general, where independence does not always herald a better world—especially for those still on the fringes of power.22 Citing Pamela Johnston Conover, Pal Ahluwalia argues “that citizen identities are the defining elements which shape the character of communities. Such identities can be socially cohesive. However, when they are found to be lacking, legitimacy itself becomes problematic” (505; emphasis added). Similarly, Desair and Maharaj quote Y. Carrim to assert that “the ways in which and the degree to which Indians are integrated into the post-apartheid society will be a not unimportant measure of how successful a non-racial democracy South Africa has become” (“Minorities”). Indian alienation from the national norm in the postapartheid period casts doubts on South Africa’s success in the projects of community building, intercultural reconciliation, and racial healing. South Africa’s failure in these spheres compels us, then, to question its very “legitimacy” as a truly postcolonial nation.