New Directions or Same Old?

Afrindian Identity and Fiction Today

Afrindian Fictions has focused on narrative acts, arguing that works of the imagination have powerful political implications for the citizenship-seeking agenda that characterizes South African Indian fiction. Yet the “fictionality” of fiction often reminds us of its distance from “reality,” even as fiction not only springs from material and political conditions but also determines our perception of those material and political conditions. In this brief conclusion, based on my visit to South Africa in December 2005, I analyze the difference between “imagined” and “lived” Afrindian identity. During my time in South Africa, I noticed that many of the issues central to this book—the cross-fertilization of races, the hybridity of Indian identity, the intense affiliation with black Africans, a disavowal of mythic India over everyday South Africa—did not seem important to many of the Indians with whom I interacted. Is South African Indian fiction really that removed from the world in which it is produced? Or is fiction aware of the problematic ideologies underpinning the lived experience and merely offering a vision of an alternative better universe? Analyzing Louis Althusser, Jeff Lewis states that “art and literature are capable of creating a critical distance by which the subject may at least partially escape the controlling power of the ideological imaginary. . . . [T]he relationship between the imagined and real conditions of life . . . can somehow fracture the substance of the ideology by making us
South African Indian fiction is not only an escape from but also a corrective to the “controlling power” of quotidian ideology.

On December 28, 2005, Dr. Deena Padayachee organized a gathering of the South African Indian literary community in his Durban home. Attendees included playwrights Ashwin Singh and Rajesh Gopie, scholar and community activist Ashwin Desai, literary critic Betty Govinden, first-time novelists and short story writers including Nazia Peer and Faezaa Simjee, poets, cartoonists, biographers, and scholars. In other words, the group represented the spectrum of South African Indian cultural expression. I asked the gathering to comment on the current state of Indianness in South Africa and the issues that animate Indian writing today. What followed was a lively discussion that was suffused with high emotion and the constant interjection of politics into a supposedly “literary” conversation. Initially I was frustrated. This was supposed to be a discussion on literature. What did the “ethnic cleansing” (a term repeatedly used by one of the two white men attending) of Indians and whites from the medical profession have to do with South African Indian literary production? I then realized that the repeated fusion of culture and politics only validated one of the central claims of this book: There is a direct and determinate relationship between political occasion and literary expression in South Africa, even after apartheid. Yet, as the conversation progressed, I was engrossed.

After having spoken to South African Indians at length during my stay in Durban and from the discussion at this gathering, I have concluded that Afrindian identity is underpinned by at least two antipodal political ideologies. One group believes that Indians are now victims of Afrocentrism following decades of oppression by Eurocentrism. The rhetoric is similar to that used by opponents of affirmative action in the United States: It benefits unqualified Africans at the expense of qualified Asians and whites. I certainly saw the implosion of racial solidarity that Ahmed Essop describes in his later fiction. Some Indians feel strongly that Afrocentrism had shattered the solidarity of the past by collapsing nationality with race. For example, a retired professor attending the seminar said that he went to a meeting for “Africans” in Pretoria. The attendees were all black. When they told him the meeting was for Africans only, he responded, “What do you think I am?” Indians, therefore, resent their elimination from a race-based national identity, one which they had ironically fostered by uniting under the umbrella category “black” during apartheid.

The second group, consisting mostly of academics and activists, is more self-critical, focusing on the racism of Indians and arguing that affirmative action is necessary for black Africans, as they have suffered the
most. In a recent e-mail, Mariam Akabor, author of a collection of stories entitled *Flat 9*, told me that among the most important issues “that Indians face in post-apartheid South Africa is how to deal with racism. The majority of Indians in SA are racist. It is sad but true. Many of the older generation Indian citizens became very used to the way life was during the apartheid days (especially the fact that in the race hierarchy, the Black people were below them) that they find it difficult to experience a total reverse in hierarchy since 1994” (May 23, 2006).

The political ideology of this liberal group of Indians echoes Parvathi Raman’s comments in an essay on progressive Indians in the 1940s: “Their diasporic sense of self was thus also embedded in ideals of modern citizenship, freedom and equality and visions of membership in a democratic South Africa” (230). While identifying as, and even taking pride in being, Indian, the central issue for this community is that of creating an egalitarian nation-state and establishing solidarity across class lines rather than those of race. The new South Africa has seen the rapid rise of a nonwhite middle class, but the vast majority of South Africans, particularly blacks, remain mired in the vicious cycle of poverty. This poverty, the second group of Indians believes, is the issue requiring instant redress. If the apartheid regime was inordinately successful in dividing people across race, the new government has equally successfully split people across class.  

The highlights of the seminar were the personal stories I heard that helped me define—as well as redefine—Afrindian identity. For example, one of the writers mentioned that on a family trip to India—accompanied in true subcontinental style by many members of her clan—her parents’ generation insisted on filling out Indian as their nationality on their immigration forms. The younger generation, of course, filled out South African as their nationality. The Indian immigration officer had to tell the older generation that their nationality was South African, not Indian. Another writer pointed out that when she watches cricket with her father and India plays South Africa, she finds that they are cheering for different teams. Yet another participant came up to me during the break and said, “If you find out what South African Indian identity is, please tell us, for we don’t know what we are.” When I said this confusion (“Are we Indian or South African or both? And if we are both, how do we be both?”) characterizes all Indian diasporas, she shook her head ruefully and said, “But in South Africa, it is worse.” While it is clear that the older generation may still cling to the fantasy of return to a mythologized India, the younger generation, although confused and even disaffected, has anchored itself firmly to the everyday reality of South Africa. The older generation's
holding on to the idea of a mythic India also complicates what we have seen in this book project where most of the writers analyzed, no matter what their age, are harnessed firmly to South Africa.

Part of this confusion regarding national and cultural affiliation emerges from the opening up of India as a source of diasporic retrieval following the end of apartheid. India is present everywhere in South African Indian life. I noted this particularly in Durban, where a “Bollywoodized” Indian identity proliferates. I saw young Indian women wearing the latest kurtis, listening to Indian music, and watching Hindi movies that I—Indian born and bred and a voracious Bollywood fan—had not even heard of, let alone seen. South African Indians have been cut off from India for so long that when India became available to them, as it always had been for Indian diasporas in the West, the intensity of that cultural retrieval was extraordinarily fierce.

Thomas Hansen, for example, describes the vast number of subcontinentals who returned to India following the end of apartheid. As Hansen points out, many of them had an adverse reaction to India. They didn’t expect it to be quite so dirty, backward, and third world—quite so “not-India,” in other words:

For the Pillays, as for so many others of their kind, their brush with India was an encounter with something disturbingly unknown, a place that made them feel very alien, very South African and very modern. It made them realise just how different they were, how “white” they were in their “work culture” and their habits, and how “inauthentic” their Indian-ness was. Mrs. Pillay experienced India within a truly ‘orientalist’ framework: as authentic, a place imbued with a certain inner beauty and harmony, and a place that exuded history and timelessness. (“Diasporic Dispositions”; emphasis added)

As we have observed in this book, South African Indians often approach Africa and Africans through the interpretive lens of Western colonialism. Here, Otherness is transposed onto what has always been historically apotheosized as the Self-Same: the “motherland” itself. The Pillays also collapse India into the stock stereotypes provided by Orientalist rhetoric: extreme poverty, timelessness, and spirituality.

The Pillays’ response to India also underlines the permanent failure of return. Many South African Indians visited India thinking it would be a triumphant coming home. Instead, return, as it often does, firmly established India’s essential difference and their South Africanness. In that vein, one man at our literary gathering even told me that he didn’t
think the “curries” he ate in India were as “authentic” as the South African ones. No matter how much South Africans may mythologize India, return always ruptures the fantasy of an idealized homeland as well as the very possibility of return itself. Ironically, this split from the Mother Country validates the South Africanness of Indians as their perception of the subcontinent is always inflected by South African history, culture, and politics.

Even though physical return exposes the hollowness of the myth of Mother India, many South African Indians—most of whom presumably have never been to India—adhere to a conservative, and therefore supposedly unsullied, Indianness in their daily lives. As a participant pointed out in the seminar, ties to India have lead to a retreat inward and to the creation of a community that cherishes a fantasy of India that would be unreal to many Indian Indians. The progressive politics engendered by apartheid have been supplanted by a fealty to a very conservative filmi aspect of Indian culture in South Africa. From what I saw in Durban, many Indians are attempting to create a pure version of “Indian” identity, even though South African Indians can only reconstruct a South African-ized form of the Indian cultural past. The belatedness of this mythologizing of India, coming centuries after the original schism of migration, is an irony made possible by the isolation of South Africa during the apartheid years.

When the conversation eventually returned to literature, the most pressing question raised was: “What do we write about?” Many participants felt that the South African Indian experience was a local one and therefore did not resonate with the world outside. This explained the invisibility of South African Indian literature to those present at the gathering. I pointed out that the South African Indian experience is not necessarily local, but rather we allow Eurocentric aesthetics to determine our conceptions of local and global. We then had a lively discussion on whether Indians should write about their specificity of their own lives or “universalize” their voices. The published writers at the gathering said that ethically one has to be true to one’s own voice, and the only way to do so was to write about issues animating one’s life: In other words, the South African Indian experience should compass one’s writing. Yet many writers also bristled at a narrow, race-based approach to literature, arguing that their work should be expansively South African rather than insularly Indian. Part of the problem in making that distinction, however, is to presume that to be Indian is somehow not to be South African, a negotiation of national collectivity and ethnic specificity that fiction has also struggled to maintain.
Most participants further believed that their writing performed an important communal and archival function by recording stories that are often forgotten or dismissed as unimportant. In its commitment to remember, literature corrects a collective amnesia on the part of the Indian community, a disavowal engendered by the pursuit of material wealth that marginalized stories of the community’s struggle and rich history. It was with great sadness that I noted the disrepair into which the Durban Cultural and Documentation Centre had fallen. The centre was established to function both as an archive and a museum. It contains rare artifacts from the indentured past as well as a wealth of archival material. Unfortunately, the centre was almost unusable. I had to plead with the staff to be allowed in, even though the centre was open to visitors. It was thanks to the kindness of one of the curators that I was able to enter the archives. Once inside, the scenes were shocking. Nothing was catalogued. Reams and reams of valuable documentation were lying around unused. Precious old artifacts were gathering dust. The curator said that there is no interest among the Indian community or the administration to preserve the Indian past. This is ironic, given that the provincial minister of education was an Indian, but also perhaps reflecting a fear that to be openly proud of being Indian is to be susceptible to accusations of apartheid-era racial insularity. Indians in South Africa thus seem to be caught between their own apathy, the indifference of a government for whom they are just not important enough, and an anxiety among progressives that ethnic pride is dangerous in the racially charged climate of postapartheid South Africa.11

Another instance of a communal forgetting of the Indian past emerged during my visit to Phoenix, Gandhi’s ashram in Durban. The ashram was uncurated and abandoned. The doors were open, and we were able to simply walk in to look at unguarded precious Gandhi memorabilia. Nor was this symptomatic only of Durban. When I visited Ahmed Essop in Johannesburg and found out that Gandhi’s Tolstoy Farm was close to Lenasia, where Essop lives, I wanted to visit. Essop said that it had fallen into a state of absolute disrepair and that it was not safe to go there any more. “You’ll probably be assaulted on your way there,” he said grimly. I could not help but reflect on the irony that the road to the commune of the high priest of nonviolence was paved with the threat of violence. Parvathi Raman says that in the course of her “fieldwork in South Africa, many people seemed anxious to claim an association with Gandhi, however tenuous” (243, n12). That so many South African Indians take pride in Gandhi makes the neglect of the ashram and farm even more regrettable.

Paradoxically, ethnic pride proliferates among Indians, regularly mani-
festing itself through an exclusionary existence, racism toward black Africans, the mythologizing of the rags-to-riches history of Indians, and the “Bollywoodization” of Indian identity. Indianness in South Africa is polymorphous, full of gaps, fissures, and holes. My visit to South Africa, and my experience at the literary seminar conducted there, proved to me that there is no one, unified Indian voice and that disparate discourses influence Indian identity. It also reveals the structural determinacy of the apartheid past—political oppression, racial hermeneutics, national identity, and longing for belonging—that still prevails in the postapartheid period.

What, then, accounts for the distance between the literature analyzed in this book and the “reality” narrated above? If literature doesn't merely reflect reality but also creates and conditions our perceptions of reality, then the gap between South African Indian literary composition and “reality” can be explained as not a disconnect of literature from reality as much as a corrective. Indian fiction projects an alternative universe that rectifies the community’s problematic ideologies. So, for example, fiction corrects the communal inability to archive the Indian past by proffering an alternative repository. Writers such as Farida Karodia, Imraan Coovadia, and Praba Moodley resurrect and memorialize the Indian past by returning to an erased history. If many South African Indians cling to a mythologized India, fiction challenges this regressive impulse by anchoring itself to the everyday reality of South Africa. South African Indians have also been accused of racial and cultural insularity. Again, fiction showcases the centuries of racial intermingling undertaken by Indians.

The writers discussed in this book perform the function of “correction” and give us a progressive, albeit complex, version of Afrindian identity. Apartheid-era fiction articulates an intense solidarity with black South Africans and seeks citizenry through race. Even though Afrindian identity is never negated, it is usually subsumed by more pressing compulsions. The instability of subcontinental selfhood challenges the purist conception of South African Indian identity seen during my visit to Durban. That this fictional identity has a direct correspondence with South African political circumstances reveals that Indianness is not only influenced but also determined by the everyday reality of South African life. While all other postapartheid Indian writing is associated with a somewhat celebratory tone, it is only Ahmed Essop’s later writing that comes close to the rhetoric of disaffection I encountered during my time in South Africa. Afrindian Fictions has argued that Indians proudly and defiantly assert their place in South Africa; closing with Ahmed Essop’s latest fiction may expose the ultimate failure of that citizenship-seeking agenda.