



Reviewing The Challenges Of Indians In Africa: Literature And The Identity

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Abstract

This article offers an overview of the changing social formation of South Africa from the standardisation of apartheid in the late 1940s to the present, and its representation in the literature and Identity, reflecting the relocation of literary history of the "New" South Africa as a nation undergoing transformations, specifically in the labour situation, land struggles and the politics of the Rainbow nation. By analysing historical and literary elements, it is possible to trace the emergence of a carping identity and literature which were shaped by the experiences of the South African Indian Diaspora community. Such identity is significant and transmittal to the country as a whole, and of reasonable value in nurturing socialist consciousness for countering current challenges of racism and materialist indifference. This paper falls into two broad sections, the first deals with the history and context of South African Indian Diasporic writings; the second section deals with Diaspora identity.

Keywords: Indian-African Writers, Identity, Diaspora, Apartheid

Introduction

When examining a space as large as the Indian Ocean, whose history is full of movement and circulation, provides us with different perspectives and dimensions of migration studies. It provides an understanding as to how settlements were established, illustrates the daily conduct of trade, explores the relationships between diverse people, and portrays the conflicting emotions felt by a particular migrant community.

Grinberg defines migration as “the geographic mobility of people who move from place to another, whether as individuals, as part of a small group or in a large mass”.

Migration does not mean just physical dislocation, but it involves emotional, psychological and spiritual translocation. The story of migrants carries the hope and desire of retaining and returning to their homeland. This is referred as 'Myth of Return'

Literature, therefore, offers a further insight into these migrations, especially in the Indian African Diaspora, about which there is a lack of official documentation. For thousands of years, Indians have been moving within the space of the Indian Ocean. Dizzily enormous and varied in topography and culture, the Indian Ocean is critical to global trade, security and geopolitics. Their reasons for circulating within the ocean have been influenced by several factors.

In fact, India's physical location within the ocean arena was integral in creating these connections with other Indian Ocean regions. Conveniently resting between the eastern and western zones of the Indian Ocean, India proved to be a significant nodal point throughout the development of relationships between peoples living within this watery breadth. Furthermore, Indians' participation in trade resulted in the formation of settlements along its shores. It is the community of Indian merchants that settled in East Africa from about 1830.

Literature has always held up a mirror to society, and this has been no truer than in South Africa. Drama, in particular, has been a booming genre, being part of the warp and weft of the liberation struggle during the apartheid years.

History: Indian African Fiction

Indian African Fiction helped develop a new framework of racial contact and Diasporic correspondence based on the movement of Indians to South Africa in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and their impact on the collective identity of a land torn apart by the tyrannical mechanism of apartheid and, in turn, the influence of the South African political landscape on the construction of an identity that occupies another place in the black and white map of South African race relations. Through an analysis of fiction from the 1970s onward, we can trace the particularity of the Indian presence in South Africa and also construct a critical lens with which to view the intersection of Diaspora literature, postcoloniality, Indianness, and apartheid. Consideration of political occasions, particularly to the rapidly changing scenario in South Africa in which Indian fiction is composed, underscores the apparently political nature of South African Indian writing itself. The aesthetic richness of South African Indian writing is also sustained by developments in postcolonial literature in general and by South African and South Asian Diasporic literature in particular.

Indian fiction reveals many of the concerns of mainstream South African literary discourse articulated by writers such as J. m. Coetzee, Nadine Gordimer, Alex La Guma, and Zakes Mda among others. These include "certain dynamics of South African society, such as tensions between the generations, class divisions and aspirations, political alliances, clashing accounts of tradition, as well as the themes of oppression under apartheid, racial harmony, and anxieties about the new nation. South African Indian writing further reflects South Asian Diasporic issues expressed by "canonical" writers such as Salman Rushdie, Bharati Mukherjee, and Hanif Kureishi. Transnational identities, generational conflicts, and return to roots are dominant concerns here as South African Indian fiction is closely shaped and conditioned by postcolonial literature. It is an exciting new field within that body of writing; yet its different from the postcolonial norm which enables us to look at two important subfields in postcolonial studies—South African literature and Indo-South African diasporic literature—through an alternative metaphorical lens.

Unending battle of Voice

South African Indians have been narrating their stories since the time they were transported from India as indentured labour in the middle of the nineteenth century, yet their voices are only being heard now. South African Indian fiction is only now being recognized as a distinct literary entity. While books on white South African writers such as Nadine Gordimer and J. m. Coetzee has been published from the 1980s onward; there has been an interest in black South African writing only recently. Despite the proliferation of texts studying South African literature in more inclusive ways, the works of South African Indian writers remain neglected. For example, Christopher Heywood's recently published survey of South African fiction, entitled *A History of South African Literature* (2004), claims that South Africa has five distinct literary groups: “Khoisan, Nguni- Sotho, Afrikaans, English, and Indian.” yet Indian writing is not analyzed in much detail here.

“Indian fiction reflects on the specifically South African problems of Diasporic identity such as establishing links with the black population while preserving indianness, locating oneself within a binary racial formulation, and coming to terms with a legacy of migration based on indenture and slavery as well as trade. Our pantheon of dramatists, novelist, writers and many internationally acclaimed literary figures, such as Ronnie Govender, Ashwin Desai, Ashwin Singh, Muthal Naidoo, Kessie Govender, Imraan Coovadia, Achmat Dangor, Farida Karodia, Beverley Naidoo, Shamin Sarif, Ishtiyah Shukri and Kriben Pillay, have relentlessly exposed South African society to itself, and to the world.”(Pallavi)

Indo-South African Plays

Indo-South African plays written during free South Africa by the Playwrights like Rajesh Gopie, Ismail Mahomed and Ashwin Singh are presenting the changing scenario of the nation and with that transformation of socio-political situation. These plays mirror the problems the community is facing during the transition period. With races integrating with each other and with the rise of black power in South Africa's new reality, the situation of the Indians have become perilous. Moreover, the rainbow reality is witnessing the process of creating synthesis among races. Therefore, these types of process create problems at community levels. Plays written by the following writers present such issues. Rajesh Gopie's plays travels from 1870 to the present time witnessing the effect of changing scenario on the community. Whereas, Ismail Mahomed narrates situation of women in South African Indian Community in two different perspectives. Some of the noteworthy plays are Rajesh Gopie's *Out of Bounds*, Ashwin Singh's *Spice 'n Stuff*, and Ismail Mahomed's *Cheaper than Roses*. *Into the Grey* by Ashwin Singh discusses various issues of the multiracial existence at the time of the nation's freedom. Problems arising out of various races living together are discussed threadbare. Indians, Black, White and the Coloured people who have never lived together so far find it difficult to adjust with the new reality and hence each race tries to dominate over the other. One unmistakably feels that no one talks and discusses about the nation! *To House* foregrounds how systemic racism is preventing reconciliation among ethnically diverse communities, but also speaks to the unique crises of national inclusion and identity impacting the South African Indian community in areas like Durban. Each of the three plays written by Ashwin Singh marks progression from the first anthology. These plays depict the situation of the nation in the post-honeymoon period.

In a time, arguably, of diminishing intellectual and communal spaces for dissent and protest or even celebration, the theatre in South Africa continues to claim its right to explore the fault-lines and fissures of our society, and to create new and more inclusive social alignments. Indian writers also tend to be extraordinarily aware of political circumstance, a consequence of the machinery of apartheid that invaded the consciousness of all it compassed in calculating ways.

Indian Diaspora: Identity

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

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

One cannot talk about the history of Indians in South Africa without mentioning the most famous South African Indian: Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. Gandhi arrived in South Africa in 1893 as a young lawyer. He returned to India after twenty-one years, leaving behind one son and his family in South Africa. Gandhi has often been criticized for failing to forge links with black Africans. Whatever his shortcomings were, it is evident that Gandhi installed the South African Indian community by creating the Natal Indian Congress (niC) in 1894.

The impact of Gandhi on South African Indians, significantly in their response to political oppression, mustn't be underestimated. Later events in India, especially his humiliation of the British Empire through simple acts of contempt, also rendered Gandhi a symbol of hope, of what nonviolent resistance could achieve. He opened up a space for political awareness among the Indian community, a social consciousness despite active solidarity during the apartheid period, the relationship between Africans and Indians has been historically fraught, especially in the province of KwaZulu Natal, where approximately 80 percent of the Indian population resides.

As Ashwin Desai states,

“by the end of the 1940s there were numerous potential points of conflict between African and Indian. At the level of the labour markets, Indians and Africans competed for jobs and joined racially exclusive unions to defend their interests. At the level of trade, Indian monopoly in the 1930s was challenged by an increasing number of aspirant African traders” (Rastogi 11)

Conclusion

South African Indian fiction exposes the thick “emotional and political bonds” that Indians share with “the wider community” in order to argue for national belonging.

The African writers have persisted with either success or agony. The specific objectives are to establish some of the works published by the African writers; determine the contribution of the works published by African writers to in terms of political, economic, and cultural illumination; examine the challenges encountered in the publishing process of the African writers' works

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