

# EXPLORING THE CHALLENGES OF ETHNIC FLUIDITY WITHIN THE WRITINGS OF RONNIE GOVENDER

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores how the fiction writer and playwright, Ronnie Govender, narrates Asian diasporic identity in the context of South African society. I shall depart from the premise that this Indian presence is ambiguous inasmuch as its subjectivity must negotiate the ontological categories of both whiteness and blackness. With this triangulated relationship in mind, I shall proceed to evidence how Govender delivers a layered reading of ethnic fluidity and how this was historically curtailed by a white minority who, systematically, dynamited conviviality as a means to shore up its own privilege. The principal texts employed in this study shall be: *The Lahnee's Pleasure, At The Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*, and *Black Chin White Chin: The Song of the Atman*.

KEYWORDS: South African Asian, Ethnic Belonging, White Supremacy, Racial Ambiguity.

LOS DESAFÍOS DE LA FLUIDEZ ÉTNICA  
EN LAS OBRAS DE RONNIE GOVENDER

## RESUMEN

Este artículo explora cómo el dramaturgo y autor de ficción, Ronnie Govender, narra la identidad diaspórica dentro del contexto de la sociedad surafricana. Mi premisa de arranque es que la presencia india en Suráfrica es ambigua en cuanto a que representa una subjetividad en la que se negocian las categorías ontológicas de lo blanco y lo negro. Con esta relación triangulada en mente, procederé a evidenciar como Govender presenta una lectura multifacética de la fluidez étnica y como ésta se vio históricamente truncada por una minoría blanca quien, de una forma sistemática, dinamitó la convivencia dentro de Suráfrica como una estrategia para garantizar sus privilegios. Para este estudio me centraré sobre todo en los siguientes textos: *The Lahnee's Pleasure, At The Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*, and *Black Chin White Chin: The Song of the Atman*.

PALABRAS CLAVE: asiático surafricano, pertenencia étnica, supremacía blanca, ambigüedad racial.



A recurring strategy within colonial administrative practices has been to afford minority groups privileges over the wider population as a means of control. As Amy Chua (2004: 2-15) evidences, free market democracy displays a similar tendency to replicate this colonial practice, and a cursory glance at the superior financial positions of the Lebanese community in West Africa, the Jewish community within post-Soviet Russia, or the Chinese diaspora residing in the Philippines, bears out this premise. Both in historical and contemporary contexts, the ambivalent positioning of Asians within East and South Africa speaks of a similar strategy. This community, oftentimes, displays an inter-community affiliation that is stronger than their identification with the nation state, and this gravitation towards cultural autonomy, coupled with an ingrained tradition of self-betterment, makes the Asian population both an object of suspicion and a target for criticism within the collective African imaginary. Being more economically successful also intensifies the perception of Asians as an outsider group, and their subsequent demonising is coloured, in great part, by the overall lack of social entropy within post-independence Africa. For many Asians, their sense of belonging becomes problematised, and their affiliation can often lie outside the African nation space.

## I. THE COMMITMENT TO CONVIVIALITY

The majority of the (limited) academic articles accrued on Ronnie Govender situate his oeuvre within a diasporic aesthetics, grouped under the label of South African Indian writing<sup>1</sup>. Govender, however, is at pains to reject this classification and, in his poem “Who Am I?,” the author has the following to say: “I am of Africa / Surging within the spirit / Of the Umgeni as it flows from Drakensberg / Through the Valley of a Thousand Hills” (quoted in Chetty 2). Here, we find a filiation with the physical landscape and the cultural dimensions of South Africa, and it is upon these the author projects his imagination. Whilst this question of belonging may, at first, seem ancillary when set against the task of analysing the author’s fictional work, it is, on the contrary, of prime importance. I realise that one should never confuse the real-life author with his/her narrators, yet it is evident how the author’s afro-centric position seeps into the imaginative process of recreating a historical period that saw the transition to full-blown apartheid.

One must situate Govender’s sense of Africanness against his community which, traditionally, occupied a third space within both South Africa and East Africa. This has a historical antecedent where, as Ojwang (2013: 118) evidences, Asians in Africa were victims of the imperial practice of creating tiered societies of an oppositional nature. The administration of colonial Kenya, Uganda, Zanzibar and Tanganyika, for example, was configured through an almost identical three-tier racial system where the Indians acted as a social buffer between Africans and

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<sup>1</sup> Taking my cue from Dan Ojwang (2013) I use the term Indian and Asian indiscriminately.



Europeans. Within this colonial configuration, Indians effectively became middle men and were denied the opportunity of adopting a natural organic hybridity towards Africanness.

A recurring theme that emerges from fictional texts of the Asian writers in Africa is how they attempt, and often fail, to negotiate a cultural space that accommodates both their Indian and African identities. Compared to the white settler communities of East and South Africa, Asians have always lived in much closer proximity to Africans and this has made them more vulnerable to racial conflict. They were victims of the imperial practice of creating tiered societies of an oppositional nature, and the administration of colonial Kenya, Uganda, Zanzibar and Tanganyika, for example, was configured through an almost identical three-tier racial system where the Indians acted as a social buffer between Africans and Europeans (Ojwang 118). Within this colonial configuration, Indians effectively became middle men and were denied the opportunity of adopting a natural organic hybridity. When one looks at the work of Moyez Vassanji, for example, one can detect an overall pervading sense of pessimism as regards the Indian presence in Africa and this, I claim, is informed by his personal sense of ambiguity regarding his own identity. As a literary trope, this in-betweenness is often narrated as being conflictive and debilitating rather than providing agency. Particularly, *The In-Between World of Vikram Lall* (2003) documents the exclusion of Asians from meaningful engagement within the new Kenyan nation, and in a revealing aside, the book's focal character, Vikram, describes himself as:

[...] a young Asian graduate in an African country, with neither the prestige of whiteness behind me, nor the influence and numbers of a local tribe to back me, but carrying instead the stigma from a generalized recent memory of an exclusive race of brown 'Shylocks' who had collaborated with the colonizers. (Vassanji 238)

While one might argue that these sentiments refer, moreover, to recent historical events rather than to contemporary realities, the lines of friction that arise in Vassanji's narration of Kenyan *uhuru* (freedom) are still present within South Africa. Karen Flint (2006), for example, looks at Mbongeni Ngema's song *Amandiya* (2002), whose lyrics singled out the Natal Indian minority as being the cause of Zulu poverty. Ngema's song (which subsequently went viral) incited Zulus to rise up and attack the local Asian population whom they perceived to be an abusive merchant class (Flint 367). This is not to say that the Asian presence is solely construed in negative terms, yet this pervading image of the Indian *dukawalla* (the archetypal shopkeeper/small businessman who is solely interested in self-betterment at the expense of the communal good) is a stereotype that Asian writers in East and South Africa struggle against. Govender's insistence on fluidity over ethnic exclusivism is thus not just a case of literary *buonismo* but, instead, it represents a contra-narrative that contests the received perception of Indians as insular and self-serving. As such, Govender's work is the expression of a hybrid consciousness inasmuch as it is the product of a diasporic imagination channelled through an African affiliation. The history of indenture in South Africa is a continual presence within his works, and in the 2008



novelistic re-rendering of his earlier play, *The Labnee's Pleasure* (1976), Govender uses the image of the Indian kitchen gardens of Cato Manor as a means to convey the cultural transformations of Indians in South Africa. Govender's forefathers, having transported seeds across the Indian ocean, plant them in African soil where (almost miraculously) they take and flourish. Contra the cultural taboo of the *kala pani* (black water) where the abandonment of the Indian subcontinent results in a loss of *varna* and the contamination of one's "pure" identity, the cultivated paw-paw, avocado, mango, guava, etc (all of which become an African staple) speak of the rhizomatic nature of this Indian/African identity. Through the organic symbol of the transplanted seeds, we come to see how Govender references his direct filiation to the African soil and, by extension, to his sense of rootedness which, simultaneously, is informed by his Indian heritage. "Call of the Muezzin ... To a Slow Samba Beat," for example, uses this motif of transplantation to show how this Asian presence has become naturalised in the eyes of Africans. Elias, the young Zulu, assures the reader that, while the Whites who lived in the Berea ridge called the plants "exotic," for him and other Cato Manor Zulus, "the pungent aroma of the curry leaves ... was as natural as daylight" (121).

Rajendra Chetty (2017) remarks that the author considered his grandfather's market garden at Cato Manor as a kind of paradise on earth, yet this same rhizomatic symbol that we find through the seeds transported across the Indian Ocean simultaneously comes to represent a locus of trauma. Govender has spoken about the destruction of the kitchen gardens in Cato Manor as being an event that has stayed with him for the rest of his life, and in his interview with Chetty (2001 247) he states that his sense of outrage actually served to "intensify my already strong sense of belonging to the district." The expulsion of all Indians from Cato Manor was the result of the 1950s Group Areas Acts which signalled the destruction of townships throughout South Africa.<sup>2</sup> The dismantling of multi-ethnic areas such as Cato Manor reconfigured those heterogeneous urban spaces into racially segregated areas and forced ethnic groupings to live and work apart. As Lemon (1991 8) argues, the ideology of apartheid served to thwart a transition from "conflict pluralism to a more open pluralistic society," and at the ideological centre of these Group Areas Acts was the idea of social segregation as a strategy to limit interracial contact and its revolutionary potential. In this light, Chetty (2017 38) has described Govender's work as "the vital memory of multiracial living in Cato Manor in a way that contributes to the new national identity; it reminds audiences and readers of the possibility of harmonious interracial existence." In particular, Chetty (33) considers *At The Edge: And Other Cato Manor Stories* as a "text-site of memory" in the sense that Govender's imaginative reconstruction of this township is a microcosmic representation of the revolutionary potential encapsulated within heterogeneity. "Over My Dead Body"

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<sup>2</sup> This reconfiguration of the nation into an apartheid state had already been in the making and the previous 1946 Asiatic Land Tenure Act had already limited the amount of land Indians could buy.



makes a specific reference to the destruction of this conviviality through the character of Thinga who resists eviction from his Cato Manor homestead. In a specific (and ironic) reference to Gandhi, Thinga performs an act of passive resistance, the only option left open to him in the face of steamroller apartheid, and his fatal heart attack whilst remaining on his small plot of land becomes his last and futile gesture.

Given the repressive nature of white hegemony, which Govender himself suffered under, one might think a more belligerent attitude towards the white settler community would be present in his books and plays. This, however, is not the case, and the understated way in which he addresses the mechanisms of white oppression, coupled with the ecumenical treatment of his white characters, gives witness to this. In *Black Chin White Chin: Song of The Atman*,<sup>3</sup> we find a camaraderie between “Stomps” Diederichs, a conservative Boer from the Platteland, Rooks Duvenage, a Coloured man, and Chin Govender. As such, the relationship performs a textual imaging of a non-racialised South African society, despite the fact that Diederichs is, himself, a supporter of the imminent 1951 Group Areas Act, an ideological positioning that, one might infer, would be sufficient grounds to end this ethnically triangulated friendship. In the case of “Stomps,” whilst he is ideologically suspicious of miscegenation, when Chin initiates an erotic affair with his white employer, Greta Schmeling, he comes to see this relationship between the White emigre woman and Chin as “the most natural thing in the world” (151). By holding an abstract belief system in creative conflict with contradictory attitudes generated by concrete situations, Govender thus provides his readers with a template for understanding the complexities of a heterogeneous South Africa.

## II. NEGOTIATING WHITE EXCEPTIONALISM

While Govender’s work does not essentialise all white identities, it does, nonetheless, examine how Asian, Coloured and Black communities were all victims of white exceptionalism. *The Labnee’s Pleasure*, one of the most successful plays staged by an author of Indian origin in South Africa, in this sense, explores the complexities surrounding racial segregation and how white racist ideologies fomented division. The author employs a pastiche English pub, divided into a Coloured and Asian area and a whites-only section, as his microcosmic representation of a tiered South African society where real and symbolic oppression was exercised upon the non-white other. Staged in 1974, the play’s form was considered revolutionary as it was the first of its kind to use the patois of South African Indians. The author employs a (deceptive) humour that serves to bring to light the contradictory attitudes that Asians held towards whites and, for example, when the manual labourer, Mothie,

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<sup>3</sup> The book was first published under the title *Song of the Atman*. In subsequent publications this title became a sub-title.



is discussing cultural differences with Sunny, the Asian barmen and the Stranger, the audience is informed that:

Our girls don't use that (deodorant). You know why? They must bath every day when they light the god lamp. We don't eat beef and pork. We don't smell like the white people. Our girls don't smell like the white girls... every day, when I'm on the tractor, my boss's daughters come and play fools with me [...] Me I hold my nose and run away. (21)

The tone of *The Lahnee's Pleasure* is, in parts, reminiscent of V.S Naipaul's *The Mystic Masseur* (1957) and *Miguel Street* (1959) in that both use versions of Indian patois and employ humour as a form of social criticism. There is, however, a marked difference in the attitude each author displays as regards their writing material and this difference is illuminating. Naipaul always establishes a cultural superiority to his characters and his narrative point of view persistently speaks from an alienated subjectivity that looks upon Trinidadian society with certain disdain. This is always juxtaposed with the author's own cosmopolitan identity which informs his narrative point of view, and this mechanism is most evident in *The Mimic Men* (1967) where Ralph Singh speaks about moving from the darkness to the light in an analogy of the abandoning of his Caribbean island for London. Whilst Govender may use a similar brand of local colour humour like Naipaul, the authorial subjectivity is always embedded within the community and the doses of humour provide a strategic contrast to issues of power relationships that the play wishes to address.

Sexual surveillance is a predominate concern within the diasporic Indian community and, as such, it is treated in the play with an ironic tone. Whilst, at first, the eloping of Mothie's 15-year-old daughter, which is given an ironic treatment, may seem to be the play's central theme, what emerges from the margins of the text is a much more serious reflection on the colour lines drawn out by white hegemony. The Stranger and the bar man, Sunny, for example, enter into a discussion on the question of active resistance to racism versus a tactic of strategic subservience, and whilst the Stranger will not use sir to address a white person and is prepared to challenge white supremacy at every call, Sunny accepts white authority which, in the play, is embodied by the figure of the Lahnee (term used in South Africa for boss). Sunny and Mothie represent a humiliated consciousness and both look for recognition in the eyes of their respective *lahnees*. Amid a moment of tension in the Asian and Coloured part of the bar, the Lahnee enters the scene, wanting to know what the ruckus is about. The Lahnee takes an interest in the case of Mothie's missing daughter, and he contacts the police station to let them know that an Asian is on his way to file a complaint and that he is to be treated well at his behest. Now back from the police station with the promise that they are looking for his daughter, a drunken Mothie causes a scene. The Lahnee imitates Mothie's accent and suggests that all Indians are too emotional and irrational, at which the Stranger becomes indignant and assures the audience that, "When these guys were walking around in caves wearing animal skins our people were building temples in India" (34-35). The Lahnee wishes to defuse this tension by offering the Stranger a drink (he employs



the term “Sammy,” a derogatory term used by white patrons to refer to Indian waiters in the Durban area) but the Stranger refuses and leaves in a sign of protest. Sunny and Mothie, on the contrary, see the Lahnee’s patronising attitude as a case of knock-about humour and, here, Govender makes a subtle allusion to how Asians internalised their subservient attitude towards white domination. In this respect, the false *bonhomie* established between the white boss and the Indians is telling inasmuch as it speaks of the ambiguous in-between nature of Asians vis-à-vis the category of black and white. In the final scene, Mothie tells the Lahnee not to “worry about him [the Stranger], boss. You want I must sing for you, boss” and starts singing and dancing whilst Sunny and the Lahnee clap along (42). This show of subservience and the feigned conviviality of the Lahnee as a strategy to maintain the white status quo is the text’s true theme and, when set against the comic elements of the play, it produces a greater effect upon the audience.

In comparison to the 2008 version of *The Lahnee’s Pleasure*, the playscript, in its documenting of the epistemological violence exercised upon South African Indians, leans more towards pessimism as regards subaltern agency. Whilst the characters of the Stranger and Johnnie within the play do resist being pigeonholed as the archetypal and subservient “Sammy,” the overall tone of the play speaks of the ubiquitous nature of racial oppression. The novel, in contrast, offers much more instances of the empowerment of Asians, and this I see as being a product of the date of publication. South Africa had transitioned from an institutionalised apartheid state to a pluriethnic nation, and Govender, in his re-writing of the 1974 play, brings to the fore the inactivated potentials present within it. For example, in the book’s epilogue, we learn that the hotel where the bar is located has been bought by South African Indian businessmen. When representatives from Hulett Sugar want to know why they wish to buy the White House Hotel, they are told that it is because it overlooks the sugar-cane fields where the businessmen’s grandparents toiled as indentured labourers. Whilst in the play the Lahnee holds a position of privilege, the novel challenges this perceived power. The Lahnee, now ironically called Richard So-So, is characterised as the son of a “Covent garden barrow boy” and, in an attempt to mask his true class identity, he emulates an elite accent (29). Robert Young (2008) in his *The Idea of English Ethnicity* looks at how notions of Englishness were never really about England per se but, rather, were fabrications of ethnic traits that served as a template for those who did not reside within England. As an identity, Englishness was, moreover, a question of an imperial affiliation with this fabricated identity and, as Young informs us:

Englishness was created for the diaspora –an ethnic identity designed for those who were precisely not English, but rather of English descent [...] New Zealanders, South Africans [...]. Englishness was constructed as a translatable identity that could be adopted or appropriated anywhere by anyone who cultivated the right language, looks, and culture. (1-2)

In moments of tension, the Lahnee’s true Cockney accent emerges from behind this appropriation, and the false sense of entitlement encoded within Mr.





So-So's performance as an imperial subject opens him up to ridicule in front of his subalterns. In this way, the fixity of the Lahnee's power is deconstructed, yet, rather than cast Mr So-So as an out-and-out bigot, the text prefers to explore the manner in which white identities are also contradictory and fragile. As with the character of "Stomps" Diederichs in *Black Chin White Chin*, the narrator in *The Lahnee's Pleasure* leaves a door open for the imagining of conviviality within South Africa rather than vilify white identity as a means of revenge for past wrongs. The narrator, "in fairness to him, and to get the picture as much into focus as possible" situates the Lahnee as a voter of Helen Suzman's (an anti-apartheid activist and MP) Progressive Party, although he may secretly endorse an apartheid state (13). This inherent contradiction within his subjectivity, it is soon revealed, can be traced back to his special predilection for his "melanin-overloaded" nanny, Matilda, who "he actually thought was his mother" to the extent that: "Even now he loves the smell of carbolic soap because it was the soap that Matilda regularly used in her daily bath" (14). Here, the unconscious memory of ethnic fluidity disturbs the vision of South Africa as a racially segregated society which is impressed upon him during his training as hotel manager where it was stressed that "in order to be a good manager he had to keep the Char Ous [the Indians] and the Pekkik Ous [the Chinese] who worked under him in their place" (14). As a means to re-address the underlying pessimism of the original play, Sunny, who the narrator also refers to on several occasions as "Blithering Idiot No 1" becomes the new manager of the White House Hotel and appropriates the identity of the Lahnee through a mimicking of Mr So-So's prestige accent (34-174). Meanwhile, the disgraced Mr So-So whittles away his lump-sum severance pay on liquor, sleeps in the Salvation Army Relief Hostel, and plays "God Save the Queen" on his accordion to passers-by. Whilst Govender is normally effective in his use of humour as a means of political satire, I see the above as heavy-handed and far-fetched inasmuch as the narrative's will to re-address those humiliations suffered under apartheid clouds his artistic judgement. It is evident that the denouement of the 1998 version of the *The Lahnee's Pleasure* is written from a perspective that simply wishes to overturn the wrongs of the past. When one compares this simple flipping over of the colonial paradigm against Ashwin Singh's *To House* (2014), we find that the latter provides the audience with a fuller vision on the complexities of an Asian collective negotiating their space with a post-independence South Africa. Set in a middle-class suburb of Durban, Singh's play provides a radioscopic analysis of reconciliation against the entanglement of power relationships where one group's gain spells another's loss. *To House*, in this respect, shows how, within the new configurations of power within South Africa, Asians may still suffer from racialised mindsets inherited from the old regime.





### III. NARRATING THE CHALLENGES TO ETHNIC FLUIDITY

The *At The Edge* collection of stories examines how Asians were compromised within the Machiavellian dynamics of segregation, and Govender explores how the Indians of Cato Mano, Chatsworth, and other townships became the scapegoat of a fledgling apartheid state that aimed to consolidate its hegemony. Daniel Francois Malan, prime minister with the National Party from 1948 to 1954, said of the Indian population that, “as a race in this country, [it] is an alien element in the population, and that no solution of this question will be acceptable to the country unless it results in a very considerable reduction of the Indian population” (Quoted in Chetty 107). In “1949” Dumisane, who is originally from KwaZulu-Natal but now resides in the Cato Manor quarter, becomes the focal character who attempts to create a bridge of understanding between Africans and Asians. The fact that his children are not allowed to attend the Cato Manor government-aided Indian School, however, is just one example of how a white hegemony wished to thwart racial mixing and inter-communal understanding. Govender, however, is careful to provide a nuanced vision of the ways in which fluidity can be compromised, and we see how Dumi also feels slighted by his Asian landlord, Mr Maniram, who is disdainful towards him. This attitude, I suggest, corresponds to an inherited ideology of caste superiority that is applied to an African context and which sours conviviality. As with the other stories in this collection, the narrative in “1949” explores the complexities that inform the triangulated relationship between Asians, Africans and Whites. As regards the latter, Percival Osborne, Dumi’s boss who is first described as “reasonable,” assures us that, “The races were different and that’s the way it should stay,” and here the reader understands how, behind his façade of equanimity, lies an ingrained denial of egalitarianism (112). As Osborne’s chauffeur, Dumi is present at the family’s New Year’s Party in Kloof where the crowd urge him to sing black spirituals and Louis Armstrong songs. Astounded at Dumi’s performance, Osborne observes that, “if he were white he would have been singing at a beach front hotel or on the radio,” yet his feigned tolerance soon evaporates when a middle-class Asian family move into his white neighbourhood (112). Through Dumi’s narrative gaze we learn that, “These people [the Mahomedys] were as fair-skinned as the whites and were rich and well-dressed,” and Osborne’s over-reaction to the Maniram family’s presence is informed by his unconscious insecurity regarding the nature of his societal power. In this context, the New Year’s Eve party (which reminds us of the last scene of *The Lahmee’s Pleasure*) is shown up to be what it is; a farcical show of bonhomie when juxtaposed against white paranoia that its power is being encroached upon.

The main focus of the text is the 1949 anti-Indian pogrom when, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of January, a concerted action was taken against Indian traders in Durban. Whilst this specific violence was triggered off by an incident at the market where Indian stall holders punished an African boy for stealing, the underlying grievances of the local Zulus against the Indian trading community were long-standing. In comparison to the Indian diasporic community, Africans suffered even more under white rule and, for example, the 1913 Native Land Act, which restricted the purchase of land



outside of reserves, gives testimony to how Africans were forced to the bottom of the hierarchical and white dominated society.<sup>4</sup> This punitive action against Indians in Durban was thus an expression of generational grievances against a system that held the Zulus down. Acting as a buffer between Whites and Africans, the Indian community became a convenient scapegoat for all the ills suffered by the latter and, in “1949,” Govender narrates how white hegemony actively dynamited ethnic fluidity. Therefore, whilst the aforementioned attitude of racial superiority is our first response in understanding the intensity of the violence meted out on Indians, deeper motivations inform this pogrom. We are told that, “Trucks from the big firms are taking some tsotsis [young criminal from township area] to Cato Manor, Riverside and all other places where Indians live and are giving them petrol and paraffin,” with Osborne taking an active role in the distribution of paraffin amongst his Zulu staff (114). Whilst rape, arson and murder are being visited upon the Indian community, Osborne chats to his staff in Zulu and assures them that, “The Indians deserve what they are getting. They make a lot of money from you people and they have no respect for you” (115). Dumi attempts to make his people understand that many Indians are as equally disenfranchised, yet although he speaks about Asian figures such as R.D. Naidu who fought against the colour bar, it is to no avail and the frenzy of collective hate takes a grip. In his final gesture of conviviality in the face of this communal madness, he attempts to save the Maniram family and dies with a spear embedded in his chest. Against the strategic pitting of subaltern ethnic groups against each other, the narrator assures us that, “there was no pity, no reason in the hearts of these malleable souls, held captive by minds more savage in their cunning” (117).

Situated within the same context of the aforementioned anti-Indian pogrom, “Call of the Muezzin ... To a Slow Samba Beat” offers up a distinct perspective on inter-ethnic relationships within the Cato Manor township. Against the scenario of orchestrated communal violence, the focus is, however, more weighted towards the trope of conviviality as a means to re-configure entrenched and negative attitudes towards the other. This is fleshed out through the relationship between Elias, an eleven-year-old Zulu, and the Asian storekeeper, Shaik, and the text, in this respect, shows how small gestures made across cultural divides can remain impregnated upon consciousness over time. Shaik, as a member of the Umkumbaan School Building Committee, which sets out to readdress the white neglect of Indian and coloured schools, functions as an alternative role model for his brother, Ahmed, who, through his charging of abusive rents to impoverished labourers, embodies the stereotypical exploitive Asian. As regards conviviality, Shaik functions as a foil to Elias in the sense that the contrastive aspect of their relationship augments the trope of identities in contact. Music becomes the means by which this fluidity is transmitted, and when Elias interprets the Kavadi music that is played from the

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<sup>4</sup> “The 1949 Anti-Indian Pogrom and the Crisis in the Natal ANC” explores the complexities of the Indian position in Durban whilst outlining the Zulu grievances.

loudspeakers of the Shiva temple on his make-shift guitar, the narrator assures us that, “Ramani Ammal in far-away India would never have guessed that her songs would one day find resonance on a home-made guitar of the banks of the Umkumbaan River” (120). Elias’s appropriation of Indian music thus becomes the narrative vehicle that gives focus to the trope of hybridity and, similar to the image of the kitchen gardens at Cato Manor as a symbol of shared cultural elements, his musical cross-overs provide a contra-narrative to the official white discourses on the incommensurability of racial cohabitation. Shaik, on discovering Elias’s secret talent, decides to buy him a proper guitar, however, on the way back from the music store, he is confronted by the full-scale rioting. Despite the subsequent tragic events (the burning down of Shaik’s business and the massacre of his children), the text leaves a door open to the ideal of conviviality. In a narrative flash forward, Elias now makes a living playing the guitar at an Indian hotel in Clairwood because despite him being an exceptional jazz guitarist, apartheid prohibits Blacks and Indians playing at White venues. When bored between sets, he takes out Sheik’s guitar and “plays his own composition, which resembles the call of the Muezzin, to a slow Samba beat” (130). The song thus encapsulates the trope of conviviality between Africans and Asians in Cato Manor, and whilst this may have been temporarily destroyed, the text establishes the memories of this past as a site of resistance against imposed discourses of exclusion.

#### IV. MISCEGENATION AS A CHALLENGE TO SEGREGATION

During the ushering in of the Group Areas Act, the Asian body increasingly came under the surveillant and disciplinary gaze of the white hegemony. Within this milieu, the political significance of miscegenation thus became intensified as it came to signify a transgression of the core ideology behind apartheid. If we look at the body of Govender’s work we can see how this trope is repeatedly used as a narrative strategy to both imagine and give testimony to a South Africa that was much more plural in its conception as a modern nation. “Over My Dead Body,” in this respect, as well as displaying the author’s anger at the destruction of conviviality, also introduces the question of miscegenation and the anxiety that surrounded this. Gurriah Naidoo is charged with *crimen injuria*, a legal term in South African jurisprudence which refers to unlawfully, intentionally and seriously impairing the dignity of another. An intent of sexual liaison was catalogued within *crimen injuria*, yet while it is the prostitute who solicits the Asian, the authorities make *her* turn state evidence so as to incriminate *him*. Naidoo is told by his lawyer that he “doesn’t have a dog’s chance” considering that the prostitute is white and, in effect, what the episode is documenting is how a white supremacist regime saw any possible miscegenation as a threat to their hegemony (146). In the novelistic version of *The Lahnee’s Pleasure*, the narrator deconstructs white authority through the relationship between Bronwyn Mary-Anne Braithwaite, the Lahnee’s wife, and the 18-year old coloured, Fanyana Ngcobo, who is secretly studying to become a lawyer. Finding



the Lahnee inadequate, Bronwyn embarks upon a series of explicit sexual encounters with Fanyana and, in a more explicit section of the text, the narrator has Fanyana place his copy of *Roman Dutch Law*, vol 1. under Bronwyn's posterior "to enable her to provide greater thrust" (78). Here, the sexual act operates as a metaphor for a contesting of white authority, with the law book as a future imagining of a wresting of this power away from white supremacy.

Of all of Govender's writings, *Black Chin White Chin: Song of the Atman* gives most attention to this trope of miscegenation through the character of Chin Govender (the author's real-life uncle). As such, the text complicates the dichotomy of "Black" versus "White" present in Franz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), the classical text to which Govender alludes in his title. In Chin's crossing of both colour lines, the narrative sets about to deconstruct the white/black binary through the image of the in-between Asian. Chin, through his cultivating of an air of sophistication, negotiates his difference by reconfiguring his racialised image. Here we find an appropriation of the figure of the dandy, which finds its homologue in Ceraso and Connelly's (2009: 7) study of the Indio-Caribbean men's "feminized version of hegemonic masculinity." This appropriation, I argue, is configured through Homi Bhabha's (1994: 86) understanding of mimicry which behaves like a fetish that mimes forms of authority. Here, Bhabha appropriates Lacan's (1977: 99) focus on mimicry, understood as something "distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind." Mimicry, in Bhabha's new configuration, becomes something inscribed within a particular discourse and appears as "a stain which dislocates and revalues normative knowledges of race, writing, history" (Seshadri-Crooks 378). Chin's mimicry of whiteness, through the figure of the dandy, thus constitutes a strategy that confronts and disrupts the authority of the original, in this case the hegemony of white settler authority. Therefore, when Chin uses his body as an aesthetic vehicle that transcends self-imposed limitations, he performs what Bhabha (1994: 87) defines as the undoing of "the original's mastery."

Having appropriated the image of the dandy, Chin initiates an erotic affair with his white employer, Greta Schmeling, and this act can be read as the manifestation of an unconscious desire to come into power through association. Mohammed (2002), in relation to the aforementioned figure of the dandy, argues that Indian-Trinidadian men specifically used miscegenation as a means to garner new positions within a colonial society. Here, we find a homologue with Chin who, whilst walking hand in hand with Greta through a white residential neighbourhood, comes to sense how miscegenation, imagined through the figure of the dandy, brings him new authority. Chin's mimicry and miscegenation is destabilizing and subversive in equal measure, yet fraught with danger. The burning of Schmeling's car is one example of the expressions of violence against Chin's mimicry of whiteness, and these kinds of reactions to miscegenation inform and become the anteroom to the subsequent 1950s Group Areas Acts.

This relationship, for the reasons set above, terminates, and Chin's subsequent sexual liaison with the coloured girl, Grace, is significant as it marks a move away from his previous identification with whiteness. This movement towards an Afro-centric position, however, is marked with certain ambiguity; whilst his opening up



of the first multiracial hotel, or his strategic support of the fledgling ANC movement all indicate a strong affiliation with a pluralistic sense of African nationhood, his silencing of his relationship with Grace and his refusal to treat it as anything more than casual gives the reader an inkling of the divided nature of his subjectivity. When the text claims that, “he had not made any promises to her [...] yet was it not implicit in the way he made love to her?” what comes to light is the divided nature of Chin’s psyche (183). This dissonance, I argue, is the result of an unconscious resistance informed by the ingrained cultural bias Asian communities have against miscegenation, and particularly where black or coloured Africans are concerned. As regards this cultural bias, the role of Asian women in East and South Africa has always been to be surveillant of sexual conduct within their community, and Floya Anthias (1998: 571-573), in this respect, declares that diasporic women became the bearers of “tradition” which was coded through ethnicity, and the transmission of these cultural mores and the maintaining of cultural cohesion, mediated through patriarchy, falls upon them. What this tells us is that, as regards a move towards a more Afro-centric subjectivity, there were a series of both external and internal factors that challenged Asians’ embracing of ethnic fluidity.

## CONCLUSION

At the core of all Ronnie Govender’s work operates an imaginary that propagates the ideal of inter-ethnic conviviality. As we have seen, whilst these interactions may, at times, be fraught with difficulties and, in certain cases, present violent outcomes, the overall tone of Govender’s work leans towards optimism as regards the possibilities of interethnic interaction. I see this insistence upon conviviality as an ideological positioning vis-à-vis the author’s own Afro-centric subjectivity. Through a series of narrative strategies, Govender’s texts show how ethnic realities in South Africa were never fixed but, on the contrary, were (and still are) constructed in relation to one another. Rather than viewing subjectivity through the cultural lens of one’s own community, Govender sets out to narrate the historiography of the Indian community in South Africa as configured *through* interaction. Stephanie Jones (2011: 170), when speaking of the Asian presence in Africa, claims that “the difficulty of escaping a stultifying and brittle past, [...] is often signified [...] through interracial sexual relationships,” and the trope of miscegenation, for example, becomes one way to enter into African history. In a settler-dominated society that was increasingly obsessed with racial categories, the body became central to the subaltern predicament, and many of the characters that populate Govender’s narratives come to understand the constructed nature of these divisions. By placing the brown body in juxtaposition with these oppositional categories, Govender gives the Asian body new political significance and, in this sense, his protagonists transform their relationship into the categories of white *and* black. This narrative perspective offers new ways of looking at South Africa outside of this black/white dichotomy and, in fact, the Asian presence helps to deconstruct fixed notions from both sides of this racial divide. When the author draws up his



white characters, rather than create two-dimensional stand-ins for apartheid, we see how they are driven by internal contradictions, and the same can be applied to his portrayals of other South African ethnic groups. The driving force of the author's personal commitment to ethnic fluidity permeates these textual relationships so as to create an imagined conviviality that wins out over conflict.

Reviews sent to author: 17/12/2020

Revised paper accepted for publication: 22/01/2021



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