

RACE, REPRESENTATION AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY: AN EVALUATION OF THE WORKS OF TWO ARTISTS OF INDIAN DESCENT IN SOUTH AFRICA

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South Africa is a country undergoing a challenging phase of transformation. Although 19 years into its democracy the inherent labels of the past classificatory system continue to haunt the nation and find expression in multifaceted forms within the creative arts. Thus in this country, the social, cultural and political construction of identity is fundamentally fragmented.

Identities by their very nature are multi-dimensional, multi-layered and at times contradictory. Further, they are pluralistic and in flux, subject to continuous processes of recalibration. As we have emerged from the negotiated revolution some of the former structures of identity and difference still remain intact. While there is an upsurge in multiculturalism with increasing overtures to co-existence among various ethnic or racial groups, many individuals/communities still remain culturally separate and polarised.

This paper will engage with the art practice of Indian South Africans that highlight and expose notions of identity against presentations of difference while simultaneously providing commentary on post-Apartheid South Africa. It foregrounds the complexities involved in the assumption of a common Indian identity, the attached religious persuasions and sensibilities, along with several broader concerns regarding issues of identity within this sector of South African society. These issues are explored with a view to establishing the extent to which those who made these works attempted to foreground aspects of their history and culture, while at the same time reflecting on the changing socio-political climate of South Africa.

Keywords: Indian, Apartheid, identity, South Africa, minority, visual art

Introduction

Identities in South Africa have often been imposed by a long process of identification located in western and later colonial and Apartheid perspectives. Segregation as an inherited colonial construct was maintained and later refined by Apartheid rulers (Zegeye, 2001: 2). While each racial group was identified in particularised ways and have internalised the need to distinguish themselves from others in order to assert their identity (Ebrahim-Vally 2001: 79), Indians, as a distinct minority group, have been identified by their history, race and culture. As a result, their identity was (and still is) constituted by their difference (Ashcroft *et al.*, 2002: 25).

Identity is considered to be a shifting space and place, where the definition and the essence of the concept are “continually being explored, examined and experienced by people” (Goldschmidt, 2003: 205) at various strata’s of society. This is particularly relevant to the South African society, which like any other is constructed through membership to groups based on race, ethnicity, gender,

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language, religion, etc. create institutions with boundaries for the located identity to manifest. These categories in turn are further manifested and displayed in South Africa through class, culture and politics, all based on race.

In this paper, the term *race* is understood within the South African context as a socio-historical and political construct. Race established hierarchical structures of meaning attached to skin colour which “shaped people’s material lives as well as their perceptions of themselves, of others, and of the world around them” (Erasmus in Daniel *et al.*, 2005: 10). Identity is also problematised here by interrogating relevant discourses of race, with colour and culture as the prime signifiers of racial identity. The hierarchical construction of race in South Africa and its justification resulted in race being the central tool in the manifestation of a segregated society. This racial ascription led to the racial divide becoming calcified and institutionalised by the Apartheid state. However, nineteen years later, this still proves to be a very complex ideology to disengage from the mindset of people.

Banton (2000: 55-66) in his essay *The Idiom of Race*, presents a broad trajectory of the concept of race that is valuable to this paper. As an historical study, he highlights that the word ‘race’ was initially, in the eighteenth century, a term used to denote a commonality of descent and character. Later in the nineteenth century, the idiom was extended to include a nationhood (and *Volk*). Later still, with political circumstance aiding the change, the main issues of race were the nature of differences between the populations, which further led to a cultivation of beliefs about group identities. These beliefs are evidenced within South Africa and have found expression through racial labelling.

Although it is a human tendency to associate with a common group, this paper argues that this recognition of racial identity is limiting and restricting. While the collective “Black” identity which was mobilised to include Indians in the freedom struggle was strategic, the position of the Indian identity today should enable a “new political agency for self representation and determination in contemporary South Africa” (Ellapen, nd: 1). This paper seeks to initiate a dialogue on the subject of cultural and political identity, agency and issues of representation including its attached narratives and visual articulation within the context of democracy in South Africa. It will argue that minorities like the Indian group are subject to identity formulation through external forms of representation which embed preconceived stereotypical traits within which that community functions and perpetuates. The paper will then interrogate the manner in which Indian artists attempt to construct forms of self-representation against the backdrop of stereotypical representations of Indianness.

Signifiers for Separation

Mercer (2009: 577) argues that identity only becomes an issue when in crisis, when something assumed to be fixed and stable is displaced by the experience of

uncertainty, a position that in some ways has again emerged in South Africa. Years of colonial rule and subsequent Apartheid legislation created such an environment for displacement resulting in a perceived homogenization of “Indian” identity that fractured a community through group and racial classification.

Rastogi (2008) in her book *Afrindian Fictions: Diaspora, Race, and National Desire in South Africa*, argues that Indians desire South African citizenship in the fullest sense of the word. To her the Indian community requires citizenship as a national anchorage as a consequence of their erasure in both the Apartheid and post-Apartheid consciousness. This desire for belonging is asserted through what she calls an “Afrindian identity” (2008: 1), a term which suggests both an Africanisation of Indian selfhood and an Indianisation of South Africa. Naidoo (1997) in his doctoral thesis employs this term as well, but in a political and resistance context. He proposes that in the new South Africa, Indians ought to re-imagine themselves as a specific construction of the African continent and as a result construct a space within a South African national identity for an Afrindian Consciousness.

In the initial post-Apartheid utopian moment of the 1990’s, at the birth of our democracy and at the moment when South Africans were seeking a new identity, Archbishop Desmond Tutu described the multicultural population of South Africa as the “Rainbow Nation.” This idea was immensely appealing and scripted the demands of a new country seeking out new boundaries, new geographies, new strategies for engagement and new images. Thus, the space had arrived for the refining and redefining of South Africa’s identities. Johan U Jacobs (1994: 878) quoted in Govinden (2008: 2) suggests that South Africa is in the process of self-narration, an almost national recollection of all those blanked-out areas of its identity. This paper tries to highlight one of those blanked out areas i.e. the challenges of the Indian artist in asserting a space for themselves in the new South Africa. It is worth noting however that this unifying vision, perceives racial identity to be the primary category through which a divided people could be united. As Appiah (2000: 607; quoted by Govinden 2008: 31) points out, racial identity is about tracing the history of a signifier or a label and also highlights a history of its effects. This paper foregrounds the visual representations aligned to this rationalization.

The title of this paper owes much to the dialogic of identity within the constructs of a labelled South African *past* alongside the redirecting and redesigning of a labelled South African *present*. It also owes its origin to class discussions with second and third year art theory students who have difficulty in classifying or identifying the author as a South African. The fact that the author is a 4th generation South African in the year 2013 still casts suspicion as to the authenticity of the author’s South Africanness. The author has witnessed several cases where she was told that she does not sound like an “Indian”, probably due to the stereotyping of Indian South Africans in the mass media. Thus her identity as an Indian woman

who isn't truly South African is constructed outside her control as is her difference. What then, do the students see that is somewhat of a mystery to them? Classified, to them, as neither South African nor Indian, it implies that the author is occupying a somewhat ambiguous space within the South African landscape, where people are seen as either black or white! This "outsider" status highlights the kinds of preconceived knowledge that is embedded in the multicultural / multiracial South Africa. It suggested a strange and distant, perhaps alien knowledge, of how citizens of this country coexist in the new South Africa. However, this 'outsider' position provides an interesting vantage point from which emerged a somewhat deeper analysis of present day Indianness in post-Apartheid South Africa, through the lens of two South African Indian artists.

Representation of Indians vs Indian Representation

While nation-building is currently seen as an imperative in South Africa, Indians are still concerned about their position and identity. A perusal of any Indian newspaper or media representation of Indians will foreground the stereotypical understanding of a homogenised Indian identity in South Africa. This sometimes takes the form of accents, dress, cars, food-ways or traditional family values as presently evidenced in the soap opera "Isidingo." In South Africa Indianness is in these ways exoticised and perpetuated thereby insisting on the "otherness" of this minority group.

The post-colonial theorist Bhabha (2004: 62) in his discourse on identification suggests that "...to exist is to be called into being in relation to an otherness..." He also proposes that the question of identification "is never the affirmation of a pre-given identity, never a self-fulfilling prophecy – it is always the production of an image of identity and the transformation of the subject in assuming that identity" (2004: 63). In effect, identity as discussed by Doring (2005: 145), is created by placing into groups individuals who share the same trait, consequently reducing individuality within the group. As a result of being a collectivizing notion, the projection of identities upon groups creates a sense of dislocation from oneself within the broader general collective i.e. the South African population.

Govinden (2008: 48) posits that Indian identity is not about reclaiming a lost sense of identity or harking back to a romantic notion of *Mother India*, as this sense of roots can be an essentialising process which perpetuates the commodification of Indian identity. Noteworthy is Rajan's comments (cited in Govinden, 2008: 48) that *Indian* is not a homogenous term but represents an identity which inevitably raises questions of an assumed non-Indian difference. Rajan further argues that as there is no essential quality that marks it, Indian identity is constantly made and remade, represented and erased, asserted and disputed. Thus identity politics as conceived by people of colour has never meant bemoaning one's circumstances, ranking or oppressions but, rather, by a politics of activism, which

seeks to recognise, name and destroy the system of domination which subjugates people of colour (Mohanty *et al.*, 1991: 276).

Hence the question of identity today draws considerable interest. Political analyst Adam Habib in discussing race in South Africa rejects the category of Indian. He says “to reduce people to an Indian identity or Coloured identity is to misunderstand how identities actually exist” (Personal Communication: 2011). Instead, he argues for hybridity. While concurring with him, it is interesting to note that when I am in India I am South African, yet when I am in South Africa I am Indian. Such is the nature of a shifting identity. Hence, the art works presented here engage with identity as a shifting construct in order to understand, evaluate and meaningfully participate in challenging identity-based forms of oppression and representation.

While Indians are represented in particularised ways in South Africa, this paper will explore the visual representations of two Indian South African artists who have to negotiate their access into the South African body politic and art historical narrative by interrogating their identities as Indian South Africans. Their works deal with the challenges of *being* Indian in post-Apartheid South Africa and although they deal with these issues in different ways they still resonate within the paradigm of post-colonial discourse. As such general concerns include issues of race/ethnicity, religion, nationalism and hybridization, dispossession and the crisis of a ‘place called home’.

Since arriving in South Africa as labourers on the sugar cane plantations, Indians have been subjected to the political enslavement and denigration by the white minority and thereafter been subjected to the racist ideologues of the Apartheid state. Through the process of indenture the many classes, castes and diverse religions and languages within the Indian community were collapsed and it was through this collapsing of space that there developed a common identity amongst the South Africans of Indian descent. Thus, the homogenizing tendencies of the South African authorities obliterated all complexities of the traditional Indian society as discussed earlier by Bhabha (2004) and Doring (2005).

As a result, while many South African Indians today feel strongly about their sense of exclusively belonging to South Africa, others identify even more strongly with a specifically South African *Indian* identity hence the dilemma of being “Indian South African”, “South African Indian”, “South African of Indian origin”, “African”, “Indian”, “Afrindian” or “South African”.

Thus, in South Africa today Indians seem to have to express their difference in “cultural” terms rather than self evidently racial terms (Radhakrishnan, 2011:182) as they are still associated with particular working class culture, marked by distinct food preferences, patterns of speech, traditional dress and segregated residences. The following section presents some works of art produced by two Indian South Africans as a reflection of the fundamental traits of this paper.

Faiza Galdhari

Faiza Galdhari is a graduate of the former Indian institution, the University of Durban Westville where she completed her Masters degree in Fine Art specialising in printmaking. In some of her works, issues of location and dislocation are explored together with representation and the empowerment of Muslim women.

In this series of four mixed media prints titled *Conversations in my Mind, Then and Now* (Figure 1), the challenges of “a place called home” and a yearning for roots is manifest. Of mixed descent, she has the appellation of being ‘coloured’ a term used in the South African race lexicon. As a result of this, her family was forced by the Apartheid government’s Group Areas Act to live in a ‘coloured area’, which she maps out in these works (see A and B). In these Coloured townships she had little access to Muslim people, since most Muslims in Durban are Indian and would therefore reside in Indian areas. She thus experienced an alienation from a ‘community’ with which she desired a relationship.

In this series Galdhari reflects upon the desire and challenge of a shifting space and the ambiguity of a transitioning identity where the imaginary of rootedness is displaced as the desire and romance of the place of home and religio-

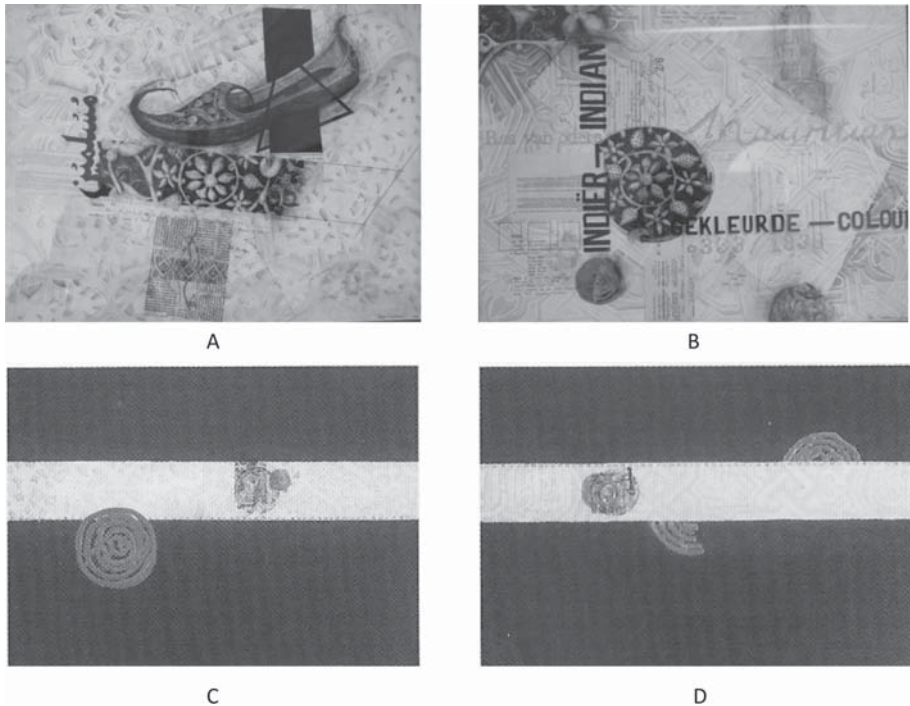


Figure 1: Faiza Galdhari, *Conversations in my mind then and now*, 2004, mixed media, each panel approx. 84 x 60cm

cultural belonging are made more enticing and bolstered by the pervasiveness and resilience of the human spirit. Through strong patterning, particularly through the circular form, she makes reference to Islamic motifs and in particular, the iconoclastic idiom in Islam while the history of a journey is symbolized by the inclusion of an oriental slipper (see A). These images foreground the resilience of the human spirit in migrating from foreign lands to this alien country. A description of her body as evidenced in the label “*Coloured*” (see B) or “*Gekleurede*” (Afrikaans for Coloured) which is intended to designate racial and social order denies her distinctiveness and ironically conflates into her South African-ness. All four works consider the complexities of being Muslim in South Africa and reflect on Indian/Muslim history and culture through the use of various symbols like the map, the sweetmeats (see C and D) and the overwhelming use of the colour black.

The textual reference of the map in image A and B demarcates the restricted group area for Coloureds. The additional reference of the rich sweet delicacies of the *jalebi* and *ladoo* (see C and D) become key signifiers of Muslim identity and highlight the cross fertilization amongst South Africans which underscore the limiting notion of Indianness in this country. Further the mapping of movement as represented by Galdhari signifies the shifting sense of place as experienced by so many South Africans. Rastogi offers an interesting perspective here on the notion of national belonging, suggesting that in the transitional and post-Apartheid period, racial affiliation incorporates a spatial affiliation which is asserted through place. This suggestion finds resonance in the works of Galdhari which focus on the dialectic of place and home while also challenging notions of home and belonging.

This body of work thus problematises the notion of identity as it is articulated within the Indian community and within the broader post-Apartheid South African environment. These representations further resonate with Mercer’s notion of the stereotype which he says is a product of a code, and an interpretation of a reality that reproduces and legitimates assumptions of race (1994:82). He contends that the ideological and cultural power of the codes determine dominant representations of race which are echoed in Galdhari’s fundamental desire to belong to and identify with a particularised group.

The Indian community is one group that is projected as synonymous with religiosity and tradition and while religion is perhaps their single most unifying aspect in South Africa, it has become a naturalised formulation of Indian identity. It is therefore often expected that works of art by Indian artists should reflect their Indianness through their colour-filled religion and culture. While some artists do tap into this pool of resources and do so in very different ways, others produce works that do not resonate with their cultural heritage.

Selvan Naidoo

Selvan Naidoo, another graduate from the University of Durban-Westville, directly references the South Indian Hindu marriage necklace in the print titled *Thali* (Figure 2). A *Thali* is a symbol of marriage in the Tamil culture both in India and in South Africa. It is a yellow cord embedded with small gold pendants in traditional shapes, predetermined by the lineage of the bridegroom's family. The union of marriage is considered complete once the *Thali* is tied around the neck of the bride. This image by Naidoo is overlaid with text, which explains the seven steps in a Hindu marriage known as the *saptapadi*. The image is also derived from the use of images appropriated from the temples of Khajuraho in north India where the union of male and female love is given visual articulation.



Figure 2: Selvan Naidoo, *Thali*, 2009, Digital Screen Print with Oil Paint on Canvas, 1.2m x 64cm

Although the image displays aspects of Hindu religion, Naidoo (Personal Communication, 2011) is quick to point out that "...by being Indian I don't want to be pigeon-holed into creating works that explore only mysticism..." This comment alludes to the homogenisation and stereotyping of South African Indians, which is experienced in almost all aspects of South African life. Through this image and others in his oeuvre, Naidoo explores his South African identity as one profoundly different from that of India.

In another print titled *I am an African* (Figure 3) Naidoo commemorates the 150th anniversary of Indian arrival in South Africa. This series of 15 panels represents images that are specific to Indian life and culture in South Africa culminating in a reflection on the many Indian lives that were lost in the cane fields of KwaZulu-Natal either through suicide or murder and subsequently in the struggle for freedom.

Each panel presents a particular aspect of Indian life, beginning with a representation of a cremation pot which houses the ashes of the deceased and foregrounds the cycle of life and death. This is followed by a second panel which pays homage to Indian women who have made South Africa their home and created



Figure 3: Selvan Naidoo, *I am an African*, 2010, mixed media, each panel is 15 x 20cm

sustainable lifestyles for their families. The red overlaid cross speaks of the large number of Hindu women who have converted to Christianity, a phenomenon evident in the townships of Chatsworth and Phoenix, for example, where the number of Christian denomination churches has grown significantly to accommodate growing congregations. However, reasons for the high rate of conversion are diverse and not the focus of this paper. The subsequent panels represent the *Murkoo* and *Vada* respectively, as a reflection of improving the economic position of Indians in this country. Even today, the selling of these savoury treats is common practice for many Indian women trying to supplement their income.

Panel six is a depiction of the grinding stone, a common item in every Tamil home in South Africa. This is a tool used for the processing of food and is a poignant piece as it reflects upon the manual labour that women and their families had to endure in order to ensure survival in a foreign country. The seventh panel is the betel leaf with the betel nuts that are common features of every prayer or ritual conducted in a Hindu home. These are not only used for prayer but are also eaten as an after-meal refreshment both in India and South Africa. The eighth and ninth panels are representations of the *Kolum* and marigold respectively, which are intrinsic aspects of Hindu ritual and worship in South Africa, while panels ten and eleven comment on the desire for material and spiritual wealth. Indians all over the world are particularly partial to gold embellishment, especially ornate items of gold jewellery. This is a reflection of their wealth and their aspirations for economic stability. Here Naidoo uses the gold bangle as a symbol of that material desire. The red string, in contrast, as worn by Hindus is a dedication and reminder of the spiritual wealth that the Hindu desires. The string is worn on the right wrist and is a permanent reminder of the individual's desire to become one with the divine.

The twelfth panel represents one of the key features of Indian Durban, the Juma Masjid Mosque in Grey Street and panel thirteen recalls one of the most common professions of many Indian men in South Africa, that of waiters. Naidoo's father was a waiter and one of the common forms of acknowledgment of these men was their English names. Their traditional names were far too complicated for

the non-Indian to pronounce, so easier, more 'familiar' English names like John, Morgan or Charlie were used. These names neutralised their race and their religious leanings and often resulted in reinforcing their marginal place. In other words, it was commonplace to identify certain jobs or professions with a particular race group. For example, Indians in Durban were stereotyped as shoemakers, waiters and tailors.

The representation of the road name and number in panel fourteen, recalls the identity of Indians through such number allocation in Indian townships. Many roads in Chatsworth, for example, have road numbers as opposed to road names, once again removing any form of identity from those who reside there.

The fifteenth and last panel poignantly reflects on the many lives that were lost in the cane fields and subsequently in the struggle for freedom. This panel also posits the question of freedom: Naidoo (Personal Communication: 2011) ponders "Are we really free? Have we really improved our lot 150 years later?" The final words "*I am an African*" are certainly pertinent here as they highlight the difference between those who are acknowledged as Black or African and benefitted from the new South Africa, and those who have been described as not Black enough in the new South Africa and therefore experienced limited progress and development, like the Indians. The text written in the font style of the Hindi language foregrounds the signification of an Indian South African or to borrow Rastogi's term, *Afrindian*. The entire image is brought together through the overlaid sheet of glass onto which a vinyl print presents a text documenting the laws to which Indians were subjected and against which they struggled.

As part of a loosely labelled 'post-Apartheid' generation of graduates, it is interesting to note that everything is still politicised for Naidoo, as he constantly engages with issues around what it means to be a South African, irrespective of whether these have positive or negative implications. In *Democracy, are we free?* (Figure 4), Naidoo explores the grand narrative of a post-Apartheid South Africa from the poignant moment when all citizens cast their vote on 27 April 1994 (Figure 5). The work comprises twenty panels (some of which are highlighted here) that function together in creating a dystopian narrative. Here the veritable freedoms that democracy would engender i.e. the right to vote and empower a people through a new constitution regarded as among the best in the world, are inverted. The work subversively explores current suffering in contemporary South Africa casting the spotlight on corruption and chaos (Figure 6) that envelope the multi-racial people of this land. Here while Naidoo moves away from self-referential 'Indian' subject matter he focuses on pertinent issues which also highlights the limitations of our democracy and critiques the abuse of power. Naidoo questions the nature of South Africa's threatened democracy, which in an accusatory sentiment questions the unfulfilled promises made by the ANC government. The original piece excludes the red 'X' associated with voting (added on in photoshop by Naidoo) but also



Figure 4: Selvan Naidoo, *Democracy, Are we Free*, 2008/9, Digital Printing on Canvas with Oil Paint, Screen Print



Figure 5: Detail of Figure 4



Figure 6: Detail of Figure 4

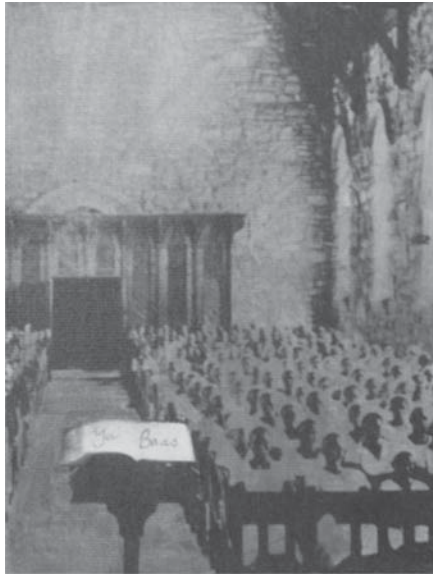


Figure 7: Detail of Figure 4

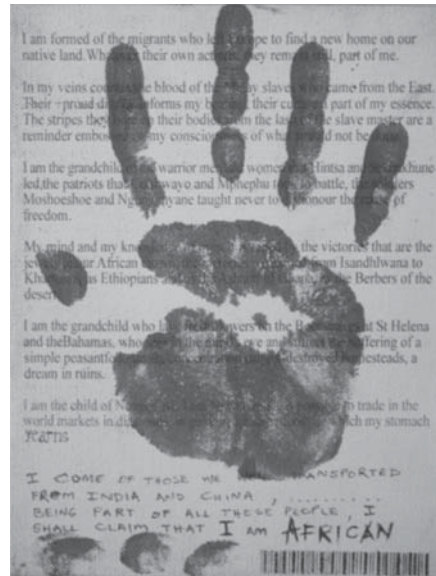


Figure 8: Detail of Figure 4

suggesting the possible erasure of the ‘X’ (via photoshop), an erasure symbolic of the fragility of democracy.

This fragility is alluded to in the detail seen in Figure 7 which likens a colonial representation of religious indoctrination of Black people by their ‘White masters’, to government’s strategies of control. This analogy is extended to explain the glorification of what Naidoo calls “the White world” where “what is White is right”. He suggests that life has not really changed in present-day South Africa, as there is still a significant portion of the population who maintain the “*Ja Baas*” (“*Yes Sir*” referring to a White superior) mentality and remain subject to victimhood.

In the detail extracted in Figure 8, Naidoo problematises his own identity through the use of his hand print which is a reference to the finger prints used as a fundamental tool of identity in South Africa. His work focuses on the shift away from past exclusions of a colonial and Apartheid legacy to a present legitimising identity by making reference to Thabo Mbeki’s “*I am an African*” speech. This speech forms the foundation of the panel over which the hand print is positioned together with a bar-code which highlights the significance of who he is in the new South Africa. The bar-code implicit in the Identification Document for all South Africans functions as a signifier of his racialised identity, which to him is only one signifier of his identity: “...above being Black or White or Indian I am South African” (Naidoo, Personal Communication: 2011). This sentiment expresses a desire to be included within the South African collective as opposed to constantly functioning on the margins and renegotiating a fit into a shifting socio-political reality. Appiah’s

(2009: 675) assertion that collective identities provide scripts and narratives for people in shaping their identities and telling their stories is pertinent here. These are critical considerations in the historiography of the South African artist of Indian origin two of whom have been discussed in this paper.

Looking Back, Looking Forward

The works presented in this paper foreground the diversity with which two South African artists of Indian ancestry reflect upon their experiences in this country. While it can be argued that their work still presents an essentialised understanding of Indian identity it is also evident that their diversity of subject matter suggests that there is a looking outwards towards the narrative of the new South Africa. It is indeed worth noting that the majority of works of art collected by galleries from Indian artists bear a decidedly Indian flavor either in title or content. Titles like *Krishna and Flute*, a painting by Ravi Govender, *Purdah*, a screen print by Faiza Galdhari, *Temples*, a painting by Kiren Thathiah, *Bunny Chow*, a painting by Riason Naidoo and *Wudhu Ghanaa*, a photograph by Hasan and Husain Essop, proliferate in the reflection of the Indian collection of the Durban Art Gallery. This is indeed revealing as they highlight their reference to Indian cultural peculiarities which reinforce the perception that a sense of Indianness distinguishes the works and reveals a degree of cultural specificity. While on one hand the value of collecting cultural and creative manifestations of the local Indian community is vital for the city's gallery it does on the other hand suggest cultural and racial stereotyping.

These works clearly focus on the Indian collective but as we look forward this racialised sense of identity which is attached to the Indian community needs to be reviewed not only by external forces like the media and national institutions like galleries but also by the Indian community itself. While it is not uncommon for minority communities the world over to view themselves through their projection of "otherness" South Africans are in a peculiar space where there is a need to recount suppressed histories. The rewriting of history through the recalling of personal experiences is an imperative in the quest to create an alternative national identity that transcends the separate nationalism that existed in the past. The emergence of these histories will highlight the under-explored histories of this country. Given the complex shifting ground of being South African today, the politicization of identity is overlaid with the historical background of colonialism and Apartheid which still persist in different forms. Hence interrogating the various understandings of identity is a necessary and critical activity whether in contexts of creativity or crisis.

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