

**Fictional Constructions of Grey Street
by Selected South African Indian Writers**

by

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fulfillment of the requirements for
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Declaration

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Dear Sir / Madam

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ABSTRACT

Fictional Constructions of Grey Street by Selected South African Indian Writers.

This thesis explores the fictional constructions of Grey Street by selected South African Indian writers to establish a deeper understanding of the connection between writers, place and identity in the South African Indian context. The concepts of 'place' and 'space' are of particular importance to this thesis. Michel Foucault's (1980) theories on space and power, Frantz Fanon's (1952) work on the connection between race and spatial politics, and Pierre Bourdieu's (1990) concept of 'habitus' are drawn on in this thesis in order to understand the ramifications of the spatial segregation of different race groups in colonial and apartheid South Africa.

The specific kind of place focused on in this thesis is the city. Foucault's (1977, 1980) theorisation of the Panopticon is used to explain the apartheid government's panoptic planning of the South African city. As a counterpoint to this notion of panoptic urban ordering, Jonathan Raban's *Soft City* (1974), Michel de Certeau's "Walking in the city" (1984) and Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (2002) are analysed to explore an alternative way of engaging with city space. These theorists privilege the perspective of the walker in the city, suggesting that the city cannot be governed by top-down urban planning as it is constantly being re-made by the city's pedestrians on the ground. The South African city is an interesting site for a study of this kind as it has, since the colonial era, been an intensely contested space.

This dissertation looks primarily at the South African Indian experience of the city of Durban which is a characteristically diasporic one. The theories of diasporic culture by Vijay Mishra (1996) and Avtar Brah (1996) form the foundation for a discussion of the Indian diasporas in the South African colonial and apartheid urban context. Two major Indian diasporic groups are identified: the old Indian diasporas and the new Indian diasporas. Each group experiences the city in different ways which is important in this study which looks at how different Indian diasporic experiences of the city shape the construction of Grey Street in fiction.

One of the arenas in which diasporic histories are played out, and thus colonial, nationalist histories are challenged, is the space of fiction. Fiction provides diasporic groups with a textual space in which to record, and thus freeze, their collective memories; memories that are vital in challenging the hegemonic 'nationalist' collective memories often imposed on them. Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase's (1989) work on nostalgia is useful in this thesis which proposes that the collective memories of diasporic groups are quintessentially nostalgic. This is significant as the fictional constructions of place in the primary texts selected are remembered and re-membered through a nostalgic lens.

The fictional works selected for this thesis include Imraan Coovadia's *The Wedding* (2001) and Aziz Hassim's *The Lotus People* (2002). Although other Indian writers have represented Grey Street in their works, including Kesevaloo Goonam in *Coolie Doctor* (1991), Phyllis Naidoo in *Footprints in Grey Street* (2002), Mariam Akabor in *Flat 9* (2006) and Ravi Govender in *Down Memory Lane* (2006), the two novels selected respond most fully to the theories raised in this thesis. However, the other texts are referred to in relation to the selected texts in order to get a fuller picture of the Indian South African perspective of Grey Street.

The selected primary texts are analysed in this dissertation in their historical context and therefore a brief history of Indians in South Africa is provided. The time period covered ranges from 1886 with the arrival of the first Indian indentured labourers to Natal to present day. Although this thesis focuses largely on the past and present experiences of Indian South Africans in Grey Street, questions are raised regarding future directions in Indian writing in the area. Thus, attention is also given to forthcoming novels by Hassim, Coovadia and Akabor. Research such as I am proposing can contribute to the debate on the cultural representation of urban space in South Africa and hopefully stimulate further studies of Indian literary production centered on writers, place and identity in the country.

Introduction

In this thesis I will be exploring the fictional constructions of Grey Street by selected Indian writers in order to establish a deeper understanding of the connection between writers, place and identity in the South African Indian context. I am particularly interested in the experience of South African Indian urban space and how it is represented in literature. The South African city is a very interesting site for a study of this kind as it has, since the colonial era, been an intensely contested space. Many theories of urban space have already been established and much has been written in South Africa about the history and geography of the Grey Street complex. However, the point of entry of my research into this already existing body of knowledge will be my application of such knowledge to a specific study of the *literary* representations of Grey Street, an area of study that is under-researched. Research such as I am proposing can contribute to the debate on the cultural representation of urban space in South Africa and hopefully stimulate further studies of Indian literary production centered on writers, place and identity in the country.

The concepts of ‘place’ and ‘space’ are central to postcolonial studies and will be of particular importance to this thesis. These terms are often used interchangeably but there is a crucial difference between them which is necessary to distinguish when analysing postcolonial literature. Place is “space to which meaning has been ascribed” (Carter et al 1993:xii). In Chapter One, the way in which space was transformed into place through colonial acts of place naming and mapping will be investigated. Michel Foucault’s (1980) theories on space and power, Frantz Fanon’s (1952) work on the connection between race and spatial politics, and Pierre Bourdieu’s (1990) concept of ‘habitus’ will be drawn on in this chapter in order to account for the spatial segregation of different race groups in colonial and apartheid South Africa. I will then turn to one of the key concepts underlying this thesis which emphasises the interconnectedness of literature, space and place. Place is a social construct that can be read through text and that can also be constructed through text. In light of this notion, I propose that the textual space of fiction can be used by postcolonial writers to redefine colonial spatial history. In this chapter, place will be approached as a text, a parchment on which new meanings are

constantly being re-inscribed. By acknowledging the dialectic relationship between fictional texts and physical places, a basis will be provided for a consideration in later chapters of the extent to which the fictional texts selected for this thesis have been powerful in providing a space for once marginalised groups to reclaim their place in colonial history.

The specific kind of place I will be focusing on in this thesis is the city. In Chapter One I therefore draw on Foucault's (1977, 1980) theorisation of the Panopticon which has influenced the construction of the modern city. The apartheid government in particular relied heavily on the principles of the Panopticon to ensure the success of racial segregation in the South African apartheid city. As a counterpoint to Foucault's notion of the panoptic ordering of urban space, Jonathan Raban's *Soft City* (1974), Michel de Certeau's "Walking in the city" (1984) and Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* (2002) will be analysed to explore an alternative way of engaging with the city. These theorists, each in their own way, privilege the perspective of the walker in the city, suggesting that the city cannot be governed by top-down urban planning as it is constantly being re-made by the city's pedestrians, the real makers and shapers of cities. It will be suggested that the city in this thesis be seen as a text that is written as well as read. From this perspective, the city can be considered a communicative device that can transform the social order. Thus, while the city influences literary production, it will be proposed that literary production has the ability to influence and shape the space of the city in turn. The idea of the city in text reconstructing the city as text will be valuable throughout the course of this thesis.

This thesis looks primarily at the South African Indian experience of the city of Durban which, I will argue in Chapter One, is a characteristically diasporic experience. The theories of diasporic culture by Vijay Mishra (1996) and Avtar Brah (1996) will form the foundation for a later discussion of the Indian diasporas in the South African colonial and apartheid urban context. The term 'diasporas' is borrowed from Mishra and is used in this context to denote diasporic people rather than broader demographic shifts. Two major Indian diasporic groups can be identified: the old Indian diasporas and the

new Indian diasporas. The way in which each group experiences and constructs the urban environment differs and these differences will be important in later chapters which deal with the fictional constructions of place by Indian diasporas. One of the arenas in which diasporic histories are played out, and thus colonial, nationalist histories are challenged, is the space of fiction. Fiction provides diasporic groups with a textual space in which to record, and thus freeze, their collective memories; memories that are vital to their survival and that often challenge the hegemonic collective memories imposed on nations. It will be argued that through literary texts, diasporas are able to write themselves back into the spatial histories from which colonial ideology has traditionally erased them. Chapter One will end with an exploration into the way in which diasporas engage in acts of collective remembering. Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase's (1989) work on nostalgia will be useful here as I propose that the collective memories of diasporic groups are quintessentially nostalgic. This will be significant when, in later chapters, I look at the way in which fictional constructions of place are remembered and re-membered through a nostalgic lens by selected diasporic writers. Given the length constraints of this dissertation, my analysis will perforce be suggestive rather than exhaustive.

History and geography are two factors which strongly influence the writing of fiction, for it must be remembered that the author of a text can never stand outside time and space. Chapter Two is thus dedicated to providing a broad spatial-historical context of Indians in the Grey Street complex. I have chosen specifically to focus on the Grey Street complex as I argue that it is an indicative reflection of South African Indian life, particularly because most Indians in the country are urban and over forty percent reside in Durban. Furthermore, Grey Street was one of the first areas in the center of Durban's 'white' city to be designated an Indian district. This chapter will provide a history of Durban ranging from 1843 when the British annexed Natal from the Boers to the present-day. The focus will be on Indian migration to the colony, highlighting the innovative ways in which they resisted and adapted to the racial discrimination they were subjected to in the new land. Chapter Two will end with a brief discussion of the Indian authors selected for investigation in this thesis, outlining their biographies and where they 'fit' in the history of Grey Street.

In Chapter Three I turn to a close examination of two novels selected in the light of the theoretical and historical contexts established in the previous two chapters. I have chosen to investigate Imraan Coovadia's *The Wedding* (2001) and Aziz Hassim's *The Lotus People* (2002) in order to explore the different ways in which Indian writers have constructed the Grey Street complex in fiction. Although other Indian writers have represented Grey Street in their works, including Kesevaloo Goonam in *Coolie Doctor* (1991), Phyllis Naidoo in *Footprints in Grey Street* (2002), Mariam Akabor in *Flat 9* (2006) and Ravi Govender in *Down Memory Lane* (2006), the two novels that I have selected respond most fully to the theories I raise in Chapter One. However, that is not to say that the other texts will not be useful in this analysis. I will be referring to them in the course of this chapter in relation to the selected texts in order to get a fuller picture of the South African Indian perspective of Grey Street. These texts will be contrasted with Yvonne Miller's *Dear Old Durban* (1985) and Barbara Trapido's novel *Frankie and Stankie* (2003), both by white authors and set in Durban during apartheid. In this chapter I wish to reveal that through their fiction, Indian writers are taking part in a vital postcolonial endeavour to re-write colonial history and re-center the Indian experience in Grey Street which white literature of the area has by and large ignored.

The Grey Street complex represented in the fiction by the Indian writers selected in this thesis is still physically in existence today. It is an area that is still being used and lived in and thus is a place that is constantly being re-made. Chapter Four looks at the new challenges that are arising in Grey Street, challenges that are far removed from those faced during the colonial and apartheid years. By looking at the ways in which the postcolonial/post-apartheid project of re-integrating the once divided spaces of the city is changing the urban experience in Grey Street, I ask to what extent these changes may affect the fictional constructions of Grey Street in the future. In this chapter I refer to forthcoming novels by writers such as Coovadia, Hassim and Akabor in order to predict the new directions in which South African-Indian writing is headed.

Chapter One

In this chapter I will introduce some of the broad theoretical issues surrounding space in order to provide a theoretical base from which to investigate the fictional constructions of Grey Street by selected Indian writers in the chapters to follow. First, I will define two separate terms that are central to postcolonial studies and that will be of particular importance to this thesis: 'space' and 'place'. These terms are often used interchangeably but there is a crucial difference between them which is necessary to distinguish when analysing postcolonial literature. Following this, I will establish a connection between place and literature, arguing that there is a dialectical relationship between them. The specific kind of place I will be focusing on in this thesis is the city. I will look at the way in which the modern city has traditionally been represented in literature in order to determine its applicability to the representations of the city in the selected texts of this thesis. I will then explore the ways in which the city can be read as a text and the way in which fictional constructions of the city can re-define the city proper. There will then be a shift towards theorising the specifically diasporic experience of the city, an experience common to most early Indian inhabitants of the Grey Street complex. I will then explore the extent to which literature has acted as a tool for diasporic communities to re-inscribe their identities into the city's geography and history. In concluding this chapter, I will turn to the ways in which diasporic communities take part in collective remembering in order to re-member their pasts, looking specifically at the role nostalgia plays in that process. By this stage, I will have a solid theoretical foundation from which to analyse the fictional constructions of Grey Street in the selected texts.

Theories of Space and Place

Recent scholarship, especially in the field of postcolonial literatures, has seen a rise in interest in the concepts of space and place. Previously, in the nineteenth century, there was an obsession in theoretical debates with history, and thus, time was the dominant medium of study. However, as we enter into what has been called "the epoch of space" (Foucault 1986:22), time is increasingly being seen as inseparable from space. Because time and space are constitutive of each other it would be more accurate to speak

of time-space. Michel Foucault, a French theorist for whom spatiality was important, attacks the idea of 'total history' in his writings, claiming that the world should be seen rather as being made up of "'spaces of dispersion': spaces where things proliferate in a jumbled-up manner on the same 'level' as one another" (in Philo 2000:207). As Foucault argues,

A whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers – both these terms in the plural – from the greatest strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat.

(1980:149)

Edward Soja, in his book *Postmodern Geographies* (1989) has acknowledged that this spatialisation of theory has helped to make sense of "how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology" (1989:6). This has implications for literature for, as Mike Crang and Nigel Thrift point out in *Thinking Space* (2003), space is an implicit operator in texts precisely because the author of a text does not stand outside time and space. Realising that "[s]pace is not a neutral medium but has a history, with literature existing within a geographical and historical framework" (McNulty 2005:5), it is clear that power and history are spatially inscribed into texts. This point is reiterated by Kate Darian-Smith and others when they explain that space and power are intimately connected, pointing out that "there is a growing body of historical and literary criticism which deals with the peculiarities of colonial space and its relationship to, and representation through, the eye – and the pen – of the imperial beholder" (1996:2). The implications of this for the colonial and apartheid situation in South Africa will be discussed later on in this chapter. By analysing literary space, it can therefore be argued that a spatial history of a place can be established. As McNulty summarises, "[s]patial histories allow us to read social, economic and material factors that influence cultural and literary construction. Thus, space can be used as a tool of analysis" (2005:6) in literary criticism.

Foucault takes the concept of spatialisation further suggesting that the organisation of space can be used to analyse relationships of power. In an interview with

Paul Rabinow, Foucault explains that “space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (in During 1993:168). For Foucault, power is responsible for influencing the “time-space geometry of how institutions, settlements, and ... whole societies are arranged ‘on the ground’” (in Philo 2000:208). One of Foucault’s central arguments “is that societies are discursively constituted through a series of normalising judgements that are put into effect by a system of divisions, exclusions and oppositions” (Gregory 2003:314). Thus, by ordering and manipulating spatial relations, physical and psychological control over individuals can be achieved. In the same way spatial relations are influential in creating and reinforcing discourses of power. In his book *Discipline and Punish* (1977), for example, Foucault explores the way in which discipline is distributed and implemented through individual relations in space. The social world is spatially constituted “through nodes and channels of power – fixed nodes where power is produced and crisscrossing channels along which power is diffused and collected” (in Philo 2000:223). His concern, as is mine in this thesis, is the way in which, through spatial relationships, categories of inclusion and exclusion are created so that those labelled as the mad and the bad are spatially segregated from society’s ‘normal’ sites of interaction. In his essay “Of Other Spaces” (1986), Foucault expands on this idea calling such exclusionary geographies, ‘heterotopias of exclusion’, sites in which individuals whose behaviour or appearance is considered ‘abnormal’ or ‘inferior’ to the norm are placed. It will be argued in later chapters that the Grey Street complex was one such heterotopia of exclusion in which Indians as a race group, defined as inferior by white colonials, were confined during the colonial and apartheid period.

Like Foucault, though writing earlier, Frantz Fanon was also interested in the relationship between space, power and the politics of difference. He argued in *Black Skin White Masks* (1952) that in colonial spaces “black skin becomes the outstanding sight (and site) of difference and inferiority in a white-dominated world” (Pile 2000:263). In this case people with black skin are labelled as the mad and the bad and it is through constant social and spatial ‘othering’ and the panoptic gaze of white eyes that the colonised individual is “fixed into place”, a place where s/he feels completely dislocated and depersonalised (Pile 2000:265). In this instance it can be said that “the materiality of

power operate[s] on the very bodies of individuals” (Foucault 1980:55). However, it must be remembered that racial segregation is not only implemented through top-down ordering but is also internalised by individuals in the social system to the extent that it is often accepted as the norm. Pierre Bourdieu (1990) draws on this idea in his ‘theory of practice’, which, like Foucault’s theory, is based on the ongoing mix of human activities that make up everyday life. Bourdieu believes that the practices of everyday life arise from the operation of what he terms ‘habitus’. This can be defined as

[t]he embodiment in individual actors of systems of social norms, understandings and patterns of behaviour, which, while not wholly determining action do ensure that individuals are more disposed to act in some ways than others.

(Painter 2000:242)

In other words, Bourdieu’s habitus is both the product and the generator of the division of society into different groups and classes and thus is shared by people of similar social status. For the purposes of this thesis it is important to note that it is the groups with the most power in society that impose a set of norms, meanings and ideas on the spaces of the ‘other’, thus exercising what Bourdieu calls ‘symbolic violence’ (1990). The concept of ‘habitus’ will be drawn on later in this thesis to explain the way in which white South Africans historically used their power to segregate Indians into racial enclaves.

When looking at literature from a spatial perspective, it is important to differentiate between space and place. However some of the theorists discussed in this thesis so far use these terms interchangeably using the word ‘space’ when they are in fact speaking of what I will define in this thesis as ‘place’. According to Chris Barker, ‘space’ “refers to an abstract idea, an empty or dead space which is filled with various, concrete and human places” (2000:292). In other words, place is the center of “human experience, memory, desire and identity” (291) and thus it can be said that space is transformed into place through social relations. In this light it is evident that what Foucault calls ‘space’ in his theorisations is what I would call place, a lived in and socially produced space. This is obvious from his explanation that

The space in which we live, which draws us out of ourselves, in which the erosion of our lives, our time and our history occurs, the space that claws and gnaws at us, is also, in itself, a heterogeneous space. In other words, we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. We live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another.

(1986:23)

For the purposes of this thesis it is essential to define 'place' in relation to a postcolonial and post-apartheid context. Ashcroft et al provide the following definition:

By 'place' we do not simply mean 'landscape'. [...] Rather, 'place' in post-colonial societies is a complex interaction of language, history and environment.

(1995:391)

Space becomes place

by being named; as the flows of power and negotiation of social relations are rendered in the concrete form of architecture; and also, of course, by embodying the symbolic and imaginary investment of a population. Place is space to which meaning has been ascribed.

(Carter et al 1993:xii)

From the above definitions, it is evident that the concept of place is elusive and not always easy to define. However, each of the definitions similarly accept that space becomes place once meaning has been ascribed to it and it is this definition of place that will be adopted throughout the course of this thesis.

Space is given meaning primarily through acts of naming (see, for example, Sienaert & Stiebel 1996:92). The issue of naming unknown landscapes, along with mapping, has become a central concern in postcolonial theoretical debates. Both naming and mapping were used during colonialism as instruments for colonisers to appropriate newly 'discovered' lands that, if not named or mapped, would remain to them unknown and uncontrollable space. As Ashcroft et al elaborate,

To name a place is to announce discursive control over it by the very act of inscription, because through names, location becomes metonymic of those processes of travel,

annexation and colonisation that affect the dominance of imperial powers over the non-European world.

(1995:183)

Paul Carter reiterates the point that through this “act of place-naming, space is transformed symbolically into a place, that is, a space with a history” (1987:377). Place-naming will be of considerable importance later on in this thesis when the naming of the Grey Street complex will be discussed in more detail. At this point, however, what should be noted is the fact that the naming of Grey Street and its surrounds was part of the imperial project of making sense of South Africa’s ‘foreign’ landscape. It marked the beginning of colonial history in the colony, a history that would attempt to overwrite that of the country’s indigenous inhabitants.¹

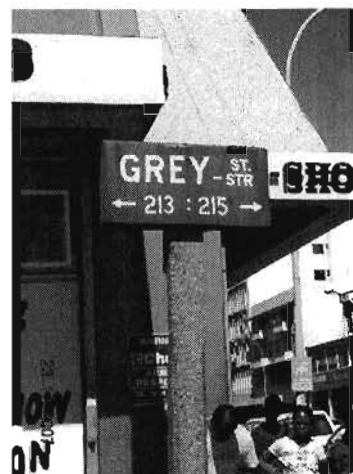


Figure 1: Grey Street sign

Like naming, “the map is [a] crucial signifier of control over place and thus of power over the inscription of being” (Ashcroft et al 1995:392). In the discourse of colonialism, map-making was considered an impartial, objective, scientific and true practice. However postcolonial theory has exposed maps as being a colonial tool for the spatial subordination of colonised groups. Mapping therefore is never a neutral activity for, as argued by Sienaert and Stiebel, “the mapper [always] brings the subjective gaze to bear upon the space and selects that which is important to be mapped according to previously subjective criteria” (1996:95). In the colonial situation, it is usually the white, male, elite gaze, which is given precedence, and mapping is thus used to codify and legitimate a Eurocentric worldview. This point is relevant for an investigation in this thesis of the way in which the space of Grey Street and the areas around it were mapped during the colonial and apartheid era. From the 1940s in particular, the racist apartheid government used the lines on the map to designate different zones to the different race groups in South Africa. The Grey Street complex was the zone designated for Indian

¹ See Chapter Four for a discussion on the postcolonial project of re-naming colonial street names.

occupation. The Group Areas Act as well as a number of other apartheid laws were powerful precisely because they manipulated the spatial arrangement of people through cartographical means. It can therefore be argued that maps are “a source of power through knowledge” (ibid), used during colonialism and apartheid to control, place and dis-place marginalised ‘others’.

Place and Literature

One of the key concepts underlying this thesis is the interconnectedness of literature, space and place. While place is powerful in influencing literary production, literature is powerful in constructing place and readers’ perceptions of it. In *Literature and Tourism* (2002), the interconnected relationship that is forged between writers and place is emphasised:

Works of literature are recognised as expressive of economic, cultural and political change, replete with intimate and revealing perspectives on the relationships between people and place at various space scales.

(Robinson & Anderson 2002:3)

James Duncan takes this argument further suggesting that ‘place’ is primarily a cultural construct and that fictional descriptions of place

are of necessity constructed within the limits of language and the intellectual framework of those describing it. Such a language is not a set of words which have a one-to-one correspondence with reality ‘out there’. It is based on discourses which are shared meanings which are socially constituted. Descriptions can have meaning only in such a context-bound sense.

(Duncan 1990:12)

In postcolonial literary theory there is a growing interest in the way in which postcolonial writers are using the textual space of fiction to redefine colonial spaces. As Ashcroft et al argue, because colonised peoples experienced an erosion of self through colonial dislocation, a major concern in postcolonial literatures is with issues of place and displacement (1989:8). In postcolonial fiction there is a constant attempt to recover the relationship between self and place that colonialism tried to destroy. Place in literature, therefore, must not be thought of as being stagnant but rather as “something in constant

flux, a discourse in process [...something] in a continual process of being ‘written’” (Ashcroft et al 1995:392). Seen in this way, place can be considered as a text, a parchment on which new meanings are constantly being re-inscribed. At the same time, the fictional text of the postcolonial writer can be treated as a space in which colonial places can be challenged and re-worked. By acknowledging the dialectic relationship between fictional texts and physical places, I would like to argue that fictional texts are powerful in the sense that they provide a space for once marginalised groups to take part in a “reterritorialization” of the self (Huggan 1995:408). This argument will be valuable in the proceeding chapters when I look at the way in which the selected Indian writers for this thesis use their novels as a means to write their people back into the spaces of history.

At this point I would like to return to the concept of mapping discussed earlier. Graham Huggan has highlighted that in postcolonial literature there is often an obsession with mapping, an obsession which he considers important as part of the postcolonial project of deconstructing and reconstructing the maps of European colonialism (1995:407). Unlike colonial cartography, the mapping process represented in postcolonial literature is

open and connectable in all its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group or social formation.

(409)

In other words, the space of the text provides postcolonial writers with the freedom to re-route and re-root themselves in places from which colonial maps excluded them. In Chapter Three this point will be valuable as I analyse the way in which Aziz Hassim and Imraan Coovadia use their fictional texts to undermine colonial and apartheid forms of mapping and spatial ordering.

Thinking the City

Although Foucault was not specifically an urban theorist, his work can be used to critique the spatial ordering of the modern city. In *Discipline and Punish* (1977) Foucault

draws on Jeremy Bentham's idea of the Panopticon to explain how control over societies can be achieved. As Foucault summarises, the Panopticon is "a diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system" (Foucault 1980:201). Architectural structures and the design of urban spaces have been based largely on Foucault's concept of 'Panopticism' (1980:71) with their grid-iron street patterns and high-rise buildings creating optimum urban surveillance and control. The notion of urban space being neutral was commonly adopted by urban planners who believed that cities were to be ordered and used in a rational and objective manner. The idea of rational urban planning is important when analysing the spatial policy and urban design of the apartheid city, a policy that relied on the principles of the Panopticon to ensure control and order over the 'black spots' of the city. In the case of the South African apartheid city, urban planners utilised the lines of the map as a 'rational' means of politically dividing space into different racial zones (see, for example, Judin & Vladislavic 1998). The concept of the Panopticon will be useful in later chapters in a discussion of the fictional constructions of the Grey Street area. The Grey Street complex, the Indian zone in the city of Durban, was an area kept under tight surveillance by the apartheid government. It was a zone that was constantly policed to ensure that Indians remained in their designated area and did not 'spill' onto the whites-only streets. Furthermore, in a later discussion of the Group Areas Act it will become clear that this act, along with many others implemented by the apartheid regime, reveals the very top-down, panoptic ordering of space that was being imposed on the urban landscape in South Africa at the time.

As a counterpoint to Foucault's theorisation of the panoptic ordering of urban life, Michel de Certeau provides an alternative way of engaging with city space in his essay, "Walking in the city" (1984). De Certeau considers the everyday as being different from the official and thus, as Victor Burgin notes, he "inaugurates a dual mapping of urban space" (1993:270). On the surface, there is what de Certeau calls the 'Concept city' (ibid), a city founded on the urbanistic discourse of the Panopticon. He criticises this way of ordering the city space, arguing that the totalising gaze of urban planners which tries to

reduce the complexity of the city to a “readable, [...] transparent text” fails to acknowledge the city’s “opaque mobility”, a characteristic that makes the city “impossible to administer” (de Certeau 1993:153). It is beneath the discourses that attempt to rationalise the city space that de Certeau’s unreadable city emerges (Burgin 1993:270). As the title of his essay connotes, de Certeau is concerned with the seemingly mundane, everyday practice of walking through the city. As he emphasises,

The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down below’, below the thresholds at which visibility begins. They walk – an elementary form of this experience of the city; they are walkers, *Wandersmanner*, whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban text they write without being able to read it.

(de Certeau 1993:153)

According to de Certeau, through the action of walking, pedestrians have the power to individuate and make ambiguous the legible order given to cities by planners and thus escape the “imaginary totalizations” imposed from above (ibid). In this way “another spatiality” of the city is created on the ground so that “[a] migrational, or metaphorical, city [...] slips into the clear text of the planned and readable city” (154). This point will be drawn on in Chapter Three when the way in which the writers of the selected primary texts represent “another spatiality” of the Grey Street complex is analysed. Both writers give precedence to the users of the city streets, focusing on characters who walk Grey Street on a daily basis. As a result, de Certeau’s theory of walking in the city will be applicable to the two novels under investigation in this thesis.



Figure 2: Walkers in Grey Street

It is important to note at this point that, for de Certeau, the users of the city are the ones who turn the abstract space of the city into a lived in and meaningful place. As he highlights, it is the walkers’

intertwined paths that give their shape to spaces. They weave places together. In that respect, pedestrian movements form one of the ‘real’ systems whose existence in fact makes up the city.

Because place in this thesis has been defined as the “focus of human experience, memory, desire and identity” (Barker 2000:293), it is on these grounds that the lived-in city can be considered a place in this thesis rather than mere space. In *Soft City* (1974), Jonathan Raban draws on this idea of the habitable city which, as he argues, stands in stark contrast to the ‘hard’ city of panoptic, urban planning. Like de Certeau, Raban asserts that

the city [is] soft; it awaits the imprint of an identity. For better or worse, it invites you to remake it, to consolidate it into a shape you can live in [...]. Cities [...] are plastic by nature. We mould them in our images [...] the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate on maps.

(1974:1-2)

The way in which city spaces are re-moulded and given new meanings by people who use them is most evident through the appropriation and creative re-imagining of street names. As de Certeau highlights, “these names make themselves available to the diverse meanings given to them by passers-by; they detach themselves from the places they were supposed to define” (1993:158). Grey Street, for example, was named after Earl Grey, the Secretary of State for the Colonies, and thus the epitome of colonial exploitation. However, for the Indians who inhabited the Grey Street complex, the street acquired new, innovative meanings.² It will be shown in the chapters to follow that, through an intimate knowledge of the city, an intimacy that is “as blind as lovers in each others arms” (153), new routes outside of the ‘proper’ ones locatable on maps, can be etched into the city’s landscape. The walkers who appear in the selected novels are described as being intimately familiar with the streets of the Grey Street complex, so familiar that they are able to re-route and even re-root themselves in spaces that evade apartheid’s surveillance infrastructure. As Steve Pile reiterates, these “walkers are involved in the production of an unmappable space which cannot be seen from above” (1996:226).

² This point will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Four.

The City in Literature

In his book, *The City in Literature* (1998), Richard Lehan relates urban texts to literary texts. Drawing from his earlier work, he suggests that “the literary text codifies ideas and attitudes about the city and that as the city itself changes under historical influence, so do these codes” (1986:99). His observations are relevant for the purpose of this thesis which aims in part, through exploring the fictional constructions of Grey Street, to uncover the attitudes the area’s Indian inhabitants have toward the street. Durban, to which Grey Street is a part, along with the other larger cities in South Africa, has been deemed a characteristically modern city. According to Lehan, the modern city in urban literature is depicted quintessentially as an unfriendly and hostile place with its inhabitants portrayed as feeling alienated and overwhelmed by the city experience.³ It has been suggested that such fictional constructions of the city reflect the fact that in the modern “urban way of life people replace primary group contacts with more superficial ones; their relationships with others are characteristically brief and impersonal, and life in the [modern] city is, ultimately, anonymous” (Curry 1992:102).

Walter Benjamin, another urban theorist, is pre-occupied with the modern urban experience in his theoretical works. Like de Certeau, Benjamin believed that the city should be approached subjectively, on foot, by the individual. He was interested in the ordinary practitioners of the city and felt that, through them, he could uncover the revolutionary. As Mike Savage has reiterated, Benjamin’s prime focus was to “subvert conventional meanings and values and thereby [challenge] the notion of the ‘mass’” (2000:38). It is precisely because the street walker encounters the city as street or shop rather than map or monument that s/he is able to undermine the Foucauldian top-down ordering of city space. In his major work, *The Arcades Project*, Benjamin sees the city not as the habitat of the bourgeoisie but rather as the home of the marginal character, for it has been said that “Benjamin regards the marginalia of the city as the most important clues for its decipherment” (Gilloch 1996:30). The gambler, the *flâneur* and the prostitute are all central to Benjamin’s theoretical investigations. This point is useful for its

³ This experience of the city is portrayed, for example, in Charles Dickens’s *Great Expectations* in which London is represented as a “shameful place, being all asmeared with filth and fat and blood and foam” (1860-61:165).

applicability to the selected primary texts under investigation in this thesis and will be explored in more detail in Chapter Three. What must be noted here is that the characters who are foregrounded in the two novels are all marginal individuals in the city, those considered through some to be the flotsam and jetsam of society. In Hassim's *The Lotus People* in particular, the city is seen from the perspective of the gamblers, prostitutes, thieves and other social outcasts who make up its urban milieu.

Benjamin's *flaneur* figure, whom he considers the embodiment of the modern urban dweller, will have limited application in this thesis however. In an attempt to define the *flaneur*, Barker has this to say:

[M]odernism's figure of the *flaneur* or stroller is one who walks the anonymous spaces of the modern city, experiencing the complexity, disturbances and confusions of the streets with their shops, displays, images and variety of persons.

(2000:294)

According to Benjamin, the city is a labyrinth, a human-made environment of commodities, machines and arcades that disorientate and distract. It is a city of spectacle and consumerism. As Benjamin highlights for example, the arcades

are glass-roofed, marble-paneled corridors extending through whole blocks of buildings. [...] Lining both sides of these corridors, which get their light from above, are the most elegant shops, so that the arcade is a city, a world in miniature, in which customers will find everything they need.

(2002:394)

For the *flaneur* therefore, the city is seen more than lived in, his gaze is that of the alienated man who never feels completely at home in the metropolis. The modern city, according to Benjamin's observations, is also a city of strangers characterised by the anonymity of crowds. In this urban space social relations are reduced to quick, impersonal encounters whereby the "pedestrian must devise a strategy of shoving and weaving through the crowd" (Gilloch 2002:95). Benjamin draws on Baudelaire's notion that the crowd is characteristic of modern urban life. As Benjamin highlights, the *flaneur* "seeks refuge in the crowd [...]. The crowd is the veil through which the familiar beckons

the *flaneur* as phantasmagoria” (2002:10). In other words, the urban crowd is the *flaneur*’s element; it acts as the medium through which he moves thus affording him the power to remain anonymous and “walk at will, freely and seemingly without purpose but simultaneously with an inquisitive wonder and an infinite capacity to absorb the activities of the collective” (Jenks 1995:146). The *flaneur* watches the urban masses from a distance thus never becoming committed to or embedded in the city. It is this aspect of Benjamin’s theorisation of the modern urban experience that does not fit well with my particular study on the social aspect of Grey Street represented in the selected novels. It will be proposed later in this thesis that perhaps because of the peculiar racial zoning within South African cities during apartheid, the experience of the modern city differed greatly from that of Benjamin’s *flaneur*. By restricting the Indian community of Grey Street to a specific bounded space in the city, what emerged was a homogenous, tight-knit Indian neighbourhood. Within this lived-in space of social cohesion, very few individuals could remain anonymous like the *flaneur* or experience urban life from a distance.

The City as Text

It has been asserted that

cities, like all environments, are texts in which are inscribed values, beliefs, and the exercise and struggle for power ... But if the city is a text, it is written as well as read, (re)constructed as well as (re)interpreted, and (re)produced as well as consumed.

(Byrne 2001:34)

De Certeau’s “Walking in the city” follows this line of thought suggesting that the city is an urban text on which the ordinary practitioners of the city continuously write. According to de Certeau, “[t]he walking of passers-by offers a series of turns (*tours*) and detours that can be compared to ‘turns of phrase’ or stylistic figures” (1993:158). In this light, the city can be seen as an arena of stories to be written and read, stories which have the power to transform spatial history. As Crang reiterates,

[w]here 'pedestrian utterances' speak the city, through metonymic tricks such as synecdoche and asyndeton the space of the city expands and contracts [...] speaking the city can make wild temporal and spatial leaps – sudden connections and shifts.

(2000:150)

For de Certeau, this ability to inscribe and re-inscribe the city can be used as a 'tactic', a weapon of the weak, to undermine the conventional, top-down representations of city spaces. Because the city as a text is read as much as it is written, it acts as a communicative device that can be said to reproduce and even transform the social order (see, for example, Duncan 1990). Therefore by re-writing the spatial experience of the city in fiction, one has the power to challenge the past or present urban environment. As Chris Barker points out, reading texts about the city is one way of reading the city because "the notion of 'the city', *the city itself*, is a representation [...] a gloss on the environment" (2000:316). According to this view, there is no unmediated access to the 'real' city which means that the only way in which cities are made available to us is through representations of them. Thus while the city influences literary production, literary production can influence and shape the city in turn. This idea of the city in text reconstructing the city as text will be useful further on in this thesis when the extent to which the representations of Grey Street in the selected novels act as a means of re-routing and re-rooting Indian identity into the area's spatial history is explored.

Diasporic culture in the city

They've given you the name 'coolie',
You've come to Natal
Give thanks in song, brother,
With a chumbu in your hand,
And a hoe on your shoulder.

(Lalla in Chetty & Piciuccio 2004:188)

One of the central concerns of this thesis is the experience of diasporic South African Indian communities in the Grey Street complex. In his essay, "The diasporic imaginary: theorizing the Indian diaspora" (1996), Vijay Mishra breaks down Indian diasporas into two main categories which will be useful later on in an analysis of the Indian diasporas represented in the selected texts for this thesis. Mishra calls the first

group the 'old' or 'exclusive' diasporas, denoting those who traveled to the colonies during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, usually as indentured labourers.⁴ These old Indian diasporas were, according to Mishra, "diasporas of exclusivism" because they created self-contained mini-Indias in the colonies (1996:422). Such mini-Indias were constructed as a result of feeling displaced in the new land of settlement. As Avtar Brah, also a theorist of diasporic cultures, explains, "diasporic journeys are essentially about settling down, about putting roots 'elsewhere'" (1996:182). However, in the colonies, Indian diasporas were often faced with racist, colonial discourse which constructed them as inferior 'others'. The colonial notion of the "Nation Thing" (Mishra 1996:423), that a people must have a land in order to be a people and thus the notion that 'they' belong 'there' and 'we' belong 'here', perpetuated the feeling of non-belonging experienced by diasporas in colonial spaces. These spaces became what Mary Louise Pratt has termed, cultural "contact zones": "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (1992:4). In Chapter Three the extent to which the selected novelists construct Grey Street as a cultural contact zone will be explored.

As Brah highlights, "embedded in the concept of diaspora is the notion of the border" (1996:198). Borders she defines as being

arbitrary dividing lines that are simultaneously social, cultural and psychic; territories to be patrolled against those whom they construct as outsiders, aliens, the Others; forms of demarcation where the very act of prohibition inscribes transgression [...] places where claims to 'mine', 'yours' and 'theirs' are staked out, contested, defended, and fought over.

(1996:198)

This concept of borders is applicable to the South African apartheid situation which was based on spatially segregating Indian diasporas into designated zones in and around the city of Durban. As a form of survival against social exclusion and cultural denigration, Indian diasporas began to turn inwards, creating ethnic enclaves of Indian solidarity. Due to the trauma of being outcast in the colonies, as well as of experiencing homesickness, a

⁴ See Chapter Two for a discussion on the history of indentured Indian labourers to South Africa.

“fantasy of the homeland” was created (Mishra 1996:423). India was imagined as the center of Indian cultural purity and in order to perpetuate this myth in the colonies Indian diasporas re-enacted Indian rituals and cultural practices in the new land.⁵ Brah contends that this was a political response by Indian diasporas who refused to internalise the racist label, ‘coolie’. Instead Indian diasporas celebrated what they considered their essential ‘Indianness’ by retaining traditional Indian architecture, food, religion, clothing and the vernacular. Grey Street is the epitome of a mini-India created by the old Indian diasporas in the colony. In the chapters to follow the ways in which the Indian settlers in the area transformed Grey Street into a replica of the homeland will be explored.

By re-creating mini-Indias in the colonies, Indian diasporas were able to establish a home for themselves within ethnic enclaves against great odds. Paul Gilroy (1993) explains that this sense of being simultaneously home away from home or, here and there, resulted in a kind of duality of consciousness. These diasporas reveal the immense social mobility of culture, the “hawker-like capacity to carry one’s ancestral baggage around, [the] capacity for re-spatialization” (Mishra 1996:431). It is this double consciousness that has effectively challenged the “Nation Thing” mentioned earlier, undermining essentialist beliefs that diasporas can only ever ‘belong’ in the place they originally come from. According to Mishra, it is the second category of Indian diasporas, whom he calls the ‘new’ or ‘border’ diasporas, that undermine discourses of nationalism even further. For the purposes of this thesis it is important to note that the new diasporas in this instance are the younger generation of Indian South Africans whose parents or grandparents were originally from India. Mishra suggests that the identity of this group is always hyphenated. As he explains,

The hyphen is that which signifies the vibrant social and cultural spaces occupied by diasporas in nation-states [...]. It also reminds us of the contaminated border, hybrid experience of diaspora people.

(1996:432)

⁵ See, Salman Rushdie’s *Imaginary Homelands*, which elaborates on this notion of imaginary Indias created by Indian diasporas abroad.

The cultural logic of the new Indian diasporas is said to be located in the hyphen itself precisely because they occupy a space between the old and the new, the east and the west, tradition and modernity. This space has been termed “diaspora space”, a space in which diasporic identities are “always plural and in process” (Brah 1996:195). This idea therefore challenges the nationalist myth that identities are pure and fixed in time and space. The extent to which Grey Street is represented in the selected primary texts for this thesis as a dynamic “diaspora space” in which Indian culture is continuously undergoing translation and change will be explored in Chapter Three.

Diaspora and Literature

The arena in which diasporic histories are fictively played out, and thus, colonial, nationalist histories are challenged, is often the space of the novel. Angelika Bammer supports this view asserting that diasporic literary texts engage in “marking and recording absence and inscribing presence” (1994:4). In *The Politics of Home*, Rosemary Marangoly George stresses that in the realm of literature, diasporic writers use the same literary tools of the coloniser to dismantle their racist ideology which, for so long, functioned to marginalise and displace diasporic communities worldwide. These texts take on the very postcolonial project of destabilising colonial histories which have often only narrated one nationalist story by “creat[ing] home through tangential locations” (Marangoly George 1996:5). By re-inscribing a diasporic self and home into the literary spaces from which they were previously erased, diasporic communities enable the marginal to move to the center and vice versa. Ironically though, in an attempt to undermine essentialist myths of ‘The Nation’, Indian diasporic writers often attempt to re-create an essentialist Indian identity in their works. However, as Gareth Griffiths argues, defending essentialist Indian identity in fiction has been a primarily political strategy on the part of the diasporic writer (1995:240). By strongly asserting Indian sensibility and restoring their sense of ‘Indianness’, Indian diasporic writers are outwardly refusing to accept the ‘coolie’ identity placed on them by racist colonials or to remain silent ‘mimic men’ (see, for example, V.S. Naipaul’s novel (1967) of the same name). As a result, these texts remind us that Indian diasporas may have been “displaced but not replaced” by colonial ideologies of oppression (Bammer 1994:xiii). With

reference to South African Indian writers, it has been proclaimed that in their fiction they have self-consciously written themselves and their people back into colonial history, “staking a place for themselves” both in South Africa and in India (Chetty & Piciuccio 2004:197). This position will be applied to the selected texts in the following chapters to explore the extent to which they challenge the nationalist discourse of colonialism and apartheid by reclaiming a hybrid identity and emphasising the multi-locationality of the concept of home.

Collective Remembering and Nostalgia in the City

In the course of this thesis it will be important to understand the way in which Indian diasporic communities in the Grey Street complex have engaged in acts of social remembering. For the purposes of this particular thesis I will draw on the idea of ‘collective remembering’ which was first developed by Maurice Halbwachs (1992). His theory is based on the claim that personal memories are essentially part of group memories. As James Fentress and Chris Wickham summarise,

All memory is structured by group identities: that one remembers one’s childhood as part of a family, one’s neighbourhood as part of a local community [...] and so on [...] and that the memory of the individual exists only in so far as she or he is the probably unique product of a particular intersection of groups.

(1992:x)

In this light, it can be argued that personal memory, which as already mentioned is essential to social memory, is necessary for giving a group an identity, a sense of belonging in the past which in turn provides a sense of belonging in the present. This view is adopted by David Middleton and Derek Edwards in *Collective Remembering* in which they proclaim that “collective remembering is essential to the identity and integrity of a community” (1990:10). I would like to argue in Chapter Three that the authors of the selected novels for this thesis are taking part in an act of collective remembering through the writing of their fictional texts, an act valuable in restoring to the Indian-South African diasporas a sense of group belonging in South Africa’s past and present.

As Fentress and Wickham acknowledge, writing has the power to freeze collective memory in textual forms which I would like to suggest is powerful as part of the postcolonial project of not only remembering, but also re-membering the colonial past (1992:9). As mentioned earlier, the colonial ideology of 'The Nation' marginalised diasporic communities in the colonies and thus also marginalised their histories. It must be noted that "*he who controls the past controls who we are*" (Middleton & Edwards 1990:10) and, from this perspective, it is possible to recognise how colonial 'History' has for so long defined and stifled diasporic identities the world over. In *The City of Collective Memory*, Christine Boyer emphasises that "history always stands against memory; the one as a constructed or recomposed artifice, the other a lived and moving expression" (1994:69). She contends that the establishment of collective memories amongst previously marginalised groups involves the establishment of counter-memories, "resisting the dominant coding of images and representations and recovering differences that official memory has erased" (1994:28). In Chapter Three I will look at the way in which the authors of the selected primary texts under investigation create postcolonial counter-memories through their work, collective memories that give precedence to the Indian diasporas in South Africa and hence memories that challenge the orthodoxy of South Africa's colonial and apartheid past.

The question that remains to be asked is how does memory shape the fictional constructions of Grey Street in the selected novels for this thesis? However, before an answer can be found, the way in which memories and city landscapes influence each other needs to be explored. According to Nadia Lovell in her book *Locality and Belonging* (1998), collective memory is embedded in place which is important for providing a sense of group belonging. Belonging, she proposes "may [...] be seen as a way of remembering instrumental in the construction of collective memory surrounding place" (1998:1). Memory, place and identity can therefore be seen as being interconnected and interdependent. As Lovell points out, landscape does not remain outside of us but over time becomes highly internalised. In other words, when "we enter a landscape [we] turn it into a place which we are no longer able to abstract from ourselves" (Lovell 1998:8). Walter Benjamin holds a similar view with reference

specifically to the landscape of the city. He believes that through our experiences in the city we leave 'traces' of memory in it which can never be erased. Savage has summarised Benjamin's position as follows:

[M]emories are lodged in specific places where people have been. These places bear the traces of past experiences. It is therefore possible that revisiting them may at some time evoke the past and in the same moment unlock past hopes and desires which previously seemed to have been overtaken [...] by the passage of time.

(2000:42)

It is this idea of the city as a city of traces that will be useful in an analysis of the fictional constructions of Grey Street later on in this thesis. Like the selected writers for this thesis, Benjamin gives more value to the seemingly insignificant fragments and traces in the city that trigger the collective memory of marginal groups than to the large, bourgeois landmarks symbolising the rational and national memories shaping conventional narratives of the city. As he is quoted saying,

The collective is an eternally alert, eternally moving being that witnesses, experiences, perceives and devises as much between the house walls outside as individuals within the protection of their four walls. To the collective, the shining enameled signs of a store or company are just as good as or better than the decorative oil paintings on the wall of the bourgeois salon [...] And the gateway, leading out into the open from multiple courtyards, is the long corridor which frightens the bourgeoisie, but is to [the collective] the entrance into the chambers of the city.

(Benjamin 2002:533)

By embracing the idea that collective memory is founded on fragments and traces in the city, it is clear that collective remembering is not an objective process but is rather laden with subjectivity. According to Middleton and Edwards, social groups actively and continuously re-invent the past to fit the present. As they reiterate, "memory [...] does not just act as a passive 'storehouse' of past experience, but changes what is remembered in ways that enhance and transform it according to present circumstances" (1990:6). Collective memory can thus be said to be largely selective, distorted and often even inaccurate. In the two novels under investigation in this thesis, nostalgia, one form of collective remembering which distorts past realities, is prevalent. In *The Imagined Past: history and nostalgia* (1989), Christopher Shaw and Malcolm Chase define nostalgia as

being “traded on comfortable and conveniently reassuring images of the past, thereby suppressing both its variety and its negative aspects” (1989:1). However, as they acknowledge, “it is wrong to imagine that there exists some *non*-nostalgic reading of the past that is by contrast ‘honest’ or authentically ‘true’” (30), for any recreation of a sense of the past in literature is always nostalgic. For the purposes of this thesis, two kinds of nostalgia will be highlighted and applied to the selected texts in Chapter Three. The first kind of nostalgia to be discussed is that for a homeland experienced by the old Indian diasporas. Shaw and Chase explain that nostalgia results from homesickness and provides those away from home with a pseudo-comfort and sense of security. As they highlight, nostalgia involves a special way of being involved in the past which enables the re-invention of a collective sense of “*my people*” (1989:2). In relation to the old Indian diasporas, nostalgia for India is revealed through their construction of mini-Indias in the colonies. The invocation of supposedly authentic Indian traditions in their ethnic enclaves, for example, functions as a means of connecting them with their homeland and with each other. Shaw and Chase support this view claiming that “tradition [...] is the thread which binds our separate lives to the broad canvas of history [...] and] which cements the link between the individual and the collectivity” (1989:11). Material objects are also employed in the present as nostalgic embodiments and representations of a so-called unified past. As Middleton and Edwards explain, “relics from the past remain essential bridges between then and now” (1990:4) and are used to help sustain identity. In the mini-Indias specifically, the objects brought over to the colony from India become “talismans” that link the diasporic communities concretely to their homeland (Shaw & Chase 1989:4). However, the homelands that diasporas usually remember are romanticised and thus often far removed from the realities of life back home. This is due to the fact that imagined homelands allow diasporas to cling onto a simple and stable past as a refuge from the turbulent and chaotic present that is the diasporas’ reality (Shaw & Chase 1989:21). Grey Street is one such mini-India that was constructed from romanticised, nostalgic images of the homeland. The extent to which the characters in the selected novels of this thesis are nostalgic for India and thus utilise Indian traditions and relics in ways that compensate for their homesickness will be discussed in Chapter Three.

In the case of the new Indian diasporas in the South African context, the nostalgia experienced by this group was, and still is, a nostalgia for an older, tight-knit Indian community rather than a nostalgia for a specific homeland. This second kind of nostalgia, according to Shaw and Chase, has emerged from the condition of modernity which has resulted in the degradation of community-oriented public life. In this contemporary age nostalgia is the attempt to cling to the alleged certainties of the past, for as Shaw and Chase reveal, there is a belief today that

if our consciousness is fragmented, there must have been a time when it was integrated; if society is now bureaucratized and impersonal, it must previously have been personal and particular.

(1989:8)

In Grey Street, for example, this kind of nostalgia was experienced by the new Indian diasporas in the 1950s after the Group Areas Act was implemented, an act that destabilised the tight-knit nature of the area. However, once the racial boundaries governing the area's inhabitants were finally dismantled towards the end of apartheid, feelings of nostalgia were further exacerbated. In the multi-racial South African city of the present, the social cohesion of the past has been replaced with anonymity. Today's city dwellers are experiencing the city of the *flaneur*, a city of alienation and angst.⁶ As a result, many of the city's inhabitants are experiencing a yearning for the 'good old days' of a Grey Street of old. In Chapter Three the extent to which the authors of the selected novels of this thesis, as well as the new Indian diasporas they represent in their narratives, remember and re-member Grey Street through a nostalgic lens will be explored. The next chapter will move to a consideration of the historical context of Grey Street and highlight the theoretical links with this chapter.

⁶ Chapter Two and Four elaborate on the contemporary experience of Grey Street.

Chapter Two

Historical Context

If you tickle us, do we not laugh?
If you prick us, do we not bleed?
If you poison us, do we not die?
And if you wrong us, shall we not revenge?¹

– Sha-Shi-Pi-Ya

This chapter will be dedicated to providing a broad historical context of Indians in the Grey Street complex, an area which is commonly referred to amongst its Indian inhabitants as the ‘Casbah’. The Grey Street complex is a distinctly bounded space which runs from the Greyville race course in the west to Pine Street in the east, and from Soldiers Way in the north to the end of Old Dutch Road in the south (see Map 1 over the page). Grey Street is a fruitful indicator of South African Indian life at this particular time, particularly since eighty percent of Indians are urban and over forty percent reside in Durban (Meer 1969:1).

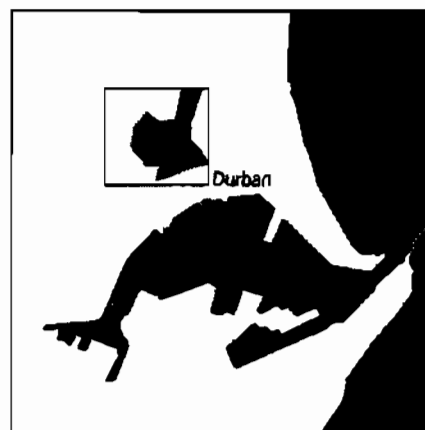


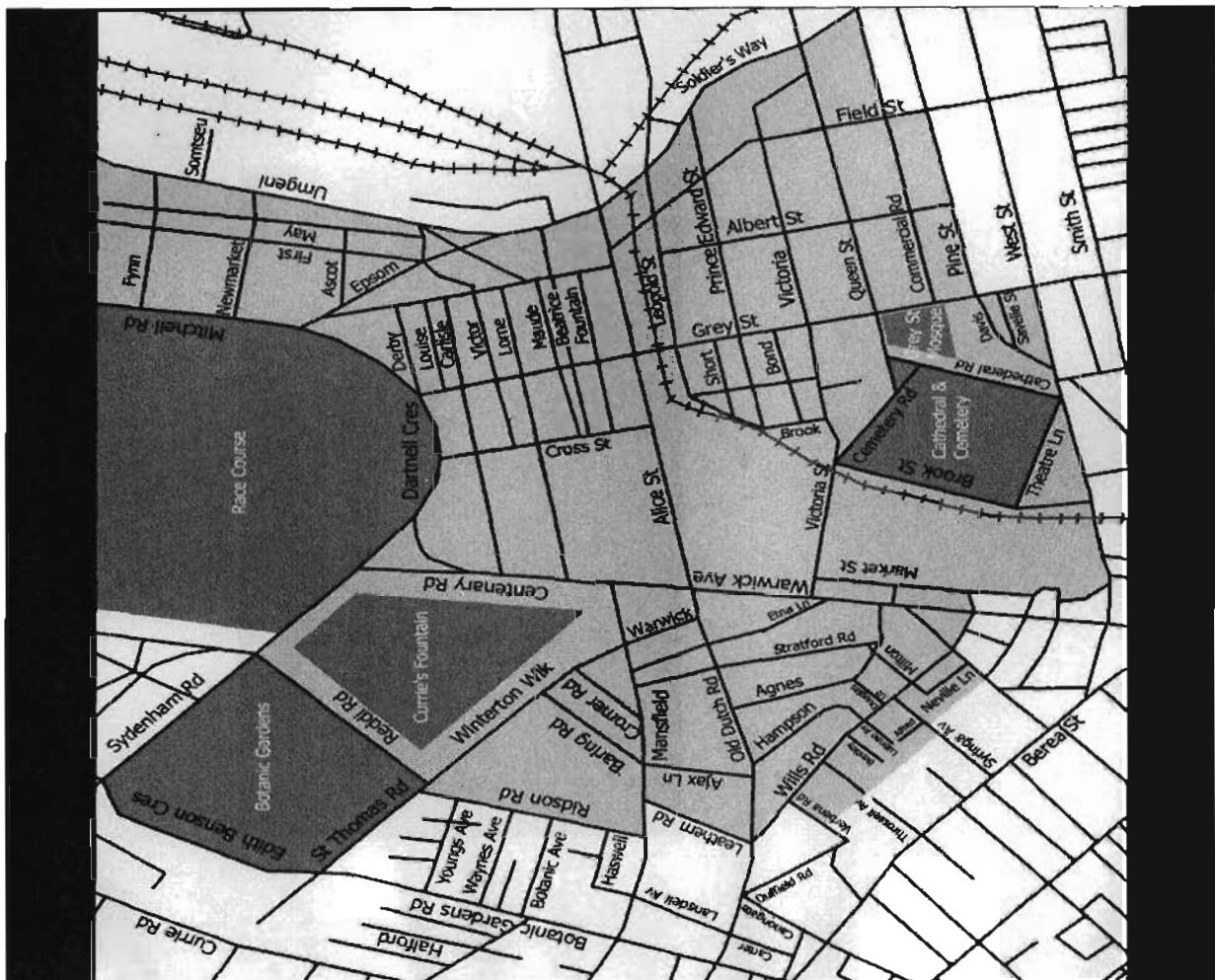
Figure 3: The Grey Street complex in Durban

Since its very inception, the Grey Street complex has been a highly contested space. Drawing from the theorisation of place naming in Chapter One, it becomes clear that the naming of the streets in the Grey Street complex was an important part of the ideology of colonialism, which as Omar Badsha in his book *Imperial Ghetto* argues, “sought to reinscribe space through the use of culturally-specific names thereby giving credence to the myth of *terra nullius*” (2001:14). The naming of this area by colonialists ensured that any indigenous knowledge and habitation of the area was literally displaced. The Grey Street complex was originally a white residential area named after Queen Victoria:

¹ Chinese novelist Sha-Shi-Pi-Ya, quoted in Desai and Vahed 2007:22.

Queen Street [was] named after Queen Victoria; Victoria Street named after her daughter; Prince Edward Street named after her eldest son; Leopold Street named after her eighth child; Alice Street named after her second daughter [...] and Albert Street named after her husband.

(Badsba 2001:14)



Map 1: The Grey Street complex (Badsha 2001:121)

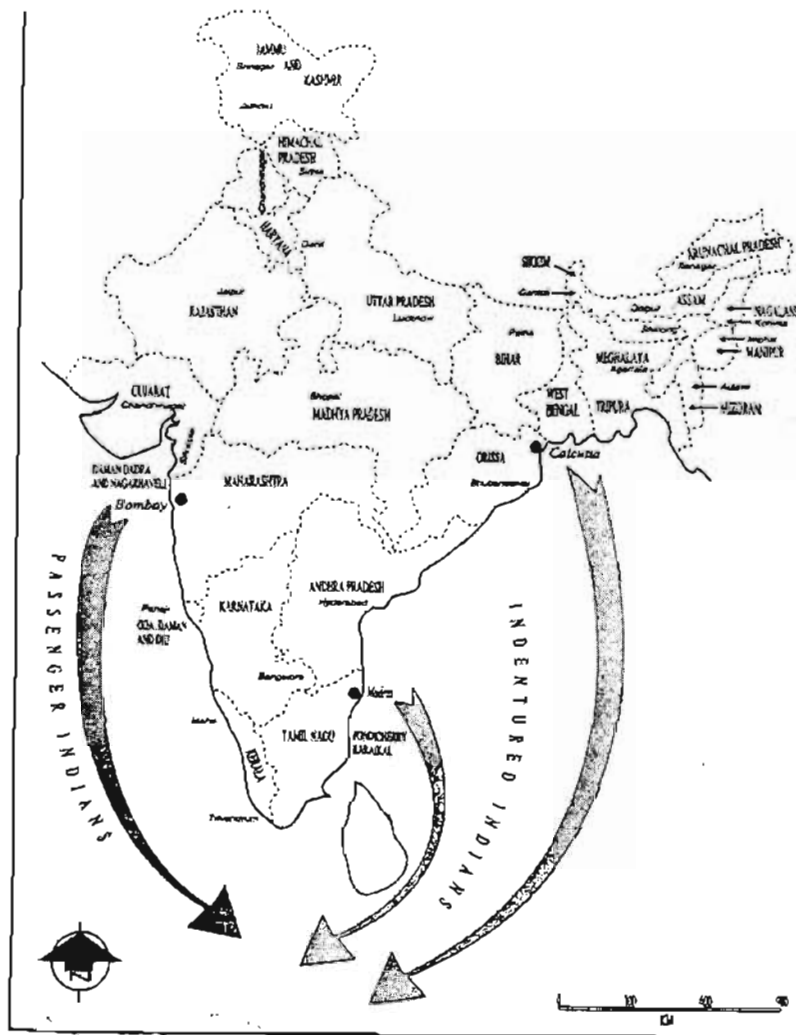
Grey Street, the road running centrally through the Grey Street complex, was named after Earl Grey, the Secretary of State for the Colonies.² The question that needs to be

² The Grey Street complex is currently undergoing a re-naming process in order to achieve the postcolonial/post-apartheid goal of re-inscribing new, multi-cultural identities into the landscape. Grey Street has been re-named Dr Yusuf Dadoo Street. Further comment on the significance of this will be made in Chapter Four.

answered at this point is how did Indians come to find themselves living in this colonial-dominated space, a space which they eventually came to call 'home'?

After the British had annexed Natal from the Boers in 1843, the British settler population in the colony began to rise rapidly. As a result, settler agriculture was stimulated in the area, with sugarcane becoming the colony's dominant crop. British farmers at the time were concerned that they would run low on cheap labour for their farms because the Zulus were considered an unreliable labour source. The Zulus were still relatively secure in their traditional homestead systems and could therefore afford to refuse to work on white-owned land. British farmers then decided to turn to the British government, petitioning for labour to be imported from India. This decision was stimulated by the indentured migration system which drew on 'black' indentured labour from the British colonies and which was set up after the British abolished slavery in 1833. In total, 1.3 million Indian indentured labourers were exported to Mauritius, Jamaica, British Guiana, Trinidad, St. Lucia, Granada and Natal from the middle of the nineteenth century to satisfy the colonies' demands for cheap labour (Vahed 1995:26). At the time colonial officials believed that Indian labourers, unlike Chinese labourers for example, were a "half-civilised race" and would therefore "present an attainable example to the kafirs [in Natal], who regarded the British as too much above them for emulation" (Ferguson-Davie 1977:5).

The first group of Indian indentured labourers reached Durban on 16 November 1860 by sea on the *Truro*. Between 1860 and 1911 152,641 Indian indentured labourers would arrive in Natal (Vahed 1995:28). These Indian immigrants were made up of several hundred castes and while most of them were from lower castes, some of them came from middle-to-higher level castes. They predominantly came from either Tamil Nadu and Andhra Pradesh in the south-east of India, or Bihar and Uttar Pradesh in the north-east. As Map 2 (over the page) indicates, Madras was the point of departure from the south and Calcutta from the north. As Goolam Vahed reiterates, the indentured Indians coming to Natal were a highly heterogeneous group with migrants from the south speaking Tamil and Telegu, and those from the north speaking different dialects of Hindi



Map 2: Main ports of embarkation, India (Vahed 1995:54)

(1995:28). However, despite their heterogeneity, once reaching Natal, the Indian indentured immigrants were homogenised and labeled inferior 'coolies' by the British colonials. Their caste differences were ignored and Indians from different castes were forced to work, eat and live in the same space. As one Indian testified in 1885, "Caste feeling has disappeared in Natal; this disappearance commences immediately the Indians get on board ship" (in Vahed 1995:32). Due to the anxiety experienced on board the ships which sometimes took up to three months to reach the colony, 'Jahaji Bhai' ('brotherhood of the boat') was achieved amongst the indentured Indians. This also fueled the breakdown of caste differences in Natal which transformed Indian immigrants into a tight-knit, homogenous diasporic group. One indentured Indian in Natal was

quoted saying, “I have taken off my caste and left it with the Port Officer” (in Desai & Vahed 2007:32). The extent to which Indian immigrants represented in the selected novels for this thesis put their castes aside as a means of survival in Natal will be explored in the next chapter.

Many indentured Indians came to Natal because they were promised better opportunities in the new land. Recruiters in India were paid to tell them of the great wealth waiting for them across the ocean. Due to the desperate circumstances of people in India at the time – the country was hard hit by famine – indenture seemed to many like the only option. Most indentured immigrants coming to Natal thought that after their contracts of indenture had expired, they would return to India. However, the myth of return quickly began to fade in the face of new realities. Once in Natal, the indentured labourers were to experience first hand what has been deemed “a new system of slavery” (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000:11). According to Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie, the conditions in which indentured Indians were forced to live and work were appalling and they were often victimised and exploited by their white employers. The situation in the colony was so bad that it had the second highest suicide rate of all the colonies receiving indentured labourers at the time (ibid). Despite such statistics, however, 58 percent of free Indians, those who had completed their contracts of indenture, chose to remain in the colony rather than to return to their homeland (Vahed 1995:37). This was largely due to the shame indentured Indians felt at not having accumulated wealth in the colony and thus not being able to provide for their families waiting for them in India. In a discussion of *The Lotus People* in the following chapter, the way in which this sense of shame affects the character Yahya will be explored. Furthermore, because indentured Indians were unable to retain their caste differences in the colony, they would be vulnerable to banishment on return to their homes. One Indian immigrant returning to India recorded that “[in Natal] I have eaten with different people and have broken my caste. My friends in India will not even eat with me, so I must come back” (in Meer 1969:12).

For the British colonials in Natal, they were surprised when indentured Indians chose to remain in the colony after their contracts had expired. As Ferguson-Davie has

highlighted, “the original plan was that the Indians would *all* go back to India as soon as they had served their time as indentured labourers” (1977:6, emphasis added). The contracts stipulated that the indentured labourers were to work on white farms for a minimum of five years. Once they had fulfilled their contracts, the Indians were encouraged to indenture themselves for another five years, after which they would be given free passage back to India. However, as already mentioned, many decided to remain as free Indians in the colony. An even greater surprise came in 1875 when a second wave of Indians unexpectedly began to arrive from India as passenger Indians. This group had paid their own way to the colony and had come to Natal freely in order to start up new business ventures. Ismet Nassin in *The Wedding* as well as Yahya Suleiman and Pravin Naran in *The Lotus People* make up part of this group of passenger Indians in the selected texts for this thesis. These Indian merchants, having also left India in search of better opportunities, recognised that in Natal there was a market for the specialised needs of their low-income Indian clientele and very soon they started dominating Indian trade in the colony. Unlike the darker-skinned, indentured Indians coming from the south, passenger Indians were lighter-skinned and came primarily from Gujarat on India’s west coast (see Map 2). Despite the fact that they were also a heterogeneous group, they too were homogenised, being mistakenly considered ‘Arab’ by the white colonials because of their pale complexion and Muslim beliefs. The British colonials believed that these so-called Arabs were in fact superior and more civilised than their darker-skinned counterparts. As Fatima Meer reiterates, “in the early years in the colony of Natal, Indians were divided among themselves into two broad social classes, on the basis of the nature of their immigration into the country – either as passengers or through indenture” (1969:61).

Most of the pioneer Indian merchants who came to Durban, as well as a fair number of free Indians, began to build Indian settlements in the Grey Street complex from as early as 1871. Although the area was originally occupied by whites, it was marshy and not conducive to the use of wagons. As a result, Indians were left to make use of it while whites secured the more pleasant area of the Berea for their exclusive use.

After 1893, when Natal had achieved self-government, exclusion of Indians in Durban increased drastically, for the new government “increasingly came to view town planning, public health, trade arrangements and other public issues in terms of racial and ethnic distinctions” (Vahed 1995:42). When by 1894, the Natal Indian population of 46,000 had exceeded the white population of 45,000, the whites became anxious to get rid



Figure 4: Grey Street in about 1900

of what they termed the ‘Asiatic Menace’ (Vahed 1995:42). The white inhabitants of Durban felt particularly threatened by the Indian merchants who were extremely successful in tapping into the commercial market in the city. In order to stifle their competitors, the state passed the Dealers Licences Act (1897), which enabled government officials to refuse Indians’ licence renewal applications in the city center. As a result, many of the Indian merchants who had established thriving businesses in the center of Durban’s commercial district in West Street in the early years of settlement were now restricted to the Grey Street area. It was from this point onwards that Grey Street was designated as an Indian business district. The Dealers Licences Act, among many others passed by the South African government in the years to follow, thus reveals the way in which the Indian diasporas were officially ‘othered’ and spatially segregated from whites in the country.

The indentured and passenger Indians who came to South Africa from the 1800s to the early 1900s can be considered to be what in Chapter One was described as the old Indian diasporas. Like most diasporas around the world, the old Indian diasporas in South Africa were never accepted as being a part of the national landscape and thus always experienced a sense of non-belonging in the new country. Even though by 1911 44 percent of the Indian population in the country was South African born, they were still refused their right to South African citizenship (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000:13). According to D.F. Malan, the Minister of the Interior in 1925, “The Indian, as a race in this country, is an alien element in the population” (in Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000:15). Right up until

1975, the white government was deeply committed to the repatriation of Indians, providing them with free passage to India and even giving them cash bonuses on their return. In 1895, the Indian Immigration Law was passed which stipulated that all non-indentured Indians had to pay an annual tax of three pounds. As Vahed explains, the whites were pleased with this law as it either forced Indian immigrants to re-indenture or return to India. After 1913, indentured immigration to Natal was strictly prohibited and it has been recorded that between 1914 and 1940, approximately 39,000 Indians returned to India, most of them surrendering their domicile rights forever (Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000:17). As Mahatma Ghandi pointed out in response to Indians being racially discriminated against:

No matter who they are [...] the Indian is bitterly hated. The man in the street hates him, spits upon him, and often pushes him off the footpath. The Press almost unanimously refuses to call the Indian by his proper name. He is 'Ramsamy', he is 'Mr Sammy', he is 'Mr Coolie', he is 'the Black Man'.

(in Vahed 1995:53)

The extent to which the old Indian diasporas in the selected texts for this thesis are represented as feeling a perpetual sense of non-belonging in South Africa will be discussed in the next chapter.

It must be remembered that the old Indian diasporas who stayed in Durban did not remain passive victims of the laws that discriminated against them. Rather, they became active agents in finding innovative ways to resist and adapt to them. Grey Street in particular was transformed by the Indian diasporas into a mini-India as a means to create a sense of home in the midst of racial and cultural exclusion. The Grey Street complex which was initially intended as a heterotopia of exclusion, to use Foucault's term mentioned in Chapter One, was transformed by its Indian inhabitants into what I would like to call a heterotopia of inclusion. Through the building of residences, schools, religious and cultural centers in the area, the once alienating, abstract space of the Grey Street complex became for the Indian diasporas an "hospitable [...] *habitus*" (Desai & Vahed 2007:413), a meaningful and habitable place as defined in Bourdieu's term discussed in Chapter One. In Dr Kesevaloo Goonam's autobiography, *Coolie Doctor*, she

expresses how Grey Street was the “main artery of [her] childhood” (1992:13). This statement is emblematic of the fact that Grey Street became the lifeblood of its Indian inhabitants, a place where they felt safe, secure and at home. Indian architecture in Grey Street is the most visible sign that the old Indian diasporas were attempting to recreate a sense of India in the colonial city. Like those in India, the Indian stores in Grey Street were built on the ground floor with residences built on the floor above and at the entrance to each shop were gables on which the names of the Indian families who owned them were engraved. The old Indian diasporas also determinedly built religious sites similar to those in India in the middle of Durban. This can be seen in Grey Street, where the Juma Masjid Mosque, the first mosque built in Natal in 1881, stands as the center of Muslim worship and a symbol of Indian community identity (Vahed 1995:182). Thus it was through Indian architecture that the old Indian diasporas ensured that their presence was carved into Durban’s colonial urban landscape.



Figure 5: The Juma Masjid Mosque

Indian family values, religious practices and the vernacular in the Grey Street complex also enabled the formation of a tight-knit, homogenous Indian community with a strong sense of ‘Indianness’ in the city. However, as Desai and Vahed acknowledge, the institutions and practices that were put in place in the colony were not mere replicas of those in India but rather were innovative adaptations that would enable the survival of diasporic groups in the urban milieu. In other words, “traditions ‘imagined’ in India were ‘reimagined’ in the new setting” (Desai & Vahed 2007:192) to suit the Indian diasporas’ current circumstances. For example, as mentioned earlier, the caste system which divided Indians in India was quickly replaced with unifying fictions of Indian solidarity in Natal. What emerged in the city of Durban was the idea of *kutum*, an “intimate *collective conscience* which socializes and controls [...], binds and integrates members into a closely watched system of social interaction” (Meer 1969:66). This system ensured that even in urban spaces such as Grey Street where one would expect to experience the

anonymity of the *flâneur* discussed in Chapter One, members could not isolate themselves from the larger Indian community. The system of *kutum* was therefore crucial in the maintenance of a strong familial base that was necessary in giving Indians a sense of collective identity and belonging. Chapter Three will look at the ways in which Grey Street is constructed in Indian fiction as a place of cultural translation in which Indian traditions and practices undergo revival and adaptation.

During the 1940s the Grey Street complex became an intensely political space for Indian resistance against racial discrimination. In her autobiography, Goonam highlights that Nichol Square, a square in the middle of Grey Street which was renamed Red Square during the resistance, was the center of Indian



Figure 6: Mass meeting at Red Square, Durban 1940s

politics in the apartheid years. After the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Bill was passed in 1946, an act which forcibly removed Indians from living in white-designated areas in and around the city, Indians took part in a passive resistance campaign. The mass rallies associated with the campaign, as well as the farewell receptions that were held before Indians went out to resist the racist law, took place primarily in Grey Street. Maria van Diepen in *The National Question in South Africa*, proclaims that during this period, “the Indian people [...] produced some of the giants of our revolutionary movement, the most outstanding being the late Dr Yusuf Dadoo” (1988:94). Dr Dadoo and his colleague Dr G.M. Naiker were the heads of the National Indian Congress (NIC) at the time and in 1947 pioneered a pledge of joint collaboration with the African National Congress (ANC) in the struggle against apartheid. The ‘Doctors Pact’, as it was commonly referred to, was an attempt to encourage Indians to look beyond the narrow dialogue of

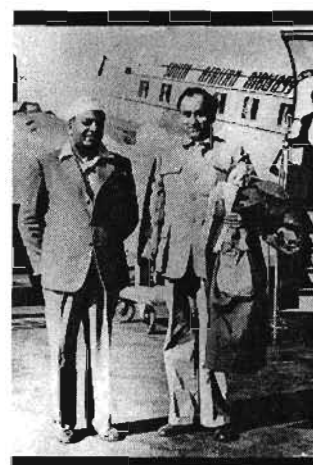


Figure 7: Dr G.M. Naicker (left) and Dr Yusuf Dadoo (right) in 1947

'Indianness' which had been encouraged by the NIC from its inception in 1894 and to join forces with Africans in the resistance struggle. Grey Street saw the culmination of this pact in 1948 when Africans and Indians came together in the streets to take part in the Defiance Campaign, a campaign aimed at resisting all of apartheid's unjust racist laws. As a result Nichol Square was transformed into a multi-racial platform for anti-apartheid politics. Further comment on the significance of this will be made in Chapter Three when I look at the extent to which Indian writers have constructed Grey Street in their fiction as a distinctly political place.

However, the vision of multi-racialism in the Grey Street complex was shattered when in 1949, riots broke out in the area between the Indians and Africans. Up to this point, tensions between the two groups had been rising as Africans believed that the Indian people were exploiting them and were using up the limited resources available to them in the city. When on 13 January 1949 a rumour spread amongst the African community that an Indian shop assistant had assaulted an African youth, a major riot was ignited. A large crowd of Africans had entered the Grey Street complex and began attacking Indians all over the city for three days. When the riots finally came to an end, 142 people had been killed and over 1,000 injured (Vahed 1995:258). A total of 268 homes belonging to Indians in the area were looted and burnt down and by 17 January 1949, over 44,700 Indians had to be housed in refugee camps (ibid). This incident was etched into the memories of the Indian inhabitants of the Grey Street complex and into the urban landscape. To use Benjamin's idea of a city of traces referred to in the preceding chapter, the events of the 1949 riots would leave traces in the Casbah that would never be able to be erased. This will be drawn on in Chapter Three when I look at how the incidents of the Durban riots live on in the collective memory of Grey Street's Indian inhabitants who are represented in *The Lotus People*.

The Durban riots revealed that the Grey Street complex was, and perhaps still is, a cultural contact zone, a term raised in Chapter One of this thesis. During apartheid specifically, it became a highly contested space between Africans and Indians, as already shown, as well as between whites and Indians. This is evident in the passing of the

country's notorious Group Areas Act in 1950, an act which extended the apartheid's separatist principles by giving the government even more power to impose racial segregation. One stipulation of the act was that the Grey Street complex was to be proclaimed a purely Indian *business* district which meant that all Indian residents in the area had to be removed. The aim behind this was to transform the city of Durban into a whites-only city and that could not be achieved with 'non-whites' living there. Between 1950 and 1978 140,000 Indians were forcibly removed in Durban from their original homes to new residential areas (Vahed 1995:288). Goonam recalls the passing of this act in her autobiography, explaining that for the Indian people of Grey Street, the act meant that they "were being robbed of their birthright" (1991:70). The once tight-knit Indian community in the city center was being broken down with whole families leaving the area to settle in Indian townships like Chatsworth and Phoenix. As was reported at the time, "settled communities [...] have been uprooted from their hearths, homes, temples, churches, mosques and cultural institutions, and forced into dormitories and sleeping cubicles without the right or the opportunity to choose neighbourhoods and neighbours" (Bhana & Pachai 1984:217). Although the buildings were still left standing in Grey Street and Indian businesses continued to operate there, the trauma of being uprooted from their homes resembled that experienced by the residents who were forcibly removed from places like Sophiatown in the 1950s and District Six in the 1960s. As Badsha argues, as a result of the uncertainty created by the Group Areas Act, property owners had little incentive to maintain their properties in the Casbah for they could be made to leave at any time. This was the turning point for the Grey Street complex as it was slowly to become ghettoised, a process which, for the Indian people would be painfully remembered. The extent to which Grey Street is constructed as a cultural contact zone in the selected texts for this thesis will be taken up in the proceeding chapter when I look at how the authors of the novels under investigation record the effects of the Group Areas Act.

In 1961 Indians were finally granted the status of permanent residents in South Africa and from the mid-1960s they were given limited political representation in a political council that the government set up on their behalf. However, despite feelings of achievement felt by most in the Indian community, some felt that it was one of the

government's many tactics used to further entrench the divide between Indians and Africans. As a result, a radical group of Indian activists emerged from the NIC who adopted a 'black' identity in place of the 'Indian' one reinforced by the name National Indian Congress. This group was part of the Black Consciousness Movement and as Dhupelia-Mesthrie records, at a public meeting held by the NIC, many Indian students held up banners proclaiming, "'Black Solidarity Yes!', 'Black Unity Now', 'Think Black Not Indian'" (2000:25). Many of these Indian radicals joined Umkhonto weSizwe (MK), the ANC-created military wing aimed at fighting in the anti-apartheid struggle by engaging in acts of sabotage. Many of the MK meetings were held 'underground' as the ANC had been banned in 1960 and all ANC-related activity was prohibited. Many of these underground meetings, which included people such as Dr Goonam and Dr Dadoo, were held in buildings in the Grey Street complex. Phyllis Naidoo, in her book *Footprints in Grey Street*, records many of the meetings that took place in the Casbah without the police finding out, some of which were even held in her flat in Cross Street. Thus, even though the apartheid government attempted to break down the tight-knit nature of the Grey Street complex through the Group Areas Act, it still persisted as a place of security for the Indian people of Durban. Drawing on de Certeau's observations highlighted in Chapter One, it can be said that, through an intimate knowledge of the place and its different routes and secluded spaces, Grey Street's Indian dwellers could make use of the area in ways that eluded the apartheid government's panoptic surveillance. This will be explored further in the next chapter when I look at the way in which Grey Street is constructed in the selected novels as a place that is utilised in ways that undermine the panoptic gaze of city planners.

Acts of sabotage and resistance continued to persist until apartheid finally came to an end in 1994. The ANC came to power in that year and took on the post-apartheid project of dismantling apartheid's separatist infrastructure. By 'deracialising' the city, Grey Street in the post-apartheid era is but a shadow of its former self. Although the area still retains its Indian influence, it is now made up of a variety of different race groups and nationalities with entrepreneurship being characterised by large numbers of Congolese, Nigerians, Kenyans and Zimbabweans who use the street corners as their

trading ground. As Homi Bhabha points out, “it is these wandering peoples who are themselves the marks of a shifting boundary that alienates the frontiers of the nation [and who] now circulate in another narrative of entry-permits and passports and work-permits that at once preserve and proliferate, bind and breach the human rights of the nation” (1994:164). In other words, although space and place were grossly over-determined during apartheid, the boundaries that racial segregation created ensured the certainty, security and safety of the Indian people in Grey Street. Today however, this certainty has been overturned by fluid boundaries, multi-racial interactions and migratory movements in and out of the city. Many Indians have since moved out of the Casbah as they believe it has become crime-ridden and dirty, “an area overrun with desperation” (Badsha 2001:22).

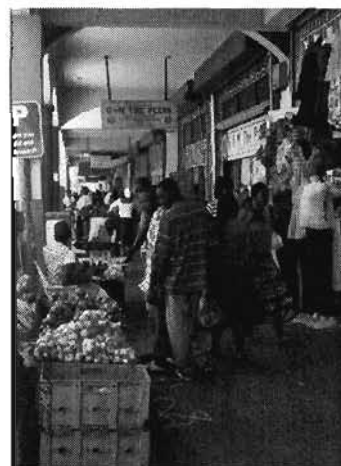


Figure 8: African street trading in the Grey Street complex today

The physical degradation of Grey Street has been accompanied by what many Indians believe to be the cultural degradation of their people’s traditional way of life. For example, when Indian immigrants of the old diaspora first settled in the city, they were determined to retain the vernacular as it was seen as a vital part of Indian culture and identity. At a conference by Durban’s Indians in 1943, it was emphasised that:

Language is an integral part of patriotism and nationalism demands proficiency in the mother tongue ... There are certain traits, customs, traditions, peculiar to a nation, that can only be understood and appreciated by those versed in their mother tongue. Anyone unversed in it loses his identity.

(in Vahed 1995:204)

In *Coolie Doctor*, Goonam recalls how, as a child, her and her friends had to attend Tamil school twice a day to ensure that the vernacular was maintained. Until 1960 the vernacular remained the language of the home for most Indians (Vahed 1995:211). However, statistics show that after this point, largely because of a rapid expansion in education, English replaced the vernacular and by 1990, 97.5 percent of Indians in the country regarded English as their first language (ibid). Due to Indians of different

language groups mixing with each other, as well as with Zulu, English and Afrikaans speakers in the urban milieu, a distinctly South African Indian English (SAIE) emerged as the main language of communication between Indians.³ Although this process reveals the fact that culture is dynamic and forever changing, many Indians today – that is the new Indian diasporas referred to in Chapter One – are experiencing nostalgia for an older, richer Indian culture. With reference to the contemporary Islamic community, Vahed recognises that “[w]hile they have access to a wide range of identities in the New South Africa most [Muslims] are turning nostalgically to an invented past of perfect Islamic sociality” (2000:48). The extent to which the characters in the selected texts for this thesis turn nostalgically to an older, more culturally rich and community-oriented Grey Street will be discussed in the chapter to follow.

Like their characters, the authors of the selected novels in this thesis also experience nostalgia for a past time. Both Imraan Coovadia and Aziz Hassim make up part of the new Indian diasporas in South Africa although the latter is from an older generation. Coovadia was born in Durban in 1970 and lived there for almost eighteen years. While he never lived in Grey Street he knew the area well as his uncle owned a shoe shop there and he would “sometimes hang around in the back” (Mamet 2007, email correspondence). For Coovadia, “it was our town” and as he admits “there’s a kind of idealisation in retrospect” (ibid). Unlike Coovadia who was still young during the height of apartheid and thus would not have been directly involved in the politics of the time, Hassim experienced the anti-apartheid struggle first-hand. Hassim was born in 1935 and grew up living in Queen Street, a major road leading off Grey Street. He spent most of his formative years there and remembers hearing the speeches held in the area by political activists such as Dr Kesavaloo Goonam, Fatima Meer and Dr Yusuf Dadoo. Despite the fact that Hassim now lives in another part of the city, he still considers the Casbah to be his home. As he proclaims,

³ See the work of Rajendra Mesthrie on this topic: *The Study of New Varieties of English* (1999) and *South African Writings in English* (2002).

Grey Street will always be home. I consider myself a product of its ethos. My sense of identity is shrouded in the experiences I was subjected to during my developmental period. I can't help feeling that it was the place that determined my fate.

(Mamet 2007, email correspondence)

For Hassim, the 1940s and 1950s in Grey Street encapsulate a romantic era in spite of apartheid or even perhaps because of it. The extent to which the authors' idealisation of a Grey Street of old influences their fictional constructions of Grey Street in their novels will be explored in Chapter Three. The next chapter will turn to a close examination of the two novels selected, together with a consideration of related fictional works, in the light of the theoretical and historical contexts established in the previous two chapters.

Chapter Three

Fictional Constructions of Grey Street

In this chapter I will be analysing Imraan Coovadia's *The Wedding* (2001) and Aziz Hassim's *The Lotus People* (2002) in order to explore the different ways in which South African Indian writers have constructed the Grey Street complex in fiction. Although other South African Indian writers have represented Grey Street in their works, including Kesevaloo Goonam in *Coolie Doctor* (1991), Phyllis Naidoo in *Footprints in Grey Street* (2002), Mariam Akabor in *Flat 9* (2006) and Ravi Govender in *Down Memory Lane* (2006), the two novels that I have selected respond most fully to the theories I raise in Chapter One. However, that is not to say that the other texts will not be useful in this analysis. I will be referring to them in the course of this chapter in relation to the selected texts in order to get a fuller picture of the South African Indian perspective of Grey Street.

Although both *The Wedding* and *The Lotus People* were written in the new millennium, in the post-apartheid/postmodern era, they are equally concerned with recording the Indian experience in Durban's colonial past. Although this will be discussed in more detail later on, what is important to recognise here is that, through their fiction, they are taking part in a vital postcolonial endeavour to re-write colonial history. As Ashwin Desai and Goolam Vahed highlight, the Indian perspective of South African history is lacking in the face of the overwhelming voice of colonial and apartheid ruling classes (2007:12). This is evident in Yvonne Miller's book, *Dear Old Durban* (1985), in which she – a white South African – details the historical experiences of Durban's inhabitants in the different parts of the city. While her descriptions of the white-occupied areas of the city are thoroughly documented, when Miller goes on to describe Grey Street she admits, "I have said nothing about the very interesting Indian shops in Grey Street and the fascinating Indian Market because I knew nothing about them" (1985:23). It is this ignorance regarding the Indian areas of the city which has resulted largely in the Indian perspective being sidelined in white, apartheid literature. In Barbara Trapido's novel *Frankie and Stankie* (2003) for example, a narrative about a white girl's

experience in Durban during the apartheid years, Grey Street is described fleetingly and from afar; it is depicted merely as a place one passes through:

The flash off-duty clothes that blacks wear can be bought on tick in the Indian-owned emporiums like Moosa's at the upper end of downtown Durban where the legless beggars hang out [...] to get to the white department stores, or to the beach, you have to pass through this commercial area, where Indians ply their trade from pretty, rickety old buildings with New Orleans-style balconies and shady covered walks.

(2003:82)

This representation of Grey Street is emblematic of the white experience of the Indian part of the city during apartheid, one that saw the Casbah as a marginal and insignificant, though exotic, space. This chapter will explore the extent to which the selected Indian writers for this thesis have challenged the dominant, white spatial perspective of the city, re-centering the borderlands and thus providing an alternative way of reading and writing the Grey Street complex.

Imraan Coovadia's *The Wedding*

The Wedding has been called a "novelised memoir" (Govinden 2004:158) as it takes the form of an autobiography narrated by a grandson about his grandparents, Ismet Nassin and Khateja Haveri. The novel begins in the early decades of the twentieth century and recounts the circumstances surrounding the wedding of the grandparents. Ismet, a clerk from Bombay, sees Khateja for the first time from a train window and falls in love with her immediately. After a deal is made with her father, Ismet is given permission to marry Khateja. Khateja on the other hand, being an aggressively independent woman, is insulted by being sold into marriage and promises to make Ismet's life a misery. The rest of the narrative focuses on the couple's tumultuous marriage which ultimately leads Ismet to decide that he and his wife should move to South Africa where they can start afresh. As described in Chapter Two, like many other passenger Indians coming to South Africa at the time, Ismet believes that better opportunities await them in the new land. Once they arrive at the port of Durban,



Figure 9: Imraan Coovadia

they manage to find an abode in the Grey Street complex. In Grey Street the couple is faced with unexpected challenges that force them to adapt to the new environment. *The Wedding* thus foregrounds the experience of the old Indian diasporas in South Africa, raising questions about the meaning of home, Indian diasporic identity, collective remembering, and nostalgia, all of which are pertinent to the theoretical debates raised in this thesis so far.

The autobiographical element in *The Wedding* has been said to be at the heart of postcolonial/post-apartheid writing in South Africa (Govinden forthcoming:7). As Jacobs explains in the light of the changing political situation in South Africa in 1994,

The country is at present engaged in a process of self-narration – a national recollection of those blanked-out areas of its identity. The current proliferation of South African life stories may be seen as part of the autobiographical impulse of an entire nation finally bringing its past into proper perspective.

(in Govinden forthcoming:7)

Conventional historical accounts of Indians in South Africa have traditionally reduced the Indian people coming to South Africa to numbers. However, in *The Wedding*, Coovadia breaks away from recounting the conventional master narrative of South African history by deliberately foregrounding the couple's personal life story and at the same time relegating large historical and political events to the margins of the narrative. As the narrator points out, despite the fact that "[a]round these star-spangled anti-lovers, South Africa started to burn" politically, they continued to exist "in a self-contained bubble, sealed off from their neighbours, from India, and from historical time" (Coovadia 2001:221). This is evident in Khateja who, despite enjoying reading the newspaper on a daily basis, does not pay any attention to the political issues raised in them. As the narrator says, Khateja "had too visceral a grasp on humanity to comprehend politics. What was in front of one's eyes and stepping on one's toes and sticking its fingers in one's nose, was real injustice" (223). Even for Ismet "[politics] never really intruded on his consciousness, which was otherwise occupied" (162). By decentering hegemonic history and enlarging the individual story in his work, Coovadia is successful in the postcolonial act of turning numbers back into people. In other words, Coovadia uses the

autobiographical mode to re-write the previously marginalised back into the history from which they were once erased. Drawing from Chapter One, it can therefore be said that by recasting the historical events in the story in human scale, Coovadia undermines the Foucauldian panoptic view of spatial history, taking on instead a de Certeau-like perspective that focuses on the subjective experience of everyday life.

South Africa as Space and Place in *The Wedding*

At first, when Ismet introduces to Khateja the idea of moving to South Africa, neither of them have a precise sense of the place. For both of them it is a far away and indeterminate place for as Khateja exclaims, “South Africa, South Africa! What is this south South Africa? [...] What is this South Africa thing you’ve gone and got into it? Where is it being anyway, just out of interest?” (121). Ismet’s reply to this question also reveals a hazy understanding of the country’s location: “Below the Sahara desert. You know” (ibid). To draw on the definitions of space and place in Chapter One, because the couple does not have a true sense of South Africa’s reality as a specific place, it remains for them an abstract space to which they can attach imaginary meanings. For Ismet therefore, South Africa seems to provide him with a promise of a better future and a way of making his wife love him. As he imagines, “That aboriginal forged Africa would throw them ever more tightly into each other’s arms” (120). In his desperation to see Khateja change her ways, he adopts the belief that the wildness of Africa will force her into dependence:

There would be an untamed volcano, a chop-licking leopard circling around in the evening time, the poisoned darts of the bone-nosed natives whistling through the air to make sure they would turn always to the other for reassurance. Cooing and mooning, adoring inaugural twosome.

(ibid)

It has been argued that “[Coovadia’s] amusingly ironic tone here alludes to the kind of [colonial] stereotypes of Africa that were embraced” by the colonised (Govinden forthcoming:21). This is made apparent when the narrator explains that “Africa spread out in front of [Ismet]” (Coovadia 2001:136), an image often adopted by colonialists who

saw Africa as a virgin territory waiting to be possessed.¹ Both Khateja and Ismet see Africa as a *terra nullius*, an unpopulated primitive landscape: “Still no shacks, no jerry-built harbours, no canoes, no people – just the clear light and the plants and the birds and the water and the land [...] nobody living there, not natural. Primitive you know” (135). Ismet is convinced that, unlike India, “[w]herever one climbed off at a platform in history-free Africa, one wouldn’t expect to stumble immediately upon a village” (119). Africa appears here in sharp contrast to India; it is seen as “a clean table of a continent: its long plain wasn’t cut up by stone walls, wasn’t swarming with a dozen peoples [...] Yes, unlike India, Africa had been spared the nonstop penny-pinching of the spirit” (ibid). This idea of a “history-free” Africa appeals to Ismet precisely because it would present itself to him as a fresh parchment on which he could inscribe a new life for himself and his wife. In relation to Chapter One where I discussed the ways in which colonialists attempted to transform the landscape of the colonies from an unknown, seemingly blank space into a recognisable and colonial-inscribed place, it can be seen that Coovadia similarly, through his fiction, is “highlighting the way Africa is represented, the manner in which its inhabitants are dehumanised, [and] its history obliterated” by colonial discourse (Govinden 2004:163).

When the couple finally reaches Durban however, their expectations are thwarted when they see that “there are railways heavy with locomotive and track, there are tall buildings, even a minaret [...] and] there is a city tabled out on the hills” (Coovadia 2001:137). As the narrator exclaims, on arrival, “Khateja looked with greedy, particular eyes [...]. Red stone smokestacks, a rubber factory, a street of warehouses, a cement mixer on the pavement. Beachfront hotels. Bottle palms in lines, black iron benches” (143). However, at first there is too much for the couple to take in and the city is yet to become familiar to them. As discussed in Chapter One, places are rendered knowable through mapping, and for the couple in the novel, in order to make sense of their whereabouts, Ismet takes out a “pencil-sketch map” (ibid) of the area and tries to recall all the landmarks and highlights of the city about which he has heard. What is interesting to note is that the map leads them straight to the Grey Street complex where they find an

¹ See Henry Rider Haggard’s *King Solomon’s Mines* (1885) as an example of this trope.

abode “in a block of flats on Queen Street, not far from the central business district, the Grey Street mosque, the market” (144). Ismet is given the map before his voyage by an Indian friend of his who had worked in Durban for a time and who thus knew where Indian people could go to find a sense of ‘home’ in the foreign city. This Indian-occupied part of the city is represented in the novel as a place that, unlike the rest of the unfamiliar city, is familiar and welcoming. This place resembles that of India:

There was a ground-floor tearoom, the stairways were cement blocks painted red, flaking red halls with a knee-high gray band, washing line strung up on chicken wire, black-eyed children with spades and buckets and dripping noses, the smell of cooking vegetables and evaporated butter, dimpled copper pots left out to dry by the screen doors, large circular women with red dots on their forehead.

(ibid)

Although not made explicit in the text, the spatial arrangement of these individuals in an exclusively Indian area of the city supports Bourdieu’s idea of the *habitus* discussed in Chapter One, that is the process which guides people of a similar social status to situate themselves together spatially. Primarily due to the racist colonial forces operating in South Africa at the time of the couple’s arrival, the *habitus* was based largely on racial and cultural differences. This, therefore, provides an explanation for how Ismet and Khateja find themselves being directed to the Indian-occupied Grey Street complex.

It is within this *habitus* that the unknown, indeterminate space of Durban quickly becomes a tangible and familiar place. Ismet walks the streets of the Grey Street complex on a daily basis, orientating himself and taking in the sights and sounds of the place just like Benjamin’s *flaneur* figure discussed in Chapter One. As the narrator describes, “[h]e wandered over to Queen Street, on the Field Street corner where there were newspaper printing presses, a bottle store with crates of Castle Lager in the window, an off-track tote [...] Then he stood on the street corner, lit a cigarette, and drank from the bottle” (161). However, unlike the *flaneur* who remains anonymous in the city and who never comes to see the city as his home, the opposite is true for Ismet. Ismet finds new routes and roots in the city. For example, on Friday mornings he would “[take] his *namaaz* mat under his arm and set off for the Grey Street mosque [...]. He went straight past the jewelry stores

with necklaces and Elgin and Madix watches on display in red velvet boxes, the *halaal* butchers selling cold meats and sausages” (176). Through his routine movements in the Grey Street complex, Ismet is able to turn the abstract space of the city into a lived-in and meaningful place to the extent that soon enough “he was starting to feel perfectly at home” (ibid). This feeling of homeliness, which the *flaneur* never experiences in the modern city, is further encouraged by the fact that the Grey Street complex is transformed by Indians into a tight-knit neighbourhood. Although this will be discussed in more detail later on, it is important to note that because Ismet and Khateja are immediately welcomed as the community’s “new neighbours” (145), the sense of alienation in the city that the *flaneur* would feel is instantly extinguished.

It is in the detailed descriptions of Ismet’s daily journeys through the streets, and his almost banal encounters with shopkeepers and vendors, that Coovadia is adopting the de Certeau-like stance discussed earlier. The racist urban planning of the city is dismissed in the novel and what is given precedence is the pedestrian, the everyday user of the streets, who is ultimately the one who, in Raban’s terms referred to in Chapter One, gives shape and meaning to the city. Although Grey Street was designated as a space to house Indians and keep them bound to one area in the city, Ismet experiences the city as fluid. He moulds the city to suit his needs and this is seen particularly when he moves around the city to sell his broomsticks. Not only does he sell his goods in the Grey Street area but he finds ways of infiltrating the white shops in Smith and West Streets as well. It is thus evident in the novel that the walkers of the city streets are able to undermine panoptic socio-spatial ordering of the city.

Diasporic Culture in Grey Street

In *The Wedding*, Coovadia constructs Grey Street as a characteristically diasporic place. His focus in the novel is almost exclusively on the old Indian diasporas in the Grey Street complex, a term coined by Mishra and discussed in the preceding chapters. Like most passenger Indians leaving India, Ismet and Khateja see themselves as temporary sojourners in the new land, for as the narrator highlights, “Ismet never exactly planned on leaving India forever and all eternity. He still thought of himself and his wife as tourists

on an extended pilgrimage” (189). For this reason there is no ceremony or “big palaver” made on their departure but rather “they simply vanished [...] just like that” not realising that that moment symbolised “the final end [...] of [...] twenty full centuries of rhetoric and maneuvering” (129). When they initially settle in the Grey Street complex, Ismet ensures that the lines of communication between him and his mother in India are kept open so that he does not lose touch with the goings-on in the homeland. His plan in the new country is to do what he went there to do, that is to make money, and that until then he and his wife “should keep to themselves, pacifically, and then they would return *home*” (189, emphasis added). This statement reveals that at first, because India is still considered their ‘home’, Grey Street is thought of merely as a space of temporary residence for the old Indian diasporas, a kind of ‘not-home’. Thinking of Grey Street in this way would mean that no unnecessary complications or ties with South Africa would be formed.

However, as in most cases, this myth of return to India begins to fade for the couple as, over the years, “[t]here were fewer letters back and forth to Bombay”, an act that was essential for “joining together countries ten thousand miles apart” (265). Their material possessions brought from India to remind them of home also start degrading with age, a symbol of the ties with their homeland slowly breaking. For example,

The silk goods, those that accompanied them on that long ago ship sealed in a green trunk, were getting to be worn and thin, [...] The tea chest popped its copper bindings. The curtain from her father’s house had long since been taken out of the window and folded away in a cupboard, a poor slip of a thing.

(266)

As the grandson admits, such a loss meant that “[his] grandparents got mentally denationalised” (265) for as he elaborates, “if something’s been muscled out of the future, it’s only a matter of time before it loses its grip on the past” (ibid). The couple eventually stops thinking of a return to India as they no longer feel that they belong there. Instead they accept South Africa in general, and the Grey Street complex in particular, as their new home.

It must be remembered that two opposing forces were at work in the new land. As mentioned in Chapter Two, while the old Indian diasporas were feeling increasingly alienated from returning to India, they were also trying to maintain continuities with the homeland through cultural and religious acts. On the couple's arrival in Durban it becomes clear that since "Durban housed the largest number of Indians in a single place outside India, it was, excluding the subcontinent, the most rhetorical city in the world" (143). This statement functions to undermine the popular colonial belief that nations are bound to separate locales for as is revealed in the novel, "India is a portable country, to some extent, which moves as people do, accommodating itself freely to new environments" (157). In this new landscape Ismet and Khateja establish continuity with the homeland in numerous ways. Firstly, tokens and relics of their lives lived in India are transported and 'transplanted' in the new land to give them a sense of security and homeliness:

India, multifold, many-fingered, articulated, cloth-covered India issued from their luggage: a Koran in a soft cream binding to put on the bookshelf that Pravina brought from down, a red-and-white-checked settee cover, the walking stick that once belonged to Ismet's father.

(148)

Religion is also translated into the new country: "Once things were a little clear Ismet took his *namaaz* mat from the bottom of his trunk and rolled it out proudly for them all to see [...] Now he could pray in a proper and respectful manner in this new land" (ibid). Furthermore, in the novel Indian cuisine is seen as an important means of keeping Indian immigrants far from home connected to their culture. Ismet, for example, thinks he can re-live India in South Africa if Khateja can be encouraged to cook him traditional Indian meals. "Ismet saw suppers, Sunday dinners, snacks on the weekend-time, curries, *biryanis*, *bhajias*, *pathas*, and *pooris* as the first essential step" to making Durban more homely (157-8). When Ismet finds, on the corner of Grey and Bond Streets, a man selling *goolab jamus*, a delicious Indian sweet, he is delighted and believes "it was a miracle that you could live here as you would in India" (189). In other words, in *The Wedding*, Coovadia uncovers the ways in which the old Indian diasporas transformed Grey Street

into a mini-India, to use Mishra's term referred to in Chapter One, an act which gave them a sense of being home away from home.

The mini-India constructed in *The Wedding* is shown not only as an active undertaking by Indian diasporas wanting to preserve their Indian identity but is also shown to be the outcome of an internalisation of the racist government's nationalist ideology that homogenised Indian immigrants in South Africa. During a job interview with his white employer, Ismet is shocked at how he is immediately "lumped directly into the Indian masses" (151) when the white man says to him, "I like Indians. As far as I'm concerned they're the best damned people in the whole damned country" (ibid). This statement is loaded as it exposes the colonial notion that Indians make up an homogenous 'national' group. Coovadia aims to highlight this point through his narrator who humorously declares, "and thanks to its piebald, multi-striped composition, the municipality of Durban inculcated in the mind of the expatriate Mohandas Ghandi, who was currently residing there, the outrageous conviction that each disparate subcontinental belonged to the same nationality – and so, in a sense, Durban created the nation-state of India" (143). As a result, in the course of the novel, the characters begin to internalise this view, continuing to see themselves as an extension of India, rather than of the new land they have settled in. As Govinden reiterates, 'nationalising' different races in colonial South Africa led to the development of the ethno-nationalist thinking that began to determine and lay the foundation for the construction of a diasporic culture. Through the self-orientalising which Indian immigrants colluded in, Grey Street became thought of more as being part of the Indian sub-continent than a South African one (Govinden 2004:164).

In *The Wedding* Coovadia constructs Grey Street as a cultural contact zone, to adopt Pratt's term discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. It must be remembered that because Durban had a population that was, according to the narrator in the novel, "one-third black, one-third white, and one-third Indian", cultures were bound to clash, mix, and thus undergo change in this space (Coovadia 2001:142). Ismet's disgust at his white employer for having "no conception of the subtleties in the world" (151), is further

exacerbated when he is given what he considers ridiculous advice from his landlord, Vikram:

So please Ismet, one word of advice that I can give for you. In this country you must not come with stories if you are this Bombay-Indian or that one Tamil, one what-what Gujarati-Indian [...] No, my friend, what is essential is we must stand together united as one.

(150)

As explored in Chapter Two, this statement reveals that Vikram, along with many other Indian diasporas who had been in the new land for some time, had learned to put aside his caste difference and adopt the nationalist myth of a common ancestry imposed by colonial ideology. However, rather than being passively absorbed, the Indian immigrants in *The Wedding* use this 'unifying fiction' to their advantage. In the face of isolation and marginalisation imposed by South Africa's colonial government, a growing solidarity among Indian diasporas would ensure their survival. Vikram understands this, telling Ismet that "if we stick together as Indians, then the sky is the limit [...] We must be together as Indians. The blacks and whites do not have the time of day for us" (188). During this period Durban was, to use Foucault's term raised in Chapter One, a heterotopia of exclusion, marginalising non-whites to the outskirts of the city (though ironically Grey Street was fairly centrally situated in the city). However, within this space Indians were no longer excluded on the basis of their skin colour but in fact experienced a sense of belonging and unity; Grey Street thus became what could be deemed a heterotopia of inclusion for Indian diasporas and is constructed as such in *The Wedding*. In his novel, Coovadia shows how the old Indian diasporas of Grey Street became inward-looking, representing them as being what Mishra has termed diasporas of exclusivism. In opposition to the colonial policies which constantly aimed to destroy 'Indianness', the characters in the novel focus on creating a rich, cultural community. At Ismet's second wedding for example, he announces to the congregation that he has chosen a traditional Indian band to play that day in order to keep Indian tradition in South Africa alive: "it is the little I can contribute to keep our Indian culture alive for all of us. Our Indian culture, that is what really counts at the end of the day" (273). Even though Ismet is aware that the only India that really exists is one of "a million squabbling

fiefdoms and hostile tribes” (189), he too learns to forget his caste difference, embracing a broader, constructed, sense of ‘Indianness’ as a political means of asserting Indian identity in the land of his adoption. Grey Street therefore can be seen in the novel as a dynamic environment in which cultural identities are constantly made and re-made to suit new circumstances.

However, the way in which the old Indian diasporas experienced the city was varied and Coovadia attempts to capture this in his novel. Ismet, as mentioned above, quickly adapts to the new environment, taking on his new Indian diasporic identity with relative ease. This can be seen mainly in his business ventures through which he builds close relationships with his diverse Indian clientele in the Grey Street complex and uses the Indian area to his full advantage. On his days off work for example, “Ismet was to be found on Bond Street sharing a tube of mint humbugs with school children, [...] handing around a sampler of guavas to shopkeepers in Salisbury Arcade [...]. Then he would produce his broomsticks and wheedle a good price out of them” (202). He does not feel constrained in this designated Indian zone but rather grows into a brilliant businessman there, better than he could ever be in India. Khateja on the other hand, although looked after by the other residents in Grey Street, feels isolated and stifled in this space. At the beginning of the novel she is portrayed as a feisty and lively woman who would never give up on her dreams and ambitions. However, in South Africa, things begin to change. In the couple’s flat in Queen Street, “the stovepipe roof and the plaster walls made her feel like nothing so much as a chicken in a coop” (183). Even in the streets Khateja can feel the restrictions placed on her freedom of movement in the city because of the colour of her skin: “The turbulent situation in Durban mostly affected her by ruining her free-ranging dispensation. She deeply relied on freedom of movement – a motorised expression of her capacious inner liberty” (223). This claustrophobia in the city makes Khateja feel like she is in exile from India:

This exile had sapped her strength and left her defenseless. Who is not a creature of the local environment? In the village, even in Bombay, Khateja was a creature perfectly adapted to the culture and the tempo and the justifications of the land, its vicious assaults and feverish provocations [...but] here, in South Africa, she was condemned to be a fish out of water her whole life: a misfit, a social joke.

To refer back to the argument raised in Chapter One, people's identities are often lodged in the landscapes of their origin which become a part of who they are. Outside of their local environment therefore, many Indian diasporas felt out of place. This is evident in Khateja's case when in South Africa she is described as a "separated creature of the earth" (182). By the end of the story Khateja is merely a shadow of her former self and as her grandson acknowledges, "the mask that's worn into my grandmother's face has a symbolic function: by rendering her more or less anonymous, more or less interchangeable, it indicates that her story is no longer really her own" (267). This statement expresses the fact that Khateja's experience resembles that of many old Indian diasporas in the colonial city, who, although having found a tight-knit Indian community in places like Grey Street, never felt quite at home in that landscape. In *The Wedding*, the Grey Street complex of the colonial era is therefore constructed both as a homely *place* for some and as a claustrophobic *space* for others.

Memory and Nostalgia in *The Wedding*

As argued in Chapter One, collective remembering is considered essential to the identity and integrity of social groups. Coovadia captures this notion in *The Wedding*, constructing Grey Street as the site in which collective memories of the old Indian diasporas are made and passed on. For example, the relics and rituals brought to Grey Street from India, as mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, become talismans, linking the Indian immigrants concretely to their pasts and thus acting as a means of remembering and re-remembering their collective history. As shown in the novel, the Indian diasporas are concerned that if they start "forgetting [India] in this and that detail, what would happen at the end of time?" (157). For Khateja in particular, remembering India was a priority and she felt strongly that "memories and a culture couldn't be left to themselves; instead each person had the responsibility of being a practitioner" (215). She is the practitioner who passes on the collective memory of the old Indian diasporas' voyage from India to South Africa to her grandson. He too is just as convinced as his grandmother that knowledge of his ancestral past is essential to finding his "bearings"

(267). It is only once his grandmother shares her memories of the past with him, that the grandson finally feels a sense of belonging in the world.

However, as discussed in Chapter One, because past memories are of particular importance for the constitution of social groups in the present, memories are constantly re-invented and re-shaped. In Khateja's case, as a refuge from the great homesickness she experiences in the Grey Street complex, she creates comfortable and nostalgic images of her past life in India. She remembers fondly the days as a child when she "became instantly content dipping her feet into the brown stream [...and] walking into the cultivated hills" (183). India here is transformed in her mind into a sacred place to which she is connected by an umbilical cord of love. However, this image of the homeland stands in stark contrast to the "conniving, rhetorical, feverish India of gambit and deception" which the couple experience when they are still in India (118). When Khateja and Ismet travel through India they get a bird's eye view of the country which to them seems "racked by age. The land was old, broken, worried apart at the seams, overrun by long-worn races, cut up by rain and rock" (76). They consider it a place of little possibility for individual advancement, a place where "each hoary old India was squatting right on top of another India squatting right on top of the one preceding" (77). However, in South Africa, the ugliness of India is quickly forgotten in the face of other problems that arise in the new land. As a result of her claustrophobia in her Grey Street flat, for example, Khateja forgets the claustrophobia she felt in India at being forced into marriage by her father. A softer, more emotional side of her emerges as she begins to construct and imagine a past life with tenderness:

Here she found herself thinking fond thoughts concerning her father, Yusuf, who had at least entertained her with the misery and poverty of his spirit, about her mother and the rapacious uncles and her mentally addled brother, Ahmed, and even, now and again, in a flood of charity, about her one-time fiancé, Ahmedu.

(208)

This is the memory of India which is created and cherished by Khateja and by many other Indian diasporas in the new land at the time. India becomes an imaginary homeland, to use Rushdie's term mentioned in Chapter One, which gives the Indian diasporic

community comfort but which, at the same time, does not reflect the homeland's realities. In *The Wedding* therefore, Coovadia constructs the Grey Street complex as a space in which collective memories of India are created and recreated through a lens of nostalgia and passed down through the generations. This chapter will now turn to an analysis of the fictional constructions of Grey Street in *The Lotus People* and will look at the ways in which Aziz Hassim's representation of the area in his novel follows or deviates from that constructed by Coovadia in *The Wedding*.

Aziz Hassim's *The Lotus People*

Like *The Wedding*, *The Lotus People* is also set in the Grey Street complex but covers a lengthier period of approximately a hundred years. The novel begins with the story of Yahya Ali Suleiman who, like Ismet and Khateja in *The Wedding*, comes to South Africa as a passenger Indian in the early 1880s. Yahya sets up his place of residence in the Grey Street complex and the narrative focuses on his life there as well as that of his son, Dara, and his grandchildren, Sam and Jake, who are raised in the area. In the course of the narrative, each generation is faced with its own set of socio-political obstacles imposed by the colonial/apartheid state. However, although Yahya starts out in the country as a poor tinker, the family eventually manages to build large emporiums in the Grey Street complex over the years. *The Lotus People* therefore pays tribute to the Indian diasporas in South Africa who, against the greatest odds, succeeded in making a home for themselves in the country.

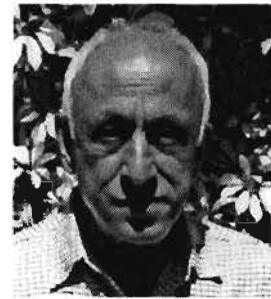


Figure 10: Aziz Hassim

Hassim has called *The Lotus People* an “historical fiction”, for as he explains, although his characters are fictional they are “based on real life families of the time” and real historical events (Basckin & Molver 2003, filmed interview). As mentioned in Chapter Two, Hassim was raised in the Grey Street complex and much of what he records in his novel is drawn from his own memories of his growing-up years in the Casbah. Thus, like *The Wedding*, *The Lotus People* is also to some extent autobiographical. However, unlike Coovadia's novel which discards large historical

events, Hassim foregrounds them but ensures that the mainstream narrative of history is interspersed with micro-histories. This is evident when Hassim has his ‘small’, fictional characters engage with ‘large’, historically known political figures in the course of the novel. Mahatma Gandhi, Dr Yusuf Dadoo and Dr Kesavaloo Goonam are just some of the names that feature in the book. This has the powerful effect of representing the past in a more personal, non-hegemonic way rather than from the traditional detached, Foucauldian perspective. Throughout *The Lotus People* there is no one domineering authorial voice but as Govinden reiterates, the narrative almost seems to narrate itself (2003:14). Due to the numerous, and mostly marginal, characters that feature in the novel, as well as the large amount of dialogue that Hassim affords them, history is told from multiple perspectives and once-silenced views are finally given a voice. As Hassim says, *The Lotus People* was his “personal TRC”, allowing him the space to testify to the horrors of colonialism and apartheid which affected him and his people (Basckin & Molver 2003, filmed interview). It can therefore be said that *The Lotus People* is postcolonial in the sense that, like *The Wedding*, it writes back to empire, putting the “arrogant colonialists” (Hassim 2002:13) back in their place by placing the Indian community of Grey Street centrally and giving them a platform, a fictional platform from which to speak. As mentioned in Chapter One, the textual space of fiction can be used by postcolonial writers to redefine and re-inscribe colonial spaces and in the case of *The Lotus People*, it is evident that the author is doing just that.

Space and Place in *The Lotus People*

As discussed in Chapter Two, the apartheid government adopted a very Foucauldian approach to city planning, using its power spatially to segregate people of different races. In *The Lotus People*, Hassim reveals the way in which the Grey Street complex and its surrounds, especially during the 1950s and 1960s, were kept under tight panoptic surveillance to ensure that the Indian community remained in their designated zone and did not engage in political acts of anti-apartheid resistance. This is evident when Jake witnesses a “clutch of camouflage uniforms, the shining faces, the glint of firearms” at each street corner when walking through the city (275). Therefore, to use the definition

of space provided in Chapter One, from the perspective of the apartheid government, the Grey Street complex was little more than an abstract space to be governed.

However, in *The Lotus People* Hassim undermines this view of the Grey Street complex, re-constructing it through his fiction as a meaningful place. In the novel the streets of the Grey Street complex, named after the colonial Royal family, no longer maintain their original meanings. Rather they are transformed by the Indian community who attach new meanings to them. This is shown in the novel in a description of the area's Indian architecture and religious buildings which re-define the streets, turning them into sites of Indian communal identity and centers of Indian worship. As the narrator points out,

At the corner of Grey and Queen Streets, occupying almost half a block, was the magnificent and architecturally famous Jumma Mosque, with its minarets and many domes. The largest of its kind in the Southern hemisphere, it was a natural landmark for both the local residents and the out of town visitors. Adjoining the mosque, fronting onto Cathedral Road and directly opposite the historic Emmanuel Cathedral, were a row of cottages that had been consolidated into a large unit that served as a *madressah* for Muslim children.

(166)

The way in which the Indian people of Grey Street appropriated the space and made it their own is also represented in Mariam Akabor's *Flat 9*. The book is made up of a number of short stories, each about a different character of Grey Street who becomes intimately connected to the place. Some feel at home there when they hear the daily sound of "the *azaan* reverberat[ing] through Grey Street, signaling the evening prayer" (Akabor 2006:24) while for others a visit to "Uncle Imoo's café [...] situated at the corner of Grey and Lorne Street" is the highlight of their day (14). Thus, through the fictional constructions of Grey Street from 'within', it is clear that the apartheid government did not succeed in keeping the area a neutral, categorised space as its inhabitants were forever re-inscribing it with new meanings and making it into a usable and habitable place.

To return to de Certeau's theory discussed in Chapter One, the totalising gaze of government authorities from on high is often undermined by the real practitioners of the city down below. De Certeau's emphasis is on the walkers of the city streets whom he believes are the real makers and shapers of cities. This is evident in Phyllis Naidoo's book, *Footprints in Grey Street*, whose title immediately connotes walking in the street. For Naidoo, it is the people on the ground – those that live in and make use of the streets on a daily basis – rather than monuments and landmarks that make Grey Street what it is. As she outlines at the beginning of the book,

I have given the history of Grey Street a miss. I shall omit its landmarks, its beauty, its filth, its magnificent gardens, its monuments [...]. No, these do not feature here. You will notice from the stories of comrades in this book, that some people lived in this area, some visited, some passed through, some in the underground hid here. Many worked here! Grey Street carried our most visual protests.

(2002:13)

The Lotus People in particular pays a great deal of attention to the walkers of the Grey Street complex, employing de Certeau's rhetoric of walking in its construction of the city. As Govinden acknowledges, "reading the novel you imagine yourself constantly walking in and out of this intricate grid of streets" (2003:3). Hassim looks at lovers, for example, who "over the weekends [...] took long walks around the avenues, picking up a bite to eat at quaint cafes" (2002:252), at a man who on his route through the city "stopped from time to time and dropped one of [his] coins into a delighted beggar's tin" (237), and at two burglars who "melted into the shadows" of the dark alleys of the Casbah to escape being seen (298). For Hassim therefore, the Grey Street complex is a city of walkers who are constantly bringing the urban landscape to life.

In *The Lotus People* Hassim uses the walkers of the Grey Street complex to re-map the cityscape. The complex is constructed in the novel as a labyrinth of streets, alleys and spaces that have been occluded in conventional mapping of the area. As mentioned in Chapter One, mapping was essential to the colonial and apartheid projects of ordering space and of creating a hard city, to use Raban's term. Such maps often relegate the 'othered' spaces in the city to the margins but, in *The Lotus People*, Hassim

brings these spaces to the center of his narrative. As discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, the city constructed in a text is used to shape the city as a text – that is the city proper. For the reader who is unfamiliar with the Grey Street complex, the maze of streets that are presented in the novel has a disorienting affect which emphasises the point that only those who have been educated in the “University of the Street” (376) can really know the ins and outs of the Casbah. It is the Indian gangsters of Grey Street in particular who, in the novel, re-map the city. When for example, Jake, the gang leader of the Victorians, takes his brother through a hidden route in the city, Sam is surprised as he had no idea that this part of the city ever existed:

They walked side by side, Jake silently leading the way through narrow passages between deserted office buildings [...]. They were moving through the rear of the blocks, through dark and gloomy areas where Sam could barely see [...]. Jake, however, knew his way around and moved swiftly, scaling low walls and cutting through narrow gaps [...]. They were walking in single file now, through a maze that left Sam totally disoriented.

(191)

Jake makes a very de Certeau-like point when he says to his brother, “The Casbah is another world, Sam. Another country. When you know your way around an army of cops wouldn’t find you. You could disappear for weeks, move around freely” (ibid). Jake proves this when he realises that two men are following him in the street. In order to lose them,

When he came to the wide entrance to the mosque he unhurriedly turned into it, then swiftly headed for the gates that led to the internal walkway [...] He could go left, alongside the rear of the shops towards a second broad passageway from which he could exit onto Queen Street once more and emerge a hundred yards behind whoever was following him.

(278)

Jake finally enters a store in Madressa Arcade in which he has a good vantage point, “a clear view of the activity outside without being clearly visible to whoever was out there” (279). Ironically, in this instance, Jake holds the panoptic vision over those that are meant to be keeping a close eye on



Figure 11: Madressa Arcade

him. This situation therefore reveals how the users of the city hold the real power of movement over that space. The apartheid project of mapping the 'othered' spaces of the city is subverted by the pedestrians who know of routes that are hidden from the panoptic gaze. Grey Street, to quote Raban, is thus constructed in *The Lotus People* as a 'soft' city, one that cannot be easily located on maps.

In Chapter One, Walter Benjamin's *flaneur* figure, who he considered the epitome of the modern day walker in the city, was discussed to determine its applicability to the walkers of Grey Street portrayed in Indian literature. Like the *flaneur*, many of the characters in *The Lotus People* are marginal figures, what Govinden calls the "flotsam and jetsam" (2003:12) of society. Gangsters, gamblers, prostitutes and thieves all make up part of the narrative. For example, in the course of the novel the reader is introduced to the gang of Grey Street's underworld, "the infamous mob whose name was only mentioned in whispers and who controlled the entire Casbah, and beyond, with blatant disregard of the law" (Hassim 2002:177). Hassim gives a voice to these individuals, highlighting their experience of the Grey Street complex and revealing the fact that they too are an integral part of the city's Indian community. The gangsters, therefore, do not remain abstract, ethereal beings but are rather portrayed as being politically conscious. They speak with authority and assert their identity in a society which otherwise attempts to exclude them. As one gang member exclaims,

What these thugs in government are doing is beyond belief, they're tearing decent people to ribbons with those killer dogs of theirs, they're using their sjamboks to scar children for life.

(539)

As Govinden has pointed out, the above statement shows how Hassim uses the marginal characters in his novel, the so-called thugs, to expose the real thuggery in society, that of the apartheid government (2003:11). Naidoo also privileges the perspective of the Grey Street gangs in *Footprints in Grey Street* where she pays tribute to Daddy Naidoo, a member of the notorious Crimson League, for his assistance during the struggle against apartheid: "Thank you Daddy and the Crimson League who made their contribution to the struggle" (2002:233). Therefore, like Benjamin, by foregrounding the marginal

individuals of the Casbah that have largely gone unnoticed, Indian writers are subverting the conventional notion of the indistinguishable urban 'mass'. The Grey Street complex in *The Lotus People* is constructed instead as a city of subjectivity or, to use Benjamin's term, a city of fragments, one that is made up of seemingly insignificant parts, that is, the marginalia of the urban milieu.

At various moments in the novel, Sam, like Ismet in *The Wedding*, seems to embody the characteristics of the strolling, observant, socially distant *flaneur*. This is especially apparent when the narrator recalls,

[Sam] idly crossed the road, passed 'Dhanjee's Fruiterers' and headed towards penny arcade, lured by the sound of raucous music as it spilled onto the street [...]. He walked into the funland a little diffidently [...]. For awhile he wandered around, then stepped out again. [...] For a little while longer Sam wandered around Victoria Street, absorbing the sights and sounds.

(Hassim 2002:172)

Like the *flaneur*, Sam also tries to use the crowd as a means of anonymously moving through the city: "He decided to head for an arcade across the road, which was also a thoroughfare into the next street. It was far busier and he would feel less conspicuous" (174). However, unlike the aimless, anonymous street wanderer who never feels at home in the city, Sam cannot alienate himself from his surroundings because he is a member of Grey Street's Indian community. Within seconds, Sam is spotted by his brother in the crowd. Thus while the city of the *flaneur* is one of alienation and anonymity, Grey Street, as mentioned in Chapter Two, is a tight-knit neighbourhood which prevents anonymity amongst its inhabitants.

The Grey Street complex is also constructed in *The Lotus People* as a cultural contact zone, to adopt Pratt's term referred to in Chapter One. It is portrayed as a space in which different racial and cultural groups come into contact with each other and compete for rights over it. As Govinden acknowledges, "place and struggle have become synonymous in South African history" (2003:9). In the course of the narrative, the periphery and center confront each other in the Grey Street complex and this is most

evident when the events of the 1949 riots and the consequences of the Group Areas Act, both discussed in detail in Chapter Two, are recorded in the novel. Dara recalls the Durban riots highlighting “the brutal savagery of the Zulu hordes that had rampaged through the Indian ghettos of the city, systematically plundering and destroying every Indian property and leaving a trail of destruction and scores of dead and dying” (Hassim 2002:13). Years later, he and his family are visited by a white government official who explains that he has to leave the area because of the new Group Areas Act: “You have sixty days to vacate this house” (208). It is because of this constant threat being made on the Indians’ sense of home and belonging in the 1940s and 1950s that the Grey Street complex becomes a distinctly political place. Grey Street is constructed as such in *The Lotus People* when the narrator explains that

life in the Casbah was about politics too. Children were weaned on it, as children elsewhere were weaned on mother’s milk. It was the logical outcome of the policies of repression, the common denominator around which their lives revolved. Spectators watched sport and simultaneously talked politics [...]. There was no other area of under one square mile that could equal it for the intensity of its emotions and its pursuit of justice.

(103)

This representation of Grey Street stands in stark contrast to that in *The Wedding* where politics is relegated to the background. Perhaps this is due to the fact that unlike Coovadia, Hassim grew up in the midst of anti-apartheid politics in the Casbah. In *The Lotus People*, it is emphasised that “Grey Street and the roads leading off it became the focal point of the Resistance Movement” (88). In the novel Nichol Square, referred to in Chapter Two, is transformed from a public park into a popular political rallying point. On one particular afternoon, “the Square was packed to capacity and still the crowds poured in, from Pine Street, Commercial Road, Grey Street and Albert Street” (85). Goonam also supports this view of the Casbah, describing Nichol Square and Grey Street generally as being central to the Indians’ political campaigns. As she acknowledges in her autobiography, “Our largest meetings were held in the heart of Durban on an empty piece of ground called Nichol Square which we renamed Red Square” (1991:106). Grey Street is thus not constructed by these Indian writers as a passive, unaffected space but rather as a hotbed of political activity and struggle against apartheid.

Diasporic Culture in *The Lotus People*

In relation to Vijay Mishra's theorisation of diasporic culture explored in Chapter One, it can be said that *The Lotus People* records the experience of both old and new Indian diasporas in the Grey Street complex. For the old Indian diasporas in the novel who settle in the Grey Street complex, the city never really becomes 'home'. This is portrayed through the character, Yahya, who to some extent sees the city as Khateja in *The Wedding* does, as a claustrophobic and stifling space. Like many other Indians coming to South Africa in the 1880s, Yahya had been promised better business opportunities in the new land. As Yahya remembers, he was told that "the future of Natal depended on us Indians and our abilities" (Hassim 2002:40). However, on his arrival in South Africa, Yahya is faced with a different reality. In this racist country, Indians are despised and "reduced to a level below that of even a manual labourer" (41). Although Yahya is desperate to return home to his family "a deep feeling of shame suffused him, the thought of returning to his family and admitting he had failed [...] was too much to bear" (ibid). Instead, Yahya decides to remain in what he considers an inhospitable and threatening country. After a chain of unfortunate events, Yahya is left with the only option of becoming a tinker, hauling his goods from street to street. For Yahya, the streets of Durban are not welcoming but remain a symbol of the strain of pulling his contraption around. As he recalls, "when I first came here I truly believed that I was coming as a free man" but now he has learnt that "the country [...] has nothing to offer" (50). Despite the fact that he finally manages to make a life for himself and his family in the land of his adoption, Yahya never completely accepts South Africa as his home. For him and many other old Indian diasporas in the country at the time, the feeling of perpetual non-belonging imposed on them by the racist white government meant that they were never able to become properly rooted in the new land.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, because of the intense social exclusion the old Indian diasporas experienced in South Africa, they began to turn inwards, forming what Mishra terms, diasporas of exclusivism. In *The Lotus People*, the Grey Street complex is constructed as such for as the narrator points out,

The Casbah, as it was often referred to, was inhabited almost exclusively by Indians, with a fair sprinkling of Coloureds. It was owned and developed in its entirety, and from its inception almost a hundred years before, by Indians who had automatically settled within its confines before spreading out into the suburbs.

(165)

Within the tight-knit Indian community that was created in the Casbah, continuities with India were maintained to compensate for the homesickness felt by the Indian immigrants and to preserve a rich Indian identity which was under constant threat by the racist government. As a result of maintaining Indian architecture, the vernacular, Indian cuisine and religious practices in the Grey Street complex, the area was transformed into a mini-India. As in *The Wedding*, the Casbah in *The Lotus People* is also described as a little India:

In the late forties Grey Street, and the roads bisecting it, were a miniature replica of a major city in India. Rows of neat double-storied buildings, consisting of stores on the ground floor and residential flats above, stretched from one end of the road to the other.

(165)



Figure 12: Indian architecture in the Grey Street complex today

Although the apartheid government saw the Grey Street complex as, to use Foucault's term, a heterotopia of exclusion on the margins of the white city of Durban, for the Indian diasporas within that space it became for them one of inclusion. Hassim does not construct the Casbah in his novel as a marginal space but undercuts traditional portrayals of it by presenting it rather as an alternative center. Unlike the representation of Grey Street in *Frankie and Stankie* for example, Hassim describes the area from 'within', revealing that "it was a vibrant and energetic community that was representative of the second and third generations of early settlers" (166). It is represented in *The Lotus People* as an island in the sea of apartheid for its Indian residents. This is emphasised when, in the novel, Sandy explains, "When you belong to it the street is your best friend. It's a cocoon that's safer than a mother's womb. Walk away and it's your greatest enemy" (224). Nithin experiences this first hand when he decides to take a short route home through the white part of the city one night. However, because

“he was a lone Indian at night in a White area, [...] that meant only one thing: he was game bait” (293). He is beaten up badly by a group of white boys because of the colour of his skin. In adopting Fanon’s term referred to in Chapter One, Indian skin becomes a ‘site’ of difference in the white city and as a result Indian people during apartheid could only find refuge in Indian-designated zones of the city such as Grey Street. In *The Lotus People*, Grey Street is therefore constructed as a safe space in contrast to the rest of the city, “that domain where the bruised self is restored, where the wounds inflicted by a menacing society are bandaged and tended” (Govinden 2003:12).

It is within this exclusive diasporic space that Indian culture is not only perpetuated but also undergoes creative re-imagining. This is seen particularly in the case of Naran and Yahya in *The Lotus People* whose encounter with each other resembles that between Ismet and Vikram in *The Wedding*. Like Vikram, Naran explains to Yahya, “this is South Africa. Your traditional methods of obtaining satisfaction will not serve you here” (Hassim 2002:4). When the two initially meet, they are wary of each other for they are from different castes. However, when they realise that they are both just trying to get by in this foreign land they become friends. As the narrator explains,

When they parted neither was aware that the foundations of two great dynasties had been put in place, over a simple embrace. The Gujarati, whose cardinal rule governing any business transaction was to give nothing for nothing, had made a monumental exception. The Pathan, who believed in taking possession of what he considered was his, by violence if necessary, had humbled himself [...]. A bond had been forged between two families.

(10)

Therefore, as in *The Wedding*, the caste system is discarded in the new land in order to adapt to the new circumstances. By uniting together as equals, the old Indian diasporas are able to lean on one another for support, a necessary step to ensure their survival in a country that wants them to leave. The Grey Street complex is thus constructed in *The Lotus People* as a culturally dynamic place in which Indian culture is continuously being re-made and re-imagined.

Unlike Coovadia in *The Wedding*, Hassim chooses in his novel also to focus on the experience of the new Indian diasporas in the Grey Street complex. In *The Lotus People*, Jake and Sam's generation constitute the new Indian diasporas. This generation is portrayed as standing in sharp contrast to the old Indian diasporas of the area particularly because, unlike many from the older generation, the new diasporas see South Africa as their home. When Dara suggests to his children that they should leave South Africa for a more civilised country, Jake and Sam are shocked and exclaim, "We belong here [...] this is our country" (17). To refer back to Mishra's argument outlined in Chapter One, while the old Indian diasporas held tightly onto their essentialist Indian identities in the new land, the new 'border' diasporas are characterised by hyphenated identities. Sam's hybrid identity as a South African Indian is revealed when the narrator highlights how "Sam has, in a manner typical of a large number of his generation, struck a delicate balance between his father and his own family, between tradition and a tolerance for change" (19). Furthermore, although the old Indian diasporas try to pass down their so-called pure Indian traditions and customs to their children and their children's children, much of it is lost over time. This is the experience of Sam's mother in the novel who "had attempted in vain, and by her own admission failed, to inculcate Eastern traditions and customs in any [of her children]" (ibid). For example, while for Dara, "[m]ost of his day to day conversation [...] was still conducted in Gujarati and it was still the language in which he did all his thinking" (70), for his sons Gujarati was a somewhat foreign language. For them and the rest of the new Indian diasporas in the Grey Street complex, South African Indian English, mentioned in Chapter Two, was spoken along with street slang. The Grey Street complex is thus not constructed in *The Lotus People* as a culturally pure space but rather a place that is representative of hyphenated identities and transculturation. It can therefore be said that, through his novel, Hassim undermines the myth of 'The Nation', exposing the fact that there is no essential national identity but that identity and culture are plural and forever in constant flux.

Memory and Nostalgia in *The Lotus People*

As in *The Wedding*, in *The Lotus People* a strong emphasis is placed on collective remembering in the Indian community. For the old Indian diasporas in the novel in

particular, they believe strongly that “[y]ou must remember your past before you can build a future” (140). Like the relics used by the couple in *The Wedding* to remember and re-member their past, in Hassim’s novel Yahya’s dagger functions as a talisman linking him and his family to their homeland. Dara gives his father’s dagger to his son in order to remind him of his Indian heritage. As Dara explains to Sam,

You are a Pathan too – the product of a tribe whose heritage is as glorious as its history. You are the descendent of legendary warriors who bow before no man and bend their knees to God alone. Their ancestral homeland is the North West Frontier Province, on the border of Afghanistan.

(483)

As explored in Chapter One, memory is an important source of knowledge which tells us who we are. That is why Sam’s son Zain is determined to find out about his ancestral history when he exclaims, “I want to know about my father’s dada, and his father before him. I have to know their history and what made them into the men they were” (482).

In *The Lotus People* the Grey Street complex is thus constructed as a site of remembering and re-membering. Drawing from Lovell’s argument raised in Chapter One, memory and hence, identity, are etched into landscapes in ways that cannot be erased. Sam experiences this first hand when he re-visits his childhood home. Outside his old house,

[h]e looked at the pavement below him, read the names that had been etched deeply into the concrete by children who had, in another age, inhabited the area. He saw the faint outline of squares, circles and oblongs created by some sharp instrument. Somehow it had survived the passage of time. [...] Sam would swear later that he had distinctly heard the happy voices of Lorraine and Sebastian [...] as they flew gracefully over the forbidden lines and landed in the center of the squares. This was not his memory reliving the past, he was physically there with them, in form and substance.

(474)

His memory and a part of his identity are embedded in the urban landscape permanently for as he realises, “I’m somewhere there too, caught in a time warp, forever a part of this environment” (475). Sam’s experience of the city here reveals that Hassim is constructing the Grey Street complex in his novel as a palimpsest of memory and history whereby the

lived city in memory is layered on the lived city of the present. Drawing from Benjamin's concept of traces discussed in Chapter One, the small, seemingly insignificant names on the pavement that trigger Sam's memory reveal that Hassim is portraying the Casbah as a city of traces. Just like the traces that are forever etched into the urban landscape of Grey Street, it can be said that Hassim etches the 'small', marginal people of the city into the landscape of his fiction, thus freezing their collective memories forever in textual form.

The Grey Street complex is constructed in *The Lotus People* as a place of political collective remembering. As already mentioned, Hassim regards his novel as his personal TRC, a way of refusing collective amnesia about apartheid's wrongs. As he says, "I think if you forget what it was like and don't record it, that insult might have been criminal" (Basckin & Molver 2003, filmed interview). In *The Lotus People*, the Casbah is portrayed so that it is as if the pavements still whisper the events of the apartheid past. For example, when Sam visits his old house, the sadness experienced by his family when they had to move under the Group Areas Act years before, still echoes in the streets. As Sam reminisces, "We would still have been there [...], a community of good solid citizens with strong family and neighbourhood ties, if they hadn't thrown us out of our homes and forced us into ghettos, to live with strangers" (Hassim 2002:471). It is through his novel that Hassim is able to re-member the apartheid past from the Indian diasporic perspective. Therefore, to reiterate Boyer's argument raised in Chapter One, the Grey Street complex in *The Lotus People* becomes a site where counter-memories are formed, memories that undermine the hegemonic narrative of the apartheid past which attempted to erase the histories and experiences of marginalised groups in the country.

As mentioned in Chapter Two of this thesis, Hassim remembers the Casbah of his childhood as being part of a romantic era and perhaps because of his own nostalgic memories of the place, he constructs the Grey Street complex through a nostalgic lens. For Hassim "[the Casbah] is still vibrant, but the [old] romance has gone" (in Govinden 2003:16). In an interview he describes Grey Street as being little more than "crime and grime" now (Mamet 2007, interview), a faint shadow of its former self. This view of the Casbah is expressed by Nithin:

The street's changing [...]. Look around you. There was a time you could spot half a dozen scotens with one sweep of your eyes. Not anymore. And the cinemas – the Vic, the Royal, the Avalon – all no more than a memory. What happened to Dhanjees Fruiterers, Victoria Furniture Mart, Kapitans [...] hell buddy, I could go on forever.

(Hassim 2002:525)

Govinden has rightly pointed out that in *The Lotus People* “[w]e see a lost city, fading and forgotten, excavated from the archives of memory, and reborn” (2003:3). The Casbah in Hassim’s novel is not just a place but is also an historical time. The nostalgia for an older, cleaner, more tight-knit Grey Street is revealed when the narrator says,

The Casbah on a Saturday morning was like no city anywhere on earth. The streets and pavements were clean, the shop windows freshly washed and glittering, the shoppers dressed in festive gear and wearing anything from the sari to the Hawaiian sarong.

(Hassim 2002:102)

Even illegal acts are portrayed in a nostalgic light:

The numbers rackets, or Fah Fee as it was called, was played by nearly everyone who could spare a tickey and provided a lucrative source of income for the street-wise operators, which was supplemented by the sale of black-market cinema tickets. [...] They were bought and sold with a cheerful smile and a gambler’s gay abandon.

(ibid)

However, Hassim recognises that although his fictional constructions of Grey Street are nostalgic – an inevitable outcome of remembering the past – his work is still “historically accurate” (Mamet 2007, interview). This can be seen in contrast to Ravi Govender’s *Down Memory Lane* where nostalgia is the leading force in shaping, and even distorting, the representation of Indian life during the 1950s and 1960s. For example, in his book Govender writes a piece entitled, ‘Bada Bing Bada Boom’, in which he recalls the Grey Street gangs. Unlike Hassim who portrays the gangs in a much more sober light, Govender mythologises them depicting them as almost stepping out of Hollywood’s “gangster movies” (Govender 2006:7). In comparison to Govender’s uncritical and simplistic construction of Grey Street as being part of the ‘good old days’, it is therefore evident that although the Grey Street complex in *The Lotus People* is represented nostalgically, it is authentically rooted. However, no matter the extent to which nostalgia

shapes the fictional constructions of Grey Street by these Indian writers, it is clear that for them, as well as for Coovadia discussed earlier, nostalgia plays an important role in the collective memory of the Indian inhabitants of the area, functioning as a way of remembering 'home' and 'homeland' alike. The next chapter will turn to discussion of the recent changes in the Grey Street complex and the ways in which such changes may impact on the fictional constructions of the area in the future.

Chapter 4: Grey Street and Beyond

In the preceding chapters, the ways in which the selected writers for this thesis construct Grey Street in their fiction have been highlighted. It is evident from an analysis of Hassim's *The Lotus People* and Coovadia's *The Wedding* that the authors have attempted to capture a particular time in their representation of the Grey Street complex, one that is now gone. Although perhaps more subtly done in Coovadia's novel than in Hassim's, both narratives depict a Grey Street that is community oriented and tight-knit, safe to live in and to walk through. However, it is also depicted as a place which was being stifled by the Group Areas Act and apartheid's other oppressive laws.

As Govinden reiterates, "South Africa at the present moment is living through a time of memory" (forthcoming:1) in which past histories of once marginalised individuals, families and events are being reconstituted. In her view, "place is, inevitably, memory [...and] memory in South Africa is apartheid" (ibid). Seen in this light, Grey Street's Casbah is just as significant as Cape Town's District Six of the 1960s and Johannesburg's Sophiatown of the 1950s. Like Sophiatown's Casbah, the Casbah in *The Lotus People* is home to the city's Indian community, a cocoon-like inner sanctum which is under constant threat from the apartheid government. Although beyond the scope of this thesis, but by way of suggestion, Hassim's construction of Grey Street resonates with Richard Rive's description of District Six in his novel *Buckingham Palace: District Six* (1986). It has been argued that in fact "all these writers are writing from alienation of some sort, from a 'kind of void' and are resisting erasure, even of memory" (Govinden 2003:16). Like many of the characters in *The Lotus People* who remember the spirit of Grey Street, the narrator of *Buckingham Palace* points out,

District Six has a soul. Its center held together till it was torn apart. Stained and tarnished as it was, it had a soul that held together. The new matchbox conglomerates on the desolate Cape Flats have no soul. The houses were soulless units piled together to form a disparate community that lacked cohesion.

(1986:127)

I would like to argue that although there are similarities between the historical occurrences in Grey Street and places like District Six and Sophiatown, it must be

remembered that the latter two places were almost completely razed to the ground during the apartheid era with only sites of worship left standing. District Six and Sophiatown therefore represent a time-space that is gone forever. As a result, the memory of these two places is frozen in time and so too are their fictional representations.

The Grey Street complex, on the other hand, is still in existence. It is an area that is still used and lived in and thus is a place that is constantly being re-made. With reference to the definition of place adopted in Chapter One, place is a space to which meaning is ascribed. This definition suggests that new meanings will give rise to new places even in the same geographical location. For example, this is evident in the recent re-naming of Grey Street to Dr Yusuf Dadoo Street. As part of South Africa's post-apartheid/postcolonial project, the old, colonial street names are being replaced thus symbolising a new way of ordering the city space. As Tomlinson et al acknowledge, this process is emblematic "of a breakdown of those modernist institutions by which the state had maintained its dominance" (2003:x). In its place has emerged an 'open', fluid city space through which people of all races and classes can pass. However, it is within this new liberated space that other challenges arise. What results is a 'new' place that is difficult to define and place boundary lines around and, therefore, for its inhabitants, it becomes a place

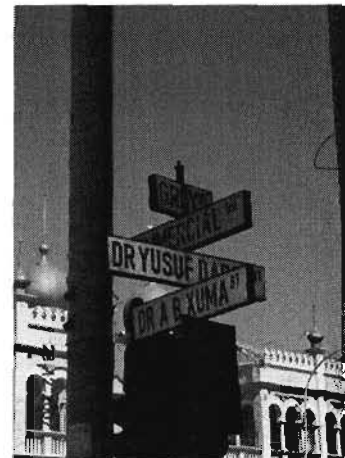


Figure 13: The re-naming of Grey Street to Dr Yusuf Dadoo Street

with which it is difficult to bond and identify. While not being a new place per se, the new mix of race groups is different today. As Badsha points out, "these changes challenge the certainty and privilege enjoyed by Indians and Coloureds which underpinned the racialised apartheid state" (2001:22). Although the area still retains its Indian influence, it is also now home to a greater mixture of races and nationalities. The post-apartheid city has witnessed an influx of black migrants from other African countries, some of whom have moved aggressively into street trading and illegal activities such as prostitution and drugs. Speaking about Johannesburg – but in a statement which can equally be applied to Durban – Tomlinson et al argue that "black

South Africans have been forced to reimagine Johannesburg not as belonging to all South Africans or to them alone but shared with others in a new African cosmopolitanism”

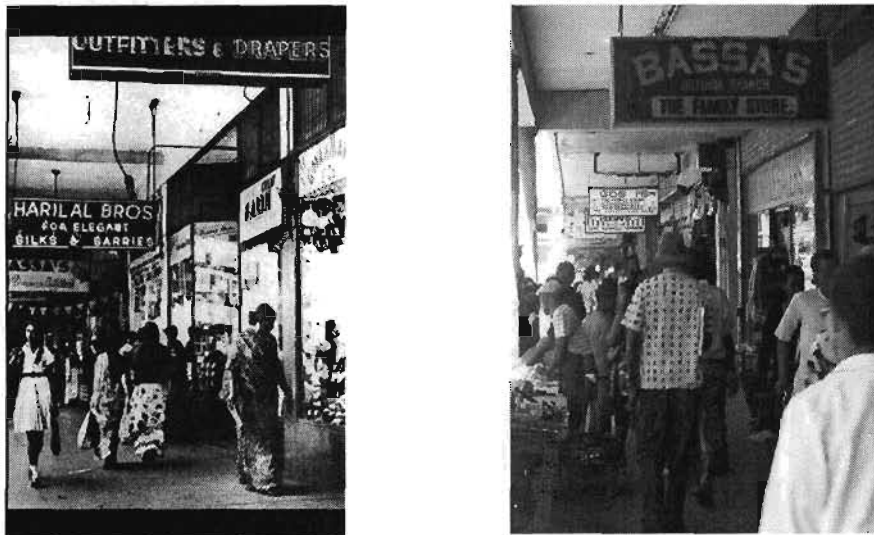


Figure 14: Grey Street as a distinctly Indian area in the 1970s (left) and as an African trading hub in 2007 (right)

(2003:xiii). As a result, the more elite Indian residents of the former Grey Street complex are moving out and establishing new homes in the suburbs. McNulty summarises the effect of such a transformation when he highlights that

The speed and totality of the transformation of these inner-city places mean[s] that buildings still bearing traces of apartheid and colonial pasts are now being used for completely different purposes. The legacy of apartheid space is inscribed on the buildings and streets that are now home to a vast array of previously ‘undesirable’ tenants.

(2005:105)

The question that remains to be asked is how will these changes in the post-apartheid city affect the fictional constructions of Grey Street/Dr Yusuf Dadoo Street to come? Ironically, many Indian writers still refer to the area as ‘Grey Street’ and struggle to remember to adopt its new name. Although the street is now named after a great Indian political activist and thus *should* gel with Indian identity in the area, ‘Grey Street’, named after an archaic colonial figure, is what Indian inhabitants in the area in fact identify more with. As Aziz Hassim has stated, “it will always be ‘Grey Street’ for me” (Mamet 2007, interview). Mariam Akabor has also expressed her inability to accept the new street

name: “When I heard about the re-naming of Grey Street I was horrified and sad. I couldn’t believe that a street as significant in South African history like Grey Street was being renamed. I felt it was totally unnecessary. You can’t erase a part of our history in that way. To this day, I still refer to it as ‘Grey Street’” (Mamet 2007, email correspondence). By holding on to the nostalgia of Grey Street which is embedded in its very name, it seems that some Indian writers are still perceiving the Grey Street area in its pastness and thus are continuing to capture this time-space in their fiction. In Hassim’s forthcoming novel, *The Revenge of Kali*, he explains that he is moving away from the political representation of the Casbah which he focused on in the first novel and instead is focusing on the general ethos of the area at the time (Mamet 2007, interview). He gives recognition in his new novel to the “individual greatness of the Durban Casbah boys” for example, who went on to become members of big bands worldwide. As Hassim emphasises, “it’s all about perspective [...] what I see is the past; I don’t see what’s there now, I see what was there then”. However, even Hassim admits that the further away one gets from the past, the more nostalgic one’s memories become: “of course as one grows older the past acquires a certain romance and nostalgia that may not be reflective of the true reality of the time” (ibid).

Ravi Govender’s recently published book, *Down Memory Lane* (2006), like Hassim’s forthcoming novel, also recreates a nostalgic sense of the ‘good old days’. It can be said, however, that in Govender’s attempt to return to those recollected halcyon days in his work, he has not only romanticised the era but in fact exoticises Indian culture as well. This is evident when Govender speaks in his book of “the culinary Dubai called Durban” (2006:40), a description that does little more than package Grey Street as “a place of exotic spice” (Govinden 2003:21). By recalling “the peaceful co-existence which existed between African and Indian people of the day” (Govender 2006:40), Govender’s description of Grey Street fits the “mainstream media and tourist representations of Durban that obscure the legacy of racialised inequality in order to promote an imagined rainbow city and exotic African tourist destination” (Govinden 2003:21). Although other Indian writers such as Phyllis Naidoo are opposed to such romantic constructions of the Grey Street complex during the apartheid years – “I did not know the ‘good old days’”

(Mamet 2007, email correspondence) – there is a pattern which seems to be emerging amongst the older generation of Indian writers writing about life in the Casbah. They all seem to be writing about a time that has passed. In Naidoo's new book, *Footprints Beyond Grey Street* (2007), she moves away from looking at comrades from the old Casbah area and focuses on stories of freedom fighters in other areas. Although there is a distinct shift away from the Grey Street complex in her book, there is not a shift in the time she writes about. Even in the face of a changing landscape in which new problems are emerging, the older Indian writers are still continuing to write about experiences from the apartheid era.

It seems it is the younger generation of Indian writers coming from the Grey Street area who are trying to represent the current experiences of living in Durban in their work. Mariam Akabor's *Flat 9* is an attempt on her part to describe the very humane and community-oriented dimension of the Casbah that lives on into the present. However, as she explains, "I feel I have done my part, based on my experiences in Grey Street" (Mamet 2007, email correspondence) and therefore her next novel will move away from the Grey Street complex. Imraan Coovadia, another upcoming writer of the new generation, has described his forthcoming novel saying that it is set entirely in Durban – but not Grey Street – and deals with issues around HIV/AIDS and psychological denial (Mamet 2007, email correspondence). Coovadia's move away from the older Grey Street of his first novel to describing a Durban suffering under the weight of HIV/AIDS represents the extent to which the remnants of the past are being displaced by new realities.

The way in which pedestrians experience street life in the present is very different to those that appear in novels such as *The Lotus People* and *The Wedding*. Unlike the older Indian diasporas in Durban, Coovadia represents a new generation of Indian South African whose identity is not limited to a particular place. As Coovadia explains, "I've gone through phases of feeling half South African and half American" (B. McNulty 2007, interview). He, like many others of the younger generation, is part of a new cosmopolitan culture, one whose identity is hybrid and thus transcends cultural and

national boundaries. This ability to belong both here and elsewhere means that the very idea of our place in the city needs to be reformulated. Today's walkers in the city are more like the *flaneur*, characterised by anonymity and alienation. The tight-knit Indian diasporic community of Grey Street is fast being replaced by smaller African diasporas from different African countries. As a result a redefinition of the meaning of urban space is required, for as Tomlinson et al point out, "the old [city] exists in nostalgia; the new [city] exists in *absentia*" (2003:xiii). The Grey Street complex is thus not a stagnant place but one in constant flux. It is a soft city whose practitioners are forever changing its shape and meaning, a text forever being re-inscribed and re-interpreted. To return to Govinden's statement that "place is memory [...and] memory in South Africa is apartheid", it seems that this applies more to the older generation of Indian writers. For the upcoming generation, newer post-post-apartheid memories are being embedded in the landscape to the extent that soon fictional constructions of Dr Yusuf Dadoo Street may no longer even resemble those of the older Grey Street complex.

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