

**Changing Form and Political Purpose
in Selected Works of Ronnie Govender**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of

Master of Arts

University of KwaZulu-Natal

2009

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I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. All citations, references and borrowed ideas have been duly acknowledged. I confirm that an external editor was not used . It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts in the Faculty of Humanities, Development and Social Science, University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. None of the present work has been submitted previously for any degree or examination in any other University.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I, the author, wish to thank:

- My supervisor, Professor Lindy Stiebel, for her guidance and encouragement.
- Pravin, Sammsara and Kashvi for their love and firm support.
- Ronnie Govender for sharing his experiences and providing me with the information and documentation that made this study possible.
- Professor Rajendra Chetty for sharing his knowledge on South African Indian Writings with me.
- Seema Maharaj and Jayce Naicker of Inter-Library Loans, Malherbe Library, Howard College UKZN for their assistance in my research.
- M. Ali, B. Bholal, A. Harilal, A.J. Mottian, J.Naidoo, and S.B. Singh for their valuable input on the reception of Govender's selected works.

ABSTRACT

Changing Form and Political Purpose in Selected Works of Ronnie Govender.

This dissertation explores changing form and political purpose in selected works of Ronnie Govender, by analysing reasons for the shifts in Govender's choice of genre, and the effects of these genre shifts in his work. Govender is unusual in that he has chosen to recast certain of his most popular works into different genres, throwing up questions of context and impact as associated with these works. The investigation of a selection of Govender's works that have appeared in at least two genres over a period of change in South Africa allows for an examination of political impact on Govender's works both during and post apartheid.

This study will be analysed within a range of theatre 'isms' and theories which influenced Govender's skills in the theatre. These are important to situate Govender as, firstly, in his early career, a theatre practitioner. Attention will be given to Constantin Stanislavski and the Method Acting Theory, (1937) as the philosophies advocated by Stanislavski were particularly useful to Govender for the staging and performance of his plays. Reference will be made to the 'Theatre of Commitment', Community Theatre, Indigenous Theatre, Theatre of the Oppressed and Epic Theatre, as elements of these theories feature in Govender's writing and stage performances. Some focus will also be given to Zakes Mda (1993), as both Mda and Govender are associated with the 'Theatre of Commitment', and share a vision of socio-political change through theatre and literature. As contributors to the South African literary canon, Mda and Govender continuously reinvent themselves through their experimentation with form which results in them consistently producing new works.

In addition, this dissertation also examines audience reception of Govender's stage performances and reader reception in his texts, and this allows for a brief investigation into Reception Theory. The theories of Wolfgang Iser (1978), Stanley Fish (1980) Hans Robert Jauss (in Bahti 1982) and Susan Bennett (1990) will be referred to in so far as they inform the reception of the works selected for the purposes of this study.

In order to contextualise Govender as a writer of both plays and prose, a brief biography of his life and his work will be undertaken. The findings of researchers such as Rajendra Chetty (2002) and Pallavi Rastogi (2008) who have studied the work of South African Indian writers will be drawn on in order to contextualise Govender's writing particularly and his position as a South African Indian writer generally. This dissertation assesses Govender's contribution to the South African canon, and forwards him as an example of a South African writer who is pointing to new directions in writing.

The fictional works selected for this dissertation which best illustrate political purpose, changing form and the changing dynamics of reader-audience response, include *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as play, *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel; "1949", first as short story then as play; and "At the Edge", first as short story then as play. These works which have appeared as both play and prose (novel and short story) have been chosen for their versatility and suitability to different genres and because Govender has chosen to recast them in new forms. Reasons for this will be explored.

Research such as I am proposing can contribute to the debate on experimentation with form, new directions in writing and the political impact of writing in South Africa. Further, the significance of the past to the present so evident in Govender's selected works under discussion, can also add to the growing corpus of academic engagement with South African Indian writing.

Introduction

In this thesis I will be exploring the flexible use of form, as linked to a changing political context, in a selection of Ronnie Govender's literary works in order to examine the evident shifts in Govender's writing and to establish a deeper understanding of the relationship between politics and the arts, with specific focus on literature and the theatre.

My interest lies in tracing the development of the marginalised South African Indian artist in the fields of literature and the theatre, against socio-political currents. What this leads to is a focus on the vital functions these two art forms perform in establishing a sense of community for the marginalised, and in so doing, providing a voice for such groups. I am especially interested in the variety of literary works by South African Indian writers that have emanated during and particularly post apartheid. A study of Govender's selected works over a wide period enables me to explore his experimentation with form and the weaving together of genres in these works. Further, it makes it possible to examine the factors that motivate such experimentation in, especially post apartheid literature.

South African Indian theatre, also referred to as 'Indic' so as to distinguish it from the theatre of India (see Pillay1992), as well as the literature of South African Indian writers, both of which form a vital component of the South African theatrical and literary canons, have been under researched. The limited body of critical material available makes this study an attractive one which offers possibilities of further research and critical commentary.

I enter this study from both a theatrical and literary perspective. This dual strand widens the possibility of exploring the shifts in genre as well as the interrogation of political purpose. Govender is firmly established in South Africa as both a theatre practitioner and a writer of prose in the novel and short story mode. Govender's *oeuvre* is underpinned by a range of theatrical and literary ideologies and practices which call for a carefully constructed theoretical framework within which to position Govender. Chapter One therefore consists of an ideological framework in two parts, the first of which is the theatrical base which was Govender's point of departure as an artist. Through the unfolding of a range of theories, it is evident that Govender has selectively utilised theory and praxis from mainstream and alternative theatre forms in order to fulfil his aesthetic and

political purposes. It is a combination of these theories and praxis as well as his personal philosophies that have influenced the indigenous theatre form called 'Indic'. By juxtaposing Govender's theories with those of Brecht, Stanislavski, Boal and Mda, I am able to raise arguments about the fluid nature of the arts and the relationship between politics and the arts.

Debate on the nature of South African literature and the role of the literary artist during and post apartheid, as well as elaboration on the sub-genre called South African Indian Writing, forms the second part of the theoretical framework. In this section I draw mostly on the theories of Njabulo Ndebele (1994) who challenged black writers to move past protest rhetoric and to extend their artistic skills. Besides emphasising the value of story telling, Ndebele strongly recommended that writers go back to their roots to unearth the wealth of ideas waiting to be explored in order to free themselves from the limitations of the protest mode. I argue that Ndebele's arguments are answered by Govender, by pointing to Govender's works both during and post apartheid, which reflect much of Ndebele's ideology.

Chapter One ends with a broad examination of South African Indian writings and investigates the correlation between the development of form and socio-political change in this field. I pose various questions on the position and progress of the South African Indian writer in relation to his counterparts, and respond to the arguments posed by Rajendra Chetty and Pallavi Rastogi. Ending Chapter One with a focus on South African Indian writing paves the way for the setting of historical context in Chapter Two.

It is important to contextualise Govender's work by tracing his roots and carefully tracking his career, because it is difficult to separate an artist's work from his life. In fact, it was Govender's experiences and perceptions that have fueled his art (Singh2009i). Chapter Two then sets the historical context for Govender's life and highlights the events that shaped his artistic career and gave rise to 'Indic' and the Shah Theatre Academy.

In Chapter Three I investigate switches in genre as linked to a changing socio-political scenario, by carefully analysing *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as play (1981) and *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel (2008). Through this analysis I pick up on the argument by writers such as Ndebele and Mda, that while it is difficult to separate politics and art, it is possible to pursue a political agenda

through creative experimentation. Interrogation of form in this chapter enables to me to explore the short story as flexible form, through the analysis of “At the Edge” and “1949” (1996). The analysis of the selected works leads to an examination of audience and reader reception. I draw on the theories of Iser (1978), Fish (1980) Jauss (in Bahti 1982) and Bennett (1990), as well as the feedback I have received through my interviews with performers who have featured in productions of the selected works mentioned, and three education stakeholders whose experiences of the reception of the short story are useful to this study.

This thesis reaches its conclusion in Chapter Four, by mentioning Govender’s current work in progress and raising questions on the possible direction in which South African Indian writers are headed.

Chapter One

In this chapter I will construct a theoretical framework within which Ronnie Govender's selected works will be positioned, by exploring the influences which underpin Govender's oeuvre. The theoretical arena that Govender can be situated in cannot be confined to a singular set of ideologies. This, I will argue, points to the dynamic nature of literature and the arts in general, but more importantly proves that South African literary and performance artists, like Govender, explore a range of writing and theatre techniques which are mostly propelled by socio-political trends. Evidence of this lies in Govender's expanding repertoire.

The multiple approach towards the construction of a theatrical framework for Govender is best suited to this thesis, not only because Govender straddles between literature and the performing arts, but also because this approach enables me to investigate the changes in form in the works selected for analysis in this thesis. Further, the multiple approach facilitates the various arguments posed in this thesis, an example of which is the dialectic between arts and politics, which is sustained throughout this and subsequent chapters. Govender is a playwright and a writer of prose in both the short story and novel forms, and this is what informs the construction of this thesis and determines the path I will follow in building a strong theoretical base.

The setting up of a theatrical context forms the first part of Govender's theoretical framework because it was the theatre that served as a springboard for Govender's artistic career, and saw him breaking new ground as a marginalised South African Indian artist. While a diverse range of theories will be introduced, there will not be an exhaustive account of each theory, given the constraints of a mini dissertation. Each will be explored in so far as it informs Govender's theatre philosophies and practice.

Govender's early career as a playwright and theatre practitioner is reflective of the predicament of artists of colour during the apartheid era. Having had very limited access to any kind of formal theatre education, artists found it challenging to adhere strictly to mainstream theatre principles. This was exacerbated by various socio-political constraints, which will be expounded on in Chapter Two, in which the historical context for Govender and his era will be set. In order creatively to overcome the various obstacles that would hinder their progress in the performing arts, theatre practitioners of colour adapted ideologies and performance techniques from various theatre genres

to create truly indigenous or 'home-grown' theatre. What emanated from this, was an interesting fusion of mainstream and alternative theory and praxis:

The concept of 'alternative' theatre, which also implies experimental, workshop theatre companies, venues and performances, dates from the late nineteen fifties, with ventures such as...Union Artists Rehearsal Room at Dorkay House...a venue where new local work could be workshopped and presented, and almost more significantly, where black artists could get into theatre.

(Hauptfleisch 1992:75)

Govender's playscripts and stage productions bear testimony to a skillful combination of selected mainstream ideology and production techniques and a variety of alternative theatre strategies which he has adopted and adapted to suit his artistic and political purposes. The indigenous theatre that resulted from this fusion gave rise to the sub-genre, South African Indian theatre, from which the term 'Indic' was coined by academics such as Pillay and Schaffer and which will hereafter be used when referring to this theatre type. 'Indic' refers to "theatre performances and related areas that have their roots in South African Indian experience" (Pillay 1992: Introduction). 'Indic' and writing by South African Indian writers will form the final part of the theoretical framework of this chapter.

Govender has acknowledged several writers, theorists and practitioners who have helped shape his artistic career:

...Paolo Freire and Augusto Boal have had an immense impact on social and political imperatives in my writings. Then there are Wole Soyinka, Bertolt Brecht, Rabindranath Tagore, Dumbuzo Marechera, R.K. Narayan, Rohinton Mistry, J.M. Coetzee, Arundathi Roy and Njabulo Ndebele.

(in Chetty 2002:339)

I will now briefly introduce theories and practices from a selected range of theatre practitioners pertinent to this thesis whom Govender acknowledges above. This will not be an exhaustive account of each practitioner's theory, rather the ideologies of the relevant practitioners will be presented in so far as they inform Govender's theatre productions.

Constantin Stanislavski (1863-1938)

I have felt there was nothing for me to do except to devote my labour and energy almost exclusively to the study of creative nature... I have acquired a sum of experience in the course of years of work and this is what I have sought to share with you.

(in Hapgood 1990:1)

Constantin Stanislavski, whose groundbreaking philosophies and praxis form the cornerstone of modern theatre performance methodology, has been credited as one of the foremost theorists of twentieth century theatre. The strong foundations that he laid through a lifetime of experimentation, revolutionised acting, demanding a complete overhaul of the existing performance styles that had become outdated and had failed to complement the new ideas introduced with the advent of Realism. Stanislavski's system, which evolved through his experiences in theatre since childhood, forms one of the strongest pillars of mainstream performance theory. Being the son of a merchant in Russia, he was privileged to have a private theatre at his home as a child and was continually exposed to the various theatres and the work of the best directors and actors of his time. His later roles as actor and, eventually, director of the Moscow Arts Theatre enabled him to approach the field of performance holistically.

The greatest challenge for Stanislavski was to get rid of the mediocre, mechanical, over the top performance skills which characterised the era of melodrama and Romanticism and which were carried over by Stanislavski's contemporaries. In its place he opted for a fresh approach to acting that was three dimensional in nature. In the absence of any written guide or set of theories to realistic acting, it was his interaction with exceptionally talented performers and directors, his interest in psychology, particularly in Ribot's "Emotion Memory" (Bendetti 1982:31), but mostly his daily notes on his experiences with performers that evolved into 'The System' which formed the blueprint for modern realistic acting which was popularised during the course of the Realist movement that commenced in the mid nineteenth century.

Stanislavski's groundbreaking theories paved the way for effective performance training globally, and soon 'Method Acting', a term coined by the Americans, became the buzz word for

film and theatre. Acting schools mushroomed in the United States in which the system was interpreted and applied in various ways. Several of the greatest Hollywood and Broadway stars have been trained through method schools.

Govender (Singh 2009b) has mentioned Stanislavski to be one of the most valuable theorists in the performance field and attests to the use of Stanislavski's techniques by his performers for his stage productions:

People like Meyerhold and Stanislavski had given articulation to a whole new movement in theatre... to create life on stage from within, later to be described in the fadistic American ways as 'Method School of Acting...'

(2008b:149)

The strictly disciplined training system that unfolded, was a slow developmental process in which intense concentration exercises and rigorous physical and voice training were conducted on a continuous basis, until actors perfected the realistic art of acting. It was the fruit of this labour that resulted in very comprehensive translated manuals that proved invaluable to students of performance theory.

Although Brecht was strongly opposed to Realist Theatre ideologies, he acknowledged the value of Stanislavski's performance theories:

Stanislavski showed the actors the social meaning of their craft. It was not an end in itself to him, but he knew no end is attained in the theatre except through art... The Moscow Art Theatre company never rested on its laurels. They invented new artistic methods for every production...

(in Willet 1978: 236-237)

Stanislavski guided his performers to believe in themselves. His concept of 'Magic If' stimulated the performers to enter the imagined world on the stage. 'What would happen if...' (in Hapgood 1937:48) was the opening phrase in which various scenarios would be presented to the performers during which they were expected to absorb themselves into their roles. Outer

characteristics were to be driven by inner impulses. Performers had to work as an ensemble and ensure that there was a smooth continuity of action. It is these elements which created the desired three dimensional characters that replaced the flat characters that Stanislavski was so determined to get rid of.

Stanislavski argued that it was imperative for the artist to possess keen powers of observation as it is these impressions that would have bearing on performance. Every aspect of the voice and body language had to be enthusiastically absorbed if the actor wished to be moved by what he saw. He stressed that subtlety was a powerful aspect of portrayal. In preparation for his role as Othello, Stanislavski carefully observed an Arab in Venice for a short period of time and the notes that he recorded were used in the rehearsal (see Robbins 1980).

Similarly, in preparation for their roles in *The Lahnee's Pleasure* in 1976, performers Mohammed Ali and Essop Khan who as Muslims had never consumed alcohol sat in a pub for a fortnight, observing the patrons in order to develop the character of Mothie, who gets progressively inebriated during the course of action. According to Ali (see Singh 2009a), it was challenging to capture the gamut of emotions that was needed for a naturalistic portrayal of Mothie. Ali believes firmly that the process of observation and his discussion based on this process with Govender and his fellow actors allowed him to internalise Mothie's character and capture it with the necessary pathos and energy.

Stanislavski's system served as a point of departure for artists whose new ideologies created reactionary movements to Realism and realistic performance during the 'new wave', the post World War Two period. Jerzy Grotowski (1982) advocated poverty by going back to basics, utilising only the bare essentials necessary for a live performance, rejecting the realistic principles of staging and performance. In spite of the reactionary stance of the 'new wave' artists, the Stanislavski system has outlived all other performance techniques.

According to Carnicke (1993) what is often neglected by critics is the fact that Stanislavski's manuscripts have been altered through translation and that he was subjected to censorship by the Soviet Government. Stanislavski's contribution to the theatre was used as basis for curriculum development when the government of 1934 insisted on a singular arts policy being imposed. Any

spiritual or psychological ideology that stifled Marxist material was removed. South African artists too were faced with bannings and censorship which stifled their artistic freedom in the apartheid era. Carnicke also asserts that internal exile was imposed on Stanislavski in the last stage of his life. Carnicke's points on Stanislavski prove that art and politics cannot be separated as is evident through the points raised in this thesis.

An interesting observation made during the process of researching the various theatre practitioners for this thesis, is that each of them has felt the impact of politics on his work and most have reacted to the political scenario of their time through their art. The common ground shared by theorists of such diverse cultural backgrounds and theatre 'isms', strengthens the arguments posed on political purpose, which forms part of the topic of this thesis and sustains the dialectic between politics and art.

Focus on political purpose leads me to explore the philosophies of three revolutionary personalities acknowledged by Govender as influential, whose ideologies and practices had universal impact and served as catalysts for new theatre movements. Bertolt Brecht, Paulo Freire and Augusto Boal embraced Marxism as the cornerstone of their theories and inspired educators, writers and theatre practitioners like Govender through their stance against Elitist or Bourgeois traditions and their tireless efforts in bringing about social change through conscientisation.

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956)

German playwright, theorist and theatre practitioner, Bertolt Brecht whose Epic Theatre called for change in existing forms of theatre, cut a controversial figure in the arts world by boldly altering dynamics that had been taken for granted for at least a century.

His groundbreaking theories and theatre practice has had profound impact on progressive theatre practitioners across the globe who have embraced his principles in order to change direction and create alternate theatre genres, an example of which is Theatre for Development which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Having lived through two World Wars and experienced life in both capitalist and communist Germany, Brecht was endowed with an acute political sense. Like Govender, Brecht had a natural

flair for writing and was extremely sensitive to socio-political injustice. He too had an impressive career not only in theatre but as a sports and political commentator, theatre critic and poet. This draws attention to the many points of identification between Brecht and Govender. He shattered the ideas of the Realist Theatre movement by toppling the ideology and staging techniques of the Theatre of Illusion, proving that the vision of change that the Realist movement advocated would hardly materialise if it continued to operate using conventional strategies. The Theatre of Illusion simply had to make way for a theatre with insight. To this end Brecht turned his theatre into an instrument of social change. According to Willet, the evolution of Brecht's ideas turned "into quite a personal aesthetic which applied to other spheres besides the theatre" (1978: Introduction).

Through the theatre Govender too was able to reflect on his socio-political milieu and fulfil his need to develop aesthetically. This is reflective of the multi-functional nature of theatre and the arts in general. Marx's 'Ideological Superstructure', "the Marxist phrase for the whole body of art, ideas, morality, etc of a given society which Marx saw resting on certain economic relationships" (in Willet 1978:23) foregrounds Brecht's philosophies which drive his theatre praxis. Brecht creates his characters from the premise that it is the class one belongs to that is the main determinant in a person's existence. This, I argue points to the strong presence of Marxist principles to which the determinant of race is added in Govender's plays, which will be further investigated in Chapter Three. These determinants give the South African artist an added responsibility when capturing the socio-economic milieu, as compared to counterparts from other parts of the world. The determinants of race and class which have been central to theatre during apartheid, while still significant, have been approached from unusual angles post apartheid. These approaches, which will be given emphasis in Chapter Three, point to Govender's bold experimentation with form and include satire and inversion.

While Govender shares Brecht's vision of socio-political change through the theatre, as is evident in his writing and stage productions such as *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as play, which according to Alvarez-Pereyre had "a conscientising effect on the audience" (in Anon 1989: 5), it is in the staging and performance of the plays that Govender deviates from Brecht and shows a leaning towards Realistic staging and method acting.

Brecht's Epic Theatre and Alienation Theory which developed from theatre director and experimentalist Erwin Piscator's radical staging innovations, were modelled on the key concepts of the epic, which particularly suited the didactic intention of his productions by introducing plots and characters that demonstrated brave and heroic deeds, Historification, which deliberately set universal themes in the distant past and in remote locations, and *vervremdungseffekte* or Alienation staging techniques, which consciously distanced and detached the audience emotionally in order to engage their critical faculties. Implementation of these broad concepts not only placed new demands on the actors, but demanded a complete transformation in the roles of the audience in the theatre. Brecht's revolutionary stance on the expected new roles of the audience has received mixed reactions from theatre critics and practitioners across the globe. This has, in turn, added value to the still developing Audience-reception theory as acknowledged by Bennett (1990) and will be given some focus in Chapter Three.

Brecht took several steps to detach his audience from the action. He argued that emotional distance would enable the audience to engage their critical faculties, which would eventually be used for self and societal transformation. To this end he removed the dramatic element of suspense from his plays by ensuring that performers narrated the expected events beforehand and that the same performer took various roles in the production to aid detachment. A variety of performance techniques were employed in order to jar the audience out of their complacency. Further, his use of montage, scaffolding and lighting created the desired artificial setting which reminded audience that they were in the theatre and that they were watching an enactment. This in effect destroyed the 'fourth wall theory' and challenged the 'slice of theatre' that characterised the Realist movement.

I don't let my feelings intrude in my dramatic work. It'd give a false view of the world. I aim at an extremely classical, cold, highly intellectual style of performance. I'm not writing for the scum who want to have the cockles of their hearts warmed. I give the incidents boldly so that the audience can think for itself. That's why I need a quick witted audience that knows how to observe- I appeal to reason.

(Brecht in Willet 1978:14)

The final point that links Brecht and Govender is their vociferous rejection of bourgeois theatre because it lacked vision, held onto Eurocentric ideology and resisted change. Ignoring the needs of

the masses, bourgeois theatre maintained firmly entrenched divisions. Brecht accused the bourgeois of “smoothing over contradictions creating false harmony and idealization” (in Willet 1978:277). Govender’s break away from the Durban Academy of Theatre Arts (DATA) which had espoused Eurocentric trends, to form the Shah Theatre Academy in 1964 in order to foster indigenous theatre which will be detailed in Chapter Two, demonstrates his commitment to creating contemporary theatre that would be socially and politically relevant.

Paolo Freire (1921-1997)

Brazilian educator and champion of the oppressed, Paolo Freire revolutionised education through his subversive strategies which had far reaching implications for both the educational and theatrical spheres. Although Freire was not a theatre practitioner, his theory and praxis were influential in the creation of community theatre. It was the people who formed the nucleus of his ‘Pedagogy of the Oppressed’ (1972), and it was this humanitarian’s simple, subversive and creative educational methodologies that helped them to fight poverty through self-empowerment. Freire who worked closely with UNESCO, dedicated himself to literacy campaigns which sought to educate illiterate adults in the Third World. By designing radical learning programmes which sharpened the awareness of the peasants and taught them how to read and write, Freire ensured that the ‘culture of silence’ (1972:10) that perpetuated the oppression of the poor was destroyed. Educators and artists like Mda and Govender have been inspired by Freire to use their educational advantage and artistic talents not only to strengthen the arts by sharing their expertise with new artists, but to take steps towards community upliftment through outreach programmes. (see for example Mda 1993, Annamalai 1998 and Singh 2009). During the 80s Govender resigned from his lucrative job as a sales rep to transform a run-down restaurant into a community theatre which was made available, free of charge, to community groups such as the Kwa Mashu Youth Group. Govender asserts that although South Africans have witnessed the demise of Apartheid, the other great obstacle to overcome is poverty: “Not only in South Africa but in Third World countries there is massive poverty....Theatre of the Oppressed is about the eroding effects of poverty as much as it is about the human condition” (Govender in Chetty 2002:346).

According to Freire, education is the key to uplifting the masses. This is only achievable if the traditional system of education - which Freire refers to as “the banking concept” (1972:46), a traditional top-down model which places the educator, who is seen as the sole source of knowledge,

on a pedestal (1972:46) - is abandoned in favour of a participatory education. The “banking concept” fails to stimulate a critical consciousness. “Problem posing” education (1972:53) guides the learner to interact with pertinent issues through healthy discussion. The collapse of the hierarchy moves the learner from the position of passive recipient who maintains the status quo of the oppressor of the ruling classes to active participant who is upwardly mobile.

In addition to the Marxist philosophies that foreground his teaching principles, Freire displays a strong leaning towards Existentialism. Years of study and fieldwork have resulted in Freire providing his own blueprint for revolutionary education. *Pedagogy of The Oppressed* (1972) reflects the philosophies that foreground Freire’s education models and provides a useful insight into the methods he forwarded in educating the peasants of the Third World. His work has catalysed grass roots education in Third World countries and has been a boost for theatre in education projects. By focusing on the process rather than the end, a characteristic shared by Brechtian theatre, Freire has successfully ensured that: “each man wins back his right to say his own word, to name the world” (1972:12).

Augusto Boal (1931-2009)

In keeping with the revolutionary spirit of Brecht and Freire and to further advance the dialogue between art and politics, I explore the theories and practices of Augusto Boal, whose work is complementary to Freire’s. It was theatre that Boal used as a “weapon” (1979: Foreword) for his cause, and it was theatre that gave voice to the voiceless peasants of Peru.

Boal argued that theatre is a political act and a means of improving the world. He also claimed that the upper classes usurped the theatre by gaining control of it to maintain their status quo. The result of this is that great barriers were created between spectator and performer, which is not the natural order that people followed in the earliest forms of theatre. He challenges bourgeois theatre by leading the passive spectator to take ownership and restore the natural order of life. Like Govender, he renounced bourgeois theatre in favour of one which is representative of all people:

Art is not merchandise. But for the bourgeoisie everything is a commodity: man is a commodity. And this being so, all things that man produces will likewise be commodities. Everything is prostituted in the bourgeois system, art as well as love.

(1979:109)

Boal's theatre education projects for illiterate adults in Peru which were initially largely experimental, went back to basics, to grass roots level, where barriers between spectator and participant were removed. Instead all who were present, educator included, were participants. Making progress with the concept presented various challenges, one of which was the language barrier and illiteracy. This can quickly be likened to the South African and illiteracy and the various socio-economic barriers to learning. Govender, whose theatre productions had wide appeal amongst the masses because they were accessible, socially relevant and entertaining, facilitated the comprehension of his plays through his use of working class patois and in so doing challenged Eurocentric conventions that ensured the theatre remained the domain of the elite.

Just as the European Medieval church, which had initially rejected theatre as a taboo and from which it had disassociated itself, suddenly saw the value of theatre in teaching the illiterate the new Christian principles (see Brockett 1965), Boal drew on the strengths of theatre in order to free the oppressed in his experiments with 'People's Theatre' in Peru in 1973. Going back to basics, Boal concentrated on the use of the body, the voice and audio visual aids to stimulate the peasants towards acts of self-discovery, which eventually enabled them to express their views of their world and ultimately improve their lives: "Now the oppressed are liberated themselves and once more, are making theatre their own..." (1972:119).

Govender espouses Boal's philosophy that theatre must be revolutionary and visionary by initiating the move away from elitist theatre to theatre that catered for the community. He effectively utilises theatre as a weapon which is evident through his stage productions which are underpinned by socio-political imperatives that were in the early stages of Govender's career as playwright, overtly projected and which have over a period of time been given a more nuanced makeover. This change in emphasis which will receive further attention as this thesis unfolds is, I

argue, an indication of an artist's development which is influenced by changing socio-political conditions and nourished through continuous interaction with his chosen art form.

Zakes Mda (1948 -)

South African playwright, theatre practitioner, writer, academic and literary critic, Zakes Mda occupies a significant position and multi-dimensional role in the theoretical framework of this thesis. There are several points of identification between Govender and Mda. Both are internationally acclaimed, award winning contributors to the South African literary canon. Mda's outstanding literary techniques, the extensive activities that he undertakes as a theatre practitioner and his critical commentary on literature and theatre will be drawn on to support the arguments in this thesis, an example of which is the dialogue between literature and politics. Drawing Mda into this thesis also gives an impetus to focus on changing forms and allows it to point to the directions in which post apartheid writing is heading.

As committed artists, Mda and Govender worked tirelessly through several decades to create the kind of theatre that was accessible to the marginalised, and have creatively used theatre "as a weapon" (Boal 1979: Foreword) and a voice in their fight against apartheid. This, I argue, sets them apart from protest writers who were for a variety of reasons unable to transcend the limitations of that genre. Ndebele's opinions on this topic which points to the writer as committed artist will be tapped into towards the end of this chapter. Through the Theatre of Commitment, the practitioner engages the audience in a process of conscientisation or awareness as is evident in *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as play. The Theatre of Commitment is political theatre that aims at developing the collective conscience of the community. It forms the cornerstone of the various forms of resistance theatre and includes the Theatre for Development. Keyan Tomaselli defines Theatre of Commitment as:

mediation rather than reflection... not wedded to the restricted conventions of dramatic heritage or the linear demands of alphabet resulting from 500 pages of print legacy... Faced with the monolithic structures of apartheid, most committed theatre ends with a song of liberation... It is the ultimate metonymic relationship between art and life...

(in Sahli 1998:51)

While both Mda and Govender started off their artistic careers as playwrights who produced plays with strong political messages, their subversive approaches coupled with their brave experimentation with form has ensured that they not be pigeonholed as protest writers. Mda started off as a mainstream theatre practitioner and playwright with plays such as *We Shall Sing for the Fatherland* (1978) and *The Hill* (1979) but moved into the alternative theatre category with plays such as *Rural Sanitation Play* (1986). Govender, likewise, also fits into mainstream theatre with its sub-categories but draws on the theories and practices of Alternative theatre forms.

It was through the Theatre for Development that Mda was able fully to utilise his academic and artistic skills for social change. The Theatre for Development is a tool to raise the social awareness of a community and is participatory in nature. Through Mda's directorship, the Marotholi travelling theatre, a Theatre for Development group which was a university based group in Lesotho, has served as a catalyst for change by providing rural communities with the tools of self-empowerment and rural transformation. Drawing on the philosophies of Freire and Boal and borrowing the 'agitprop' technique characteristic of Brechtian theatre, Mda began his mission for social upliftment. Realising the shortcomings of 'agitprop' motivated Mda to move towards participatory theatre (see Mda 1993).

The performers of Theatre for Development facilitate the dialogue based on topics chosen by the community group. Through the discussion, it is the community that comes up with viable solutions. Theatre for Development was a reaction to government led community projects which were propagandistic in nature and merely fulfilled the needs of government in power. Theatre for Development placed the power to transform in the hands of the community:

Theatre for Development has the potential to be the most relevant theatre in a democratic South Africa, since it can be rooted with the people in marginalised rural areas and urban slums. It utilizes the modes of communication and entertainment that already exists in these areas. It is the theatre of the illiterate in its most progressive form...

(Mda 1998:264)

As a literary and theatre critic, Mda's observations point to the need to let go of the past, not by ignoring it but by addressing it in refreshing, creative ways which enable one to move forward. In addition he argues that while arts and politics can't be separated, politics should not be the sole agenda in the arts. These arguments are echoed by critics like Sachs in "Preparing Ourselves for Freedom" (in Attridge and Jolly 1998) and Ndebele in "Rediscovery of the Ordinary" (1994).

In e-mail correspondence with Mda in which I invited him to offer commentary on Govender and current South African writing, he said:

I am glad you intend to write your thesis on Ronnie's work. I know him very well and love him as a person and writer. In fact his play, *The Lahnee's Pleasure*, had a great influence on my own playwriting. Although it is thirty years or more since I read it, I realized the great possibilities that were open to me as a writer.

(Singh 2009h)

The brief investigation above into the theories of Stanislavski and others and Govender's application of these theories to mark his own work leads now to a general discussion of South African literature during and post apartheid, with particular emphasis on South African Indian writings. I will begin by looking at Njabulo Ndebele's well known writings on South African black protest fiction, then move on to a more specific focus on South African Indian writing as an example of this genre.

Njabulo Ndebele (1948-)

Ndebele's critical studies on the literature of black writers and the role of the black intellectual in literature and politics have been influential both during apartheid and thereafter. His entry into the field of literary criticism which was previously dominated by white academia encouraged intellectuals of colour to widen the field through their engagement. His bold stance sparked off debates on the role of literature, the impact of the past on current writing and the relationship between politics and art; debates which have been engaged in by writers such as Govender, Mda, Brink (see Brink in Brown and Van Dyk 1991) and Oliphant (see 1996). Such debates, I argue, are particularly relevant to this thesis as Govender's reprisal of his earlier works such as *The Lahnee's Pleasure* necessitates the interrogation of the past in relation to the present.

Ndebele's writing on the role of the short story in the careers of writers of colour during apartheid has bearing on my investigation of the short story as genre which will be carried out in Chapter Three. Furthermore the significance of the short story as a popular form during apartheid has absorbed local and international literary critics (see for example Oliphant 1996 and Rastogi 2008). Ndebele acknowledged the vital function the short story served to fulfil the political needs of black writers who were faced with major difficulties in publishing their literature due to a lack of publishing facilities as well as financial constraints. It was The Congress of South African Writers (COSAW), PEN and Ravan Press which provided the creative outlet through collections like *Staffrider* as will be discussed in Chapter Two which includes a brief contextualisation of South African Indian writings. Ndebele argues that while the protest mode of writing served the interest of writers in the watershed years of apartheid, the period of transition called for a change of emphasis and development of form: "Njabulo Ndebele... had... long been crusading for an art that went beyond the knee-jerk responses to the hurt caused by apartheid" (Mda 1996:193-194).

Ndebele argued that for as long as black intellectuals were stuck in the protest mindset, it would be impossible for them to experience catharsis and free their imagination:

Recently I have suggested that what has been called protest literature may have run its course...The fact that much of the writing produced in the townships...still reproduced this protest tradition, with little modification, reveals what seems to me to be the characteristics of a socially entrenched manner of thinking...a manner of thinking which has gathered its own momentum and now reproduces it uncritically.

(Ndebele 1994:60)

He called for new ways of looking at the past and a change of focus from oppressor to oppressed. Govender similarly endorses Ndebele's comments in his quest for reinvention: "If you want to tell a story, even if it is about grief, get away from one-dimensional sloganeering. "It is only by laying to rest the ghosts of the pasts that we can look squarely at the future" (see Govender in Blumberg and Walder 1999: 208).

Ndebele urged writers to go back to their roots and look to orality and their cultures as a stimulus to free their imaginations. Focus on the urban oppressed and lamenting about the evils of apartheid simply ensured that the oppressor remained the focus of attention. Taking inspiration from Kemal's *Anatolian Tales* (1983), he reminded writers that they should turn to the rural who in any case form the neglected majority of the oppressed (see Ndebele 1994). It is through the inner impulses of the story that the conditions that underpin the lives of the subjects are unveiled. Taking the lead from Boal, who was steadfast in his belief that all human activity is political (1979), it can be argued that writing the stories of a community, irrespective of its location is a political act. In this sense Govender's short stories "At The Edge" and "1949" which are set in the peri-urban district of Cato Manor will be discussed in terms of their political purpose in Chapter Three.

The narrow protest mode should make way for imaginative story telling through which fresh ideas could pour forth. The power of storytelling is hardly likely to fade, especially when new dimensions and perspectives have the ability to energise these tales. Writers like Govender and Gcina Mhlophe, playwright, performer and writer of short stories, look to the value of storytelling and culture in their writing and performance and endorse the resilient multi-functional nature of story telling. Several other writers have similarly gone back to their roots to draw on their rich histories, cultures and rituals, in order to create a wonderful mixture of modern and traditional, in truly subversive texts (see for example Ncgobo 1991, Vera 1993 and Mda 1995). While Vera and Mda reveal political purpose by indulging in the mythical and the extraordinary, Ncgobo's political concerns are voiced through interaction with rural village life. Such art supports Ndebele's call for the "rediscovery of the ordinary" (Ndebele 1994). This postcolonial approach which ensures that the oppressed are encouraged to tell their stories, validates their existence and guides the reader back to roots. Further it allows the writer to enrich the lives of the oppressed through art, calling to attention the multi-functional role of literature. In this regard, Govender poignantly portrays the characters from the sugarcane plantations of Mt. Edgecombe and the market gardens of Cato Manor and recollects the stories from his childhood as related by Chelamma, thus releasing himself from the confines of the protest tradition.

In calling for literature with a broad social and cultural perspective, Ndebele's remarks point to the direction that South African writers have been taking post apartheid as exemplified by

Govender in *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel (2008). Further consideration will be given to directions in post apartheid writings in Chapter Four.

South African Indian Writings

Focus on South African Indian Writings as a sub- genre or the “little...canon” (Chetty 2002:9) of the South African literary canon completes the construction of the theoretical framework for this thesis. While it is relevant for Govender’s body of literature to fall within this canon, Govender has repeatedly shown an aversion to his literature being simply reduced to the label ‘Indian Writing’: “I have been described as an Indian South African, a South African Indian... I know that I am South African... I know very little about Indian theatre. I am a South African writer” (Govender in Chetty 2002:343). Govender has stressed in an interview that I conducted with him (2009b) that he is in no way ignoring his Indian roots, but wishes to be recognised first and foremost as a South African writer.

The glaring gap in critical studies in this sub genre poses a challenge to a researcher engaged in this field. Chetty (2002) and Rastogi (2008) have made a similar observation. This I argue, points to the impact of apartheid on minority groups like the Coloured and Indian populations and once again calls up the debate between politics and the arts. While artists like Fugard and Ngema rapidly gained international recognition and have been lauded for their contributions to the struggle through their art, artists like Govender have been relegated to the back burners of critical studies. “The binary black /white opposition that has structured anti apartheid as well as apartheid discourse” (Kruger 2001:113) has resulted in minority groups who occupy what I call an in-between space within the hierarchical structures of apartheid being sidelined or given minimal focus in academic spheres, as is evident in academic articles and books published post apartheid (see for example Attridge and Jolly 1998, Brown and Van Dyk 1991 and O’ Brien 2001). One of the reasons for Govender’s late recognition in national and international circles is that as an artist fully committed to the struggle, Govender supported the cultural boycott and refused to have his works showcased abroad and in local venues that denied a multi-racial audience. Zakes Mda has a different view on Govender’s lack of recognition and why Govender’s work had gone unrecognised and unacknowledged in South Africa:

Edinburgh Fringe festival programme notes of 'At the Edge' claim that his relative obscurity has been largely self imposed because of his refusal to export his work and appear on South African television and national festivities in support of the cultural boycott. This may be so, although there are many theatre practitioners who have refused to appear on SABC but who are better known than Govender. So that is not the main reason. The main reason is that Govender is too good to be famous. He does not follow a formula that is proven to 'sell plays', but his style is creative and innovative...This is the same fate that befell... Saira Essa, whose pioneering work at her Upstairs Theatre in Durban is known only to a small group of ardent followers.

(Mda 1996:214)

What is evident through Mda's views on the relative obscurity of artists like Govender, is that artists who were committed to the struggle against apartheid were not able to indulge in art for art's sake or for commercial gain. Further, such artists had to work long and hard before receiving any kind of recognition.

While it was playwriting that characterised black writing in the 50s and 60s, it was the Black Consciousness Movement of the 70s that swept in a tradition of protest poetry. This trend is reflective of popular genres engaged in by black writers (see for example works by Sepamla, Serote). It was the short story mode however, that was the most resilient form. The short story fulfilled both the aesthetic and political needs of the writer in the face of economic constraints, limited publishing opportunities and censorship.

That socio-political change influences change of direction in literature is clearly illustrated through the changing forms of literature that have evolved since the apartheid era. While the short story continues to occupy a large part of the collection of Indian writings, the short story has evolved from short protest accounts to intricate, intense works with a multitude of themes and open endings. Rastogi points to the fact that while Indian writers started widening their skills, as reflected in the novella form (see for example Essop 1984), the post apartheid period has ushered in a new tradition of novel writing (see for example Coovadia 2001 and Govender 2006). South African Indian writers have broken with tradition by offering fresh perspectives on the histories of the

previously disadvantaged. While political occasion does still underpin post apartheid writing, it is through the consciousness of the subjects that political agenda is probed. *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel (2008) can be forwarded as a suitable example of a post apartheid text which utilises a rich array of literary techniques and is multilayered.

Preoccupation with the past and retrieval of memory has also resulted in a growing number of autobiographies by Indian writers thereby widening the canon called South African Indian Writings (See for example Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2003 and Govender 2008b).

While both Chetty and Rastogi argue that Indians have a fascination with politics (Rastogi 2008), I argue that it is evident through the recent experimental works of writers such as Govender and Hassim, that Indian writers have combined their political visions with their creative skills in producing works that are truly reflective of the new wave of writing in South Africa.

I now move to situate Govender in his political, social and historical context in order to prepare a background for critical analysis of the selected works.

Chapter Two

2.1 Historical Context

In this chapter, I will set out a broad historical and biographical context for this thesis and its subject tracing Govender's political and artistic career in order to provide a background to his work. In addition, I will outline a brief history of South African Indian theatre which has been referred to as 'Indic' in Chapter One, as Govender "can be credited with inaugurating the genre of South African Indian theatre" (Rastogi 2008:222). Govender is a theatre practitioner and also a writer of prose, therefore I will briefly examine the history of the sub-genre called South African Indian writings. A clear outline of the historical and biographical context paves the way for this thesis to explore the various strands that need to be untangled in Govender's work. Govender's complex history and a dynamic artistic career, points to a writer who is quite comfortable with shifting genres.

The historical context relevant for my thesis begins with the fragmented history of Indian settlement in Cato Manor as this was Govender's birthplace where he spent at least 23 years of his life. It was this peri-urban township that provided Govender's life education and influenced his political and artistic aspirations. Govender has been inspired to use Cato Manor as the background for much of his literature and stage productions in order to celebrate a vital community in the historical and cultural development in South Africa:

The history of Cato Manor has been marginalised. It was the first and largest district where more than 180 000 people, most of whom owned their properties, were kicked out. Everybody knows about District Six and Sophiatown, [...] but continued neglect of a wonderful history is morally wrong.

(Govender in Moodley 2002:2)

Aziz Hassim in his interview on *Lotus People* echoes a similar view on the need to truthfully document the history of the marginalised:

I wanted to write about our people, about what life was like at that time, because I thought it was disappearing...History is recorded by the victors, always. And in South Africa, the truth of the Indian people, the contribution to the freedom struggle, is recorded nowhere. You cannot go and research anything anywhere that will tell you these things...the story of our people has not been told in truth.

(in Rastogi 2008: 212-13)

The Manichean stance of the apartheid government ensured that the history of the oppressor has been glorified during the apartheid era while the history of the 'other' has been grossly underplayed. The material on South African history in texts and the media during apartheid points to a history that was sabotaged:

In many respects, South Africa is the epitome of the worst aspects of colonialism. It has rigorously systematized and codified the inequality, oppression and deprivation of the subjugated people in ways that are fairly well known.

(JanMohamed1983:9)

The arrival of the first batch of 342 indentured labourers on board the *Truro* in 1860 paved the way for the creation of Indian Communities like Cato Manor in the late nineteenth century. The Natal Coolie Law of 1859 made it possible to import cheap labour to Natal when the local African population refused to be used as cheap labour.

The arrival of the indentured labourers in Natal marked the beginnings of virtual slavery as they worked the fields that would yield handsome profits to the sugar barons. "By 1864, exports of sugar from Natal almost quadrupled to £100 000, compared to £26 000 in 1863. Sir Liege Hulett, former prime minister and a sugar baron, admitted that Durban had been built by the Indian people" (Rossouw 2006:5). The slave labourers worked for up to fourteen hours a day. Severe fines and punishment were imposed on them, rendering it nearly impossible to scrape together any form of savings with which to secure their futures.

Indentured labourers were joined in 1875 by passenger Indians who had come of their own free will in order to trade. While the indentured labourers who hailed from the south of India were mostly Tamil and Telegu speaking, the Hindi speaking labourers were from the north of India. The majorities of the passenger Indians were from the state of Gujarat and were mostly of Muslim faith. They communicated in either Urdu or Gujarathi. Even though their cultural, religious and artistic practices kept them in touch with their roots, there was evidence of caste consciousness and cultural

differences amongst the various groups of immigrants, yet, “in spite of the obvious differences between the indentured and ‘passenger’ Indian, all of them would be codified as a single entity under the taxonomy of apartheid” (Black quoted in Rastogi 2008:11). All Indians were generally regarded as blacks and were labelled the derogatory ‘Coolie’, which had various connotations in India. The positive that arose out of this homogenising was the sense of unity that prevailed in the face of oppression.

1911 marked the end of the indentured labour practice following protest activity “by British and Indian anti-slavery activists” (Rossouw 2006:6). Indentured labourers, who were eventually liberated after the collapse of the practice of indenture, chose employment as domestic employees or labourers, while many opted to establish market gardens which serviced the greater Durban area. Govender is himself a second generation descendant of Cato Manor’s indentured labourers. His grandfather, Veerasamy Govender chose indenture as a means of escape from punishment in India, “for an unforgivable indiscretion” (Govender 2008b:63).

Cato Manor, the abbreviation for Cato Manor Farm, was granted to Sir George Cato in 1843 as compensation for land removed from him that was to be used for the military. The land, which totalled 4,500 acres, stretched across from Berea Ridge to Sydenham.

Cato subdivided plots in 1914 and sold them to the developers of country estates, who in turn, either sold plots or rented them to Indian market gardeners. Govender’s family moved to Cato Manor in the early 1930s when Govender’s grandfather Veerasamy opted to remain in South Africa once the term of indenture had expired, having saved from his meagre wage, which enabled him to purchase a piece of land in the area so that he could earn a living as a market gardener. Govender fondly remembers his grandfather lovingly toiling in his Cato Manor market garden:

From the small dam he made a river at the foot of the garden, in his sixties, he would lug two heavy metal cans and water his meticulous rows of [...] vegetables, which he would take by horse-cart, before sun -up to sell at the morning market.

(Govender in Chetty 2009:14)

The community built their humble abodes on land that consisted of shale. With meagre resources they took it upon themselves to build the necessary infrastructure which should have been the responsibility of the South African government. Most residents followed the tradition of the ‘owner-builder’, constructing wood and iron homes, with the odd brick building making an appearance. Govender posits that it was the community spirit and the joint family system that made it possible to create the necessary community structures that were reflective of the socio-political, economic and cultural achievements within a short space of time.

Detailed descriptions of this colorful peri-urban township form an important component of Govender’s written works:

In the thirties the Cato Manor community began building its own schools, shops and bazaars, temples, churches and mosques, and set up welfare institutions such as the now nationally established home for orphans and the aged, the Aryan Benevolent Home. They even provided their own bus service and built a crematorium and social and sporting amenities.

(Govender in *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* 1996:11)

Govender wrote the stories based on Cato Manor as an expression of the bond that he had formed with a community that had suddenly been crushed. Govender’s sense of nostalgia, his pride for the achievements of his community, and his anger and bitterness about the forced removals is clearly summed up whenever he speaks of Cato Manor: “There were a host of haunting memories of a lifetime spent at the earth of his atman; the soil he’d never imagined he’d one day be torn away from, the rich red soil of Cato Manor” (in Chetty 2003:317).

The achievements of the community were marred by harsh discriminatory laws such as the Pegging Act, which prevented the residents of Cato Manor from entering the more affluent surrounding white suburbs. It was however, the Land Act of 1913 that effectively gave rise to the notorious later Group Areas Act of 1950 which enforced segregation through a process of rezoning when the appearance of ‘grey’ areas began to pose a serious threat to apartheid ideals.

In 1932 Cato Manor was incorporated into the City of Durban, with most of the land belonging to Indians. Urbanisation saw a trickling of Africans into settlements closer to the city. Small clusters of shacks appeared in uMkhumbane which was named after the river that ran through Cato Manor and soon uMkhumbane became one of the largest shanty towns. According to Edwards (1989) uMkhumbane was a symbol of the desire for freedom and permanent residence. The name uMkhumbane but can be traced to pre-Shakan times, however, its root meaning is unknown. According to resident Milton Nwensa, it is believed that the name, is derived from *umkhumbi*, the Zulu word for 'ship', because the indentured labourers who worked the cane fields had to travel across the uMkhumbane River in tiny boats. Property owners rented out their property to prospective shack dwellers at exorbitant rents:

There thus appeared in the 1940s a sub-rentier class of African shacklords. Some of these enlarged their shacks so that a single shack might comprise fifteen to twenty rooms.[...] In 1950 one such shacklord paid an Indian thirty shillings a month for land on which he erected seventeen shelters, sixteen of which were sub-let at rents of £1 a month.

(Maylam 1996:19-20)

African and Indian residents generally lived in harmony but tensions were slowly rising from 1945 because of exploitation by landlords and deteriorating living conditions as shacks sprang up overnight. According to Maylam, by 1950 an estimated 50 000 Africans lived in Cato Manor. In the 1940s there was much evidence of political activism when both the African National Congress and the Natal Indian Congress began making inroads into the Cato Manor community. Govender refers in *In the Manure: memories and reflections* to trade unionists like Billy Peters and R.D. Naidoo and political activists such as George Sewpersadh who lead the community in its resistance campaigns.

On 13 January 1949 the simmering tensions erupted into Indian/African riots which started in the city when an Indian businessman allegedly caught an African youth stealing and punished him. The violence rapidly escalated and spread to Cato Manor where thousands were injured - an estimated 137 people lost their lives and there was arson and looting of properties. The 1949 incident severely damaged Indian-African relations. Many Indian landowners fled and refused to return to their properties. Govender wrote the poignant account of Dumisane in the short story

“1949” (1996). The apartheid government turned a blind eye to the mounting tensions arising within the shack settlements. It was only when the riots had reached full scale and this posed threat to nearby white areas, that the military was called in to enforce control. In 1952 emergency camps were erected on the banks of the uMkhumbane River.

The 1950s Group Areas Act which enforced segregation of various race groups into strategically demarcated areas was implemented by 1956. Cato Manor was rezoned into a white area. By 1958, 180 000 people were forcefully removed to areas like Chatsworth and Kwa Mashu, in spite of strong resistance campaigns. Anice Hassim wrote: “Cato Manor was the first victim in what was to become a tragedy on a human scale that has hardly ever been witnessed. Millions of people suffered in the hands of the grand design” (1990:5). Govender’s poem which follows summarises the human cost:

CATO MANOR

Silence now and bush
No more Discovery Road
No more Trimbone Road
No more hopscotch
No more ripe mangos from Thumba’s yard
Cato Manor, you have done your penance
Amid crumpled eviction notices.

(Govender 1996:149)

The demise of Cato Manor marked the destruction of other ‘grey areas’ like Sophiatown.

2.2 Early Life and career of Ronnie Govender

Initially named Sathieseelan Gurulingum Govender by his parents, whose choice of name was informed by the Panjagum, which was the Hindu astrological chart, ‘Ronnie’ Govender was registered as Ronald Gurulingum Govender due to the influence of his uncle. Interestingly, however Govender chose ‘Sathie’ as his alter-ego in his memoirs *In the Manure* (2008), as he sincerely wishes that he could have retained the name Sathieseelan, the first part meaning ‘truth’. Born on 16 May 1934 in 22 Discovery Road, Cato Manor, Govender was raised in humble surroundings,

together with his nine siblings and extended family. Govender has fond memories of his childhood in Cato Manor:

In many ways mine was an idyllic childhood. Of course there were the stresses, our district was poor. My father was not a wealthy man but he struggled very hard and we had a comfortable living. We had a very strong sense of community. My parents provided us with a warm, loving household which was amazing, given the stresses of the time.

(Govender in Moodley 2002:5)

As a youth Govender drank freely of the natural beauty of Cato Manor. His love for nature is demonstrated repeatedly in his detailed description of the rich assortment of fruit and vegetable plantations and indigenous plant life in his short stories. He was aware of poverty, exploitation and racial inequality from an early age and it was this that drove him to be an active part of the working class struggle. Govender's memoirs *In the Manure: memories and reflections* (2008) provides a clear insight into Govender's humble beginnings and political conscientisation. His inquisitive nature and mischievous escapades often landed him 'in the manure' (2008b: 31).

Having completed his primary school career at Cato Manor School, he enrolled at Sastri College, the only Indian high school for boys in Durban, where he matriculated in 1953. His strong sense of justice and acute political sense which, as will be elaborated on, were influenced by his father and certain members of the community, steered him towards pursuing a Law degree at the University of Cape Town. Due to financial constraints and because of his natural flair for journalism which was influenced strongly by his brother, Gony, himself a successful journalist, Govender worked part time for a newspaper called the *New Age* for which he wrote a sports column. His career in law came to an abrupt end with the banning of the *New Age* in the early 1950s, which was accused of being Communist in nature. Govender was no longer able to finance his studies.

On his return to Durban, Govender did a stint of journalism with *The Graphic* for which he wrote a boxing column but realised that the career was not an economically viable one, especially since there was very limited opportunity for Indians in the field of journalism. He enrolled for a

diploma in teaching at the Springfield College of Education in 1955 where he graduated as a primary school teacher. While studying, he continued as a sports columnist on a part time basis for *The Graphic* and continued his career as a journalist on a part time basis while teaching by freelancing for *The Leader*. His career as a teacher lasted for eleven years, during which time, he stood out as a non-conformist who criticised apartheid education. He made a valuable input into education by insisting on a wholistic approach to teaching. He provided many sporting and cultural opportunities for his charges, making numerous sacrifices after school hours to coach and rehearse (see Govender 2008b). His strong political stance was in conflict with the ideals of the Department of Education. His transfer from F.O.S.A. School (Friends of the Sick association) in the TB settlement in Newlands to M.ES. School which was built by the community of Cato Manor caused a further rift between himself and the Department of Education, which imposed punitive measures on Govender for standing up to authority. His creation of the musical satire “Talking Turkey” in the early 60s which attacked the Group Areas and Immorality Acts brought him under the severe scrutiny of his employer. Feeling disillusioned at the bureaucracy and red tape he was subjected to, and becoming artistically stifled, Govender resigned from his teaching career.

Govender took up a position with the South African Breweries in 1966 where he was employed for eighteen years. While his job was financially rewarding, Govender found that the capitalist ideals his job espoused conflicted with his strong Marxist beliefs. Further, Govender’s restless spirit would not allow for any form of complacency and he also felt that he needed to spend more time on his writing.

It was his grandmother, Amurtham, and mother, Chellama, who taught him compassion for the needy and gave him a strong spiritual and moral foundation. As a child Govender was fascinated by the daily rituals that two of the most important women in his life performed to the last detail. In addition, he claims to be indebted to his grandmother for sparking his love for story telling. Govender was nourished by the stories told to him, especially the mythology and morality tales, narrated by Amurtham. The short story “The Incomplete Human Being” which forms part of *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* (1996) focuses on the importance of learning the vernacular and being God fearing. Govender draws on the lessons his grandmother had given him through such stories.

Govender posits that it was initially his father who gave him a strong political sense (see Govender 2008b). As a driver for a local bakery, Jack Dorasamy Govender affiliated himself with the local trade union movement at the time and held meetings in his home on a regular basis. Govender recalls listening attentively to the talks that progressed well into the night. As mentioned earlier, Govender's journalistic endeavors were inspired by his brother Gony, while the sporting and political aspects of Govender's career were nurtured through his association with various members of his community "from political activists such as the President of the Natal Indian Congress, George Sewpersadh, trade unionists R.D. Naidoo and Billy Peters who attended the first Communist International as South African delegates" (Govender in Joseph 1991:186).

It was the annual school magazine initiated by Mr Barnabas, principal of the Cato Manor School where Govender was a pupil, that gave Govender his first taste of writing. He wrote a story fashioned in the western style and looks back with amusement at the opening lines: "Dead Man's Gulch lay basking in a flood of yellow moonlight as the two masked riders came galloping by" (Govender 2008b:36). Mr. Barnabas, who was a teacher of English and had a passion for literature, was a refreshing change in the classroom where children in Govender's era were taught by authoritarian individuals who went by the book. He is said to have stimulated Govender's love for literature and general knowledge. Govender pays tribute to Barnabas in the play *At the Edge* by setting the play in Barnabas's office and creating the role of the principal fashioned on Barnabas's enthusiastic personality.

Govender's first attempt at publishing a short story in a newspaper was an eye opener and a disappointing experience. He submitted to the magazine section of the *Sunday Tribune*, a sensitive tale about a youth called Koonjebharie who was constantly ridiculed because of his buck teeth and very dark complexion. His piece was rejected because, at the time, the newspaper had a white target audience. This was his first taste of prejudice in the field of publishing. As his career progressed he encountered many more obstacles, not only with newspapers, but with publishing houses as well.

Govender's political role as sports activist must be seen in conjunction with his career as a journalist, as he used his role as a reporter to further the cause of non-racial sport. As a journalist and a sports writer, he launched direct attacks on manifestations of apartheid in these arenas. This was a very effective means of political mobilisation. While employed as a teacher, he had to apply

to the Department of Education to be engaged as a part-time sports editor for *The Leader*. He used this opportunity to highlight racism and inequality in sport. Although his stint with *The Graphic* as a boxing columnist paid him only 10 shillings, he was grateful for the opportunity of watching live boxing at the ringside in the City Hall. It was these small beginnings and the many incidents he witnessed in sport that turned him into a forerunner in the quest for non-racial football and one of the founders of intergrated sport.

In addition to *The Leader* and *The Graphic*, Govender also wrote for the *Golden City Post* but it was his launch of the *Soccer Herald*, which had become the biggest black owned newspaper in the 1960s, that gave non-white soccer the coverage it had been denied in other newspapers. Govender soon became an executive member of the South African Soccer Federation which promoted amateur and professional, non-racial football. His involvement with sport extended to compering boxing and soccer matches at the Curries Fountain. He was actively involved in the sport and cultural boycott in the early 70s. Govender continued his career as a journalist on a part time basis. He offered political commentary in *The Sunday Tribune*, *The Daily News* and *Sunday Times* and still makes a contribution to several newspapers around the country on the subjects of the arts, sport and politics.

After resigning from South African Breweries, Govender purchased the Aquarius nightclub in Reservoir Hills and turned it into a theatre and restaurant. He saw this as an opportunity to finally dedicate more time to writing and the theatre. He offered his venue to local community groups and youth groups from the surrounding townships. The venture was eventually not financially viable and Govender closed down the theatre in 1987. He had a stint as Director in Residence at the Asoka Theatre, University of Durban-Westville in 1988.

Govender moved on to the Baxter theatre in Cape Town in 1991 as marketing manager and was Director of the Playhouse in Durban from 1993 to 1998. Govender was finally able to dedicate his time writing, a dream that he long nurtured (see Singh 2009i).

Currently Govender's repertoire boasts at least 16 plays, a collection of short stories, his memoirs and two novels. *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* (1996), won him the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 1997 for best first book in Africa and his memoirs *In the Manure*:

memories and reflections (2008) which was written a year before he turned 75 captures his life through his alter-ego, Sathie. Govender's first novel *Song of the Atman* (2006), which was shortlisted for both the European Union funded Jacana Prize and the Commonwealth Writers Prize in 2007, was described by Kader Asmal as a "South African classic" (see Singh 2009k). *The Lahnee's Pleasure* (2008) is Govender's second novel and his latest published offering. Govender's current work in progress will be discussed in Chapter Four.

Govender has worked tirelessly for at least four decades to eventual critical acclaim. His other achievements include an AA Vita Award for life long contribution to the theatre and a Vita Award for Best Playwright and Best Actor for *At the Edge*. In 1991 Govender was nominated as Africa's Best Playwright and The English Academy of South Africa awarded him a medal by for his contribution to South African literature and drama in 1999. In 2007 he received the Life Time Achievement Award from the Arts and Culture Trust, which was followed in 2008 by the Order of Ikhamanga in the silver category "for his contribution to justice through the medium of theatre" (Segar 2008:5). In October 2009, the eThekweni Municipality and the KwaZulu Natal Premier's office bestowed on Govender the honour of "Living Legend", his latest accolade.

2.3. South African Indian Theatre

Ronnie Govender has been credited by several of his counterparts for catalysing the creation of the Indigenous Theatre genre. It is necessary to provide an overview of the history of South African Indian Theatre, in order to contextualise Govender's theatrical career and track the role he played in the transformation of South African theatre.

As explained in Chapter One, 'Indic' refers to "theatre performances and related areas that have their roots in South African Indian experience". The term 'Indic' is used to "distinguish performances from the Indian subcontinent (Pillay 1992: Introduction). Schaffer argues that while the labelling of this genre might be construed as racist, it is necessary to present it as a distinct form and mark the theatrical contributions of Indian South Africans (Schaffer 1992:84-85). Annamalai (1998) contends that it is a challenge to draw up a socio-historical framework due to the range of forms and styles that constitute 'Indic'.

As is the case with the sub-genre South African Indian writings, critical research in the field of 'Indic' has been sparse. The University of Durban-Westville has, in the 1990s, attempted to fill the gap by researching and documenting this much neglected area. It was for this reason that *The Theatre Monograph Series* was introduced, where students and academics made inputs on the various components of 'Indic'. The 90s and beyond were productive periods for research in this area, due to media coverage and increased interest in the documentation of theatrical works and activities. (See for example, works such as Joseph 1991 and Chetty 2002).

Annamalai (1998) and Pillay (1994) cite lack of resource material and documentation as well as an inconsistent theatre tradition as some of the reasons for the void that existed in research. The fluid state of this canon made it difficult to keep a firm track of its development. Further, Eurocentric bias interfered with critical appreciation of Indic, as Manichean mindsets interpreted early forms of Indic such as the rituals and cultural activities as crude and primitive. "Indic theatre is ... perceived to be irrelevant to our evolving cultural identity, and that its main expressions are its exotic, but culture-specific dances with overt religious themes that are not consonant with a materialist ethos" (Pillay 1994: introduction). While separating the various components of Indic facilitates the investigation into its evolution, what must be taken into account, is that paradigm shifts have resulted in the existence of hybrid forms and styles.

Earlier in this chapter I briefly pointed to the religious, cultural and artistic practices of the indentured and 'passenger' Indians, which helped them keep in touch with their roots and forge a collective identity. It was these activities that formed the basis of 'Indic'. Earliest performance and literary activity were part of the oral tradition which was a universal trend due to illiteracy as well as a lack of published material. Literacy was the privilege of select classes and indentured immigrants were amongst the lowest on the rungs of the caste ladder in their motherland. Music, dance, religious rituals and dramatisation of scenes from religious epics like the Bhagavad Gita, Ramayan and Mahabharata saw the burgeoning of a colourful and lively performance tradition which was reflective of the Hindi, Tamil and Telegu communities. Bhajans and Kirtans, which were religious hymns, as well as folk songs and the highly sophisticated karnatic style of music were usually accompanied by a selection of musical instruments brought to these shores by immigrants and were rendered on special occasions, as well as for relaxation. The ancient dance forms of Bharatha Natayam, Kathak and Therukoothu (six-foot dance), were accompanied by live musical

renditions. Most of these activities were open air activities and were community driven (see Joseph 1991 and Annamalai 1998). In addition, folk tales and fables were narrated and sometimes dramatised as a means of education and entertainment for children. It is from this rich storytelling tradition that Govender found his own gift of storytelling which is a vital element of his literary works and stage productions (see Govender 2008b). The 'passenger' Indians too brought with them a collage of cultural and religious activities and a range of literature and musical instruments. The rendering of Quawalis and Ghazals was essential in the various religious and cultural activities. Flavours of this rich culture are evident in *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as a play (1981), when the Natchania dance is performed by Mothie when he recalls the jovial spirit that prevails the night before an Indian wedding, as well as the rendering of the Quawali as a means of social commentary in the political satire, *Off-side* (1984). Govender's May 2009 production, *Thunsil* effectively used traditional music, song and dance to link excerpts from his collection of short stories and plays.

Cultural activities and performances by Indian immigrants were largely male dominated and conducted in the vernacular. The use of English was a gradual process which took a while to be absorbed into 'Indic'. The ending of the indentured system in 1911 motivated Indian immigrants to take steps to preserve their cultures and languages. Vernacular schools and religious organisations took the lead in propagating cultural, religious and linguistic activities. The Eisteddfod, which was an annual competition in which all schools competed in various performance categories, motivated communities to throw their weight behind the projects. It was this healthy competitive spirit that brought out the best talent and raised the performance standards of early 'Indic'. The great community spirit that prevailed ensured that costumes, props and transport were readily available. What was encouraging is that there was a move away from male dominated performances as the eisteddfods encouraged male and female performers.

Religious organisations hosted shows for the purposes of fund raising. N.C. Naidoo, P.R. Pather and Mathiemugum Pillay were highly respected for their cultural initiatives in their communities in the 50s and 60s. N.C. Naidoo travelled with his troupe of school children by train across the country to raise funds for community organisations such as FOSA, while Mathiemugum Pillay presented professional shows in community halls across Durban.

Naidoo points to the fact that vernacular theatre was strengthened because of separatist laws.

We had no access to the productions of Afrikaner white companies. We had no theatre venues either. Cinemas and schools were the most often used venues. Segregation, which pre-dates the formal introduction of apartheid, helped to confine early Indian theatre ventures to more or less conventional lines.

(Naidoo 1992:3)

In the absence of indoor venues for theatrical activities, Indian cinemas such as the Royal Picture Palace in Victoria Street, Durban, were used after hours. Notable figures, such as Tommy Lalbahadur who presented plays in Hindi, scripted plays and put them on in such venues on Saturday nights. In spite of poor acoustics and the fact that performers were not professionally trained, this form of theatre strengthened the case for formal theatre in 'Indic'. Handwritten manuscripts by Lalbahadur and his counterparts are in existence in the archives of the Aryan Benevolent home in Durban (Schauffer 1992:86).

Indic prior to 1950 can be summed up as largely reflective of the traditional and cultural lifestyle of the Indian community. However, National Party rule from 1948 brought about sweeping socio-political changes that resulted in shifting paradigms in South African theatre in general. The Group Areas Act disrupted all activities, including cultural life, for Indians and other races. The divisive act negatively impacted on cultural activities due to changed lifestyles because of increased political tensions.

While the Indian community in South Africa was still largely insular, the influence of the academic curriculum and the fact that it became imperative to learn the language of the oppressor for social mobility meant the extension of 'Indic' towards the western or Eurocentric tradition. Literary works which were largely Eurocentric were taught at school and tertiary level. Schools and colleges were involved in productions of western texts. Liberal white academics and educationists like Pauline Morel, a principal of an Indian school, became interested in Indian culture. Morel began to produce Indian plays at her school. She also encouraged Indian students to participate in various productions. Morel later joined forces with a group of artists including Govender to form Durban Academy of Theatre Arts, which will be elaborated on later in this chapter.

In Durban, an interest was cultivated in Eastern classics such as *Shakuntala* during the late 50s, and white liberals such as Morel and Charlie Shields, a teacher at the Sastri College, produced these classics in English, with the usual trappings of elaborate sets and period costumes. Likewise, western plays such as *The Miser* by Moliere and even fairy tales were translated into vernacular languages. This marked an interesting blend of western and traditional cultures. This trend continued into the 1960s and it was evident that the embracing of the English language weakened the case for the continuation of vernacular traditional performance.

The harsh political changes in the country in the 50s sparked off resistance campaigns which impacted on the course of theatre. A few acting companies played to non-white audiences, exposing them to western theatre conventions. Govender and Naidoo felt the need to create opportunity for non-white theatre as state theatres were the sole preserve of the white population. "Fringe theatre groups were left to fend for themselves" Govender observes of that time (2008b:145), thus at the beginning of the 60s, attempts were made to create a theatre that embraced change and that was inclusive. The arrival of Indian theatre director Krishna Shah in 1961 is marked by many performers and researchers as the beginning of Indigenous Theatre for South African Indians, but it can be argued that Shah arrived at a point where artists already had some sense of what they wanted to achieve in 'Indic'.

In the late 1950s the Union of South African Artists (which later changed to become Union Artists) aimed at promoting black theatre by supporting various ventures in the country. Union Artists which was managed and sponsored by white liberals was originally created with the aim of protecting the interests of black artists in the white dominated entertainment industry, "but its potential to be the start of an important movement for black rights within the theatrical world was effectively neutralised not only because of its domination by white management and white financial backing, but also by its programme of activities" (Schauffer 1994:3). Krishna Shah, a guest of Union Artists was invited to bring his production of Rabindranath Tagore's *King of The Dark Chamber* to the country. Durban was fortunate to host him as it had the largest Indian population in the country. Shah was an award winning director who was sent by the Indian Academy to study American Theatre. Shah enjoyed the privilege of being schooled in Stanislavski's 'method' way and was exposed to various theatrical forms in the United States of America. Schauffer posits that choosing Shah to promote non white theatre was a safe option as he represented liberal, bourgeois

tradition and did not hail from the motherland (1994). The arrival of Shah from the United States marks Govender's formal entry into mainstream theatre. Govender describes this experience as "a defining moment [...]. This was where he belonged, the theatre was what it was all about" (2008b:4).

Shah staged *King of the Dark Chamber* at the Canegrowers Hall in M.L Sultan Technikon in 1962 and was persuaded to return in 1963 to conduct coaching clinics to local performers. Govender had written an article on the performance of Bashkar who was an impressive dancer. Summoned by Shah, who was impressed by his article, Govender became part of the coaching clinic which lasted for six weeks. Shah held intensive workshops at the St. Aidans Church Hall and because of time and space constraints had to work with two or three groups simultaneously. As a devoted theatre practitioner who mentored his group along the lines of 'Total Theatre' (Annamalai 1998), Shah exposed performers to all aspects of the theatre, from script writing to directing. Discussions were held at the end of the workshops. Participants had to produce a meaningful one act play. Govender's script, a one dimensional diatribe based on an old school friend Koonjebharie, was chosen because it characterised what Shah was searching for: socially relevant, unusual and honest. Shah at this stage was directing Alan Paton's *Sponono* and left the group with skills that were to impact profoundly on the growth and direction that 'Indic' was to take. Govender went on to write his first play *Beyond Calvary* (1964) which he presented together with plays of his friends Benjy Persadh and Benny Bunsee in a trilogy called *Trio against Trains*. Shah's workshops had fostered the need to create works that were original and three dimensional and this allowed theatre practitioners the opportunity to realise the wealth of potential waiting to be unleashed.

The Durban Academy of Theatre Arts was formed soon after the completion of Shah's workshops, as a result of the associations forged by various stakeholders in the field of theatre. It included Professor Fatima Meer, Welcome Msomi, Ronnie Govender, Muthal Naidoo, Devi Bhagwan and Pauline Morel. DATA was the first multiracial company that represented purely western theatrical tradition by presenting only Eurocentric works. DATA was financed by Union Artists and used the M.L. Sultan Technikon as a venue for rehearsals. Although DATA can be credited for producing a host of Indian Theatre practitioners, its liberal Eurocentric bias led to its eventual dissolution. Segregation laws threatened the existence of multiracial theatre organisations like DATA and members were split in their visions of the path that Indic should follow. While

some members were comfortable in continuing the Eurocentric, liberal vein, others like Govender and Naidoo rejected the elitist position that DATA occupied and wished to work on modern material that reflected on the contemporary socio-economic and political milieu.

The split in DATA led to the creation of the Shah Theatre Academy, named in honour of Krishna Shah, in 1964. It was in the Shah Theatre Academy that many well established actors, like Mohamed Ali, Essop Khan and the late Kessie Govender cut their teeth. Govender was in charge of scriptwriting, while the directing was the responsibility of Muthal Naidoo:

The Shah Theatre Academy differs from other local contemporary theatre society in that it was formed with the express purpose of fostering indigenous theatre [...] to encourage a progressive outlook and break away from the conventional attitude to the theatre prevalent in Durban [...] the Academy is constantly searching for indigenous plays and those who have written plays are kindly asked to contact the group.

(The Shah Theatre Academy brochure 1969)

The activities of the Shah Theatre Academy ensured that the seeds of Indigenous Theatre were firmly planted. The initiatives of the Academy once again added new dimensions to Indic. It was not possible for the Shah to operate on a full time basis as many of the artists already had full time jobs. The Academy was faced with time, financial and space constraints, but it was racial laws and the lack of commitment by individuals to continue striving towards a non-racial theatre that presented the larger obstacles. However, “Govender’s work became central in the formation and canonisation of a new genre of indigenous English South African Indian Theatre that combined social criticism, political satire and the use of local idioms and expressions arising from the experiences and history of Indians in Durban and Natal” (Hansen 2000:59). The activities of the Shah Theatre Academy continued for approximately 30 years during which various members branched out into other organisations or embarked on solo careers.

The volatile political atmosphere sparked by the Sharpville massacre as well as the banning of the ANC gave rise to the Black Consciousness movement. Student organisations like SASO, which were at the forefront of the struggle, included Indian membership. It was out of this deep political

commitment that The Theatre Council of Natal (TECON) was created with the aim of protecting and promoting black performing arts. Students like Saths Cooper and Strini Moodley initiated this organisation which was made up largely of the black middle class. According to Annamalai (1998) TECON neglected the black rural population by initiating all of its activities in the city. Operating from the YMCA in Beatrice Street, TECON worked within a liberal paradigm. While TECON did not receive much white patronage, it demonstrated a swing away from the multiracial approach that DATA and The Shah Theatre Academy propagated. Schauffer relates what it was like to be on the receiving end when he was denied membership because he was white (See Schauffer 1994). TECON continued to produce Eurocentric works in spite of its strong ties with the tenets of the Black Consciousness Movement.

By the 1970s political activism in South Africa was reaching new heights and the Nationalist government imposed harsh measures in order to stunt political activism effectively. Theatre felt the oppressive power of the state in the form of banning and censorship. TECON was one of the groups that was targeted by the state. The Publications Act of 1974 severely hampered the progress of artists, many of whom had chosen to leave the country. Theatrical presentations took on the protest mode and were staged in halls and on campuses. Artists were faced with the dilemma of avoiding the bannings and censorships and producing socially relevant work. Artists showed their commitment to the struggle by being part of the cultural boycott.

Govender was at the forefront of the cultural boycott in Durban. Once again artists were caught between their political allegiances and their commitment to their art. Govender, who was clear about his position, refused to showcase his plays abroad and rejected invitations to participate in national festivals. In this sense theatre certainly was a weapon against oppression. American playwright Arthur Miller was the first international artist to ban his plays from being staged here. He is said to have made an exception when Govender explained that Miller's play *A View from a Bridge* was to be produced by a non-racial theatre company, and he waived royalties as a mark of support. Govender also pushed for a non-racial culture to be practiced at the Grahamstown Festival where his play *At the Edge* featured.

The 70s was also characterised by productions which focused on working class and race issues. It was *The Lahnee's Pleasure*, first produced in 1974, that took the lead in this respect. Kessie

Govender and Kriben Pillay followed suit. The transition that characterised the 80s was met with intensified political intervention both on the part of the state and masses. The political transformation influenced a move towards community based theatre organisations which, due to lack of necessary support structures, struggled to sustain themselves. The establishment of organisations like Komunikon headed by Ketan Lakhani and The Upstairs Theatre run by Saira Essa and Alan Joseph, as well as the establishment of the Libra Theatre by Ronnie Govender in the 80s, widened the range within which 'Indic' operated to include more community based projects. Speech and Drama was a popular extra curricular activity amongst Indian scholars who attended one of the many schools that operated in the city centre and in residential areas. Muthal Naidoo's dream of establishing the Sydenham Cultural Institute did not materialise, mostly because of a lack of funding. The Libra Theatre was established at the Aquarius Restaurant in Reservoir Hills, which was purchased by Govender. The vision behind the Libra was that fringe theatre groups and community and youth groups from neighbouring areas such as Kwa Mashu would be able to use the theatre for development and to showcase their works. Experimental productions like Ajay Hurban's *JUMP!* was one of the efforts by University students who used the Libra.

Political satire was a popular genre from 1983 onwards and was reflective of the trend of South African theatre in general. By this time Peter Dirk-Uys had popularised the concept through his artfully constructed dialogues and impersonations of political figures. 'Indic' drew much material from the tricameral parliament in which Indians who chose to be a part of the three tiered government were regarded as sellouts – selfish, power hungry individuals who had ignored the broader political implications for the majority of the population. Muthal Naidoo produced *We Three Kings* (1982) which castigated Indian political sellouts, while Govender's *Off-side* (1984) lampooned Indian political figures of the 80s. The distinct political agenda combined with sarcasm and farce attracted large crowds.

'Indic' in the 90s had several ramifications. On the one hand politically relevant plays and productions based on the political transformation was one angle that 'Indic' took. On the other hand, there seemed to be an enthusiastic market for family dramas and comedy, which were commercial in nature, with plays such as *Mooidevi's Muti* (1998) by Aldrin Naidoo and *Coconut Busters* (1999) by Mohamed Ali and Essop Khan. Farce, family drama and comedy which formed part of popular theatre were embraced by the Indian theatre audience. Many of these productions

played to packed houses, turning theatre into a lucrative enterprise. The trio of Mohammed Ali, Essop Khan and Savy Ramsamy extensively toured the country, bringing even conservative families to laughter. Family comedy is still a successful facet of 'Indic', as the trio continues to churn out side splitting productions. Political satires continued well into the 90s and the democratic change allowed for the spotlight to fall on new political figures like Archbishop Emeritus and Nelson Mandela in plays such as Govender's *Backside* (1998).

The significant democratic changes that occurred since 1990 heralded a new kind of focus. Indic plays took on a deeper intellectual, social and political role, exploring race relations, class issues and social mobility. Kriben Pillay's *Looking for Muruga* (1995) and Govender's *At The Edge* (1997) stand out in this genre. Both Govender and Pillay look to the past to correct the present. The significance of the past on the present will be explored in detail in Chapter Three. Pillay, a university academic and playwright, successfully merged elements of the existential Absurd theatre with new Realism in this complex, yet well balanced production.

The 1990s also was an important period for women in 'Indic'. With plays exploring gender issues being staged, a greater focus was given to issues surrounding gender roles and abuse, especially in the Indian community. Krijay Govender's *Women In Brown* (1998) was a refreshing change in 'Indic'. Women's Day celebrations encouraged new material and this resulted in a range of gender based performances. Govender debunked the notion that male playwrights generally placed male characters as protagonists and females on the peripheries through his play *Blossoms From the Bough* (1986) which featured a solo performer, Lily Ferlito, who played out the story of her life as a child of mixed parentage during apartheid.

By the 1990s Hansen notes that, "the battle for recognition for Black theatre and Indian theatre had been on. In 1990, Kessie Govender was admitted...to the Natal Performing Arts council and Govender became director of the Natal Playhouse. Dozens of plays by Africans and Indians have been staged since then" (2000: 261).

Comedy is still today the drawcard for Indian audiences who pack theatres and community halls for comedy shows, while there is a select theatre audience for more intellectual and artistically complicated productions. Young Indian theatre audiences attend comedy shows in droves while

community halls prove to be easily accessible venues for touring theatre groups. The lifting of the Indian cultural boycott has seen a surge in the interest in Bollywood inspired plays and song and dance shows. Regular productions, both local and imported are extremely commercialised and form an important segment of popular entertainment.

Community theatre has taken on a whole new dimension by extending itself to social upliftment projects. Leading playwrights are often commissioned to spearhead these projects. Youth groups formed to keep groups off the streets explore socially relevant issues and present them both at amateur and professional levels. This augers well for Theatre for Development in the 'Indic' canon. Looking out for the disadvantaged allows 'Indic' to play a significant role in social upliftment and to move away from the insularity that characterised earlier forms of 'Indic'.

Despite the relative popularity of theatre for Indian audience, competition from the film industry, especially Bollywood, impacts negatively on theatre attendance. That certainly does not however, detract from earnest soul-searching theatre that compares very favourably with the international market. Govender still continues to be at the forefront of meaningful, quality theatre which has genuine stories to tell. Govender's *At The Edge* has played to a deeply appreciative international audience in the Edinburgh festival in 1991, the Canada-South Africa Festival in 1994. He has recently been invited to do a production of *The Lahnee's Pleasure* in New York where he delivered a key-note address and a reading of the play was done by a group of performers from New York (2009). Endeavours such as this show Govender's ongoing efforts to propel 'Indic' to new heights.

2.4 A short overview of South African Indian writings

The history of South African Indian writing mirrors that of 'Indic' and the arts in general. Politics and repression underpinned the art of the non-white population during apartheid, and to a large extent politics continues to foreground much of the art produced post apartheid albeit with changed perspectives. Indenture, language issues and the fact that as late as 1910, education was not compulsory for Indians, spelt a slow entry into the field of written literature: "In 1927, some 10000 children out of a total of 55000 children between 5 and 19 years of age were accommodated in 39 schools" (Burrows in Annamalai 1998:47). It was largely due to community effort that additional

schools were built, as education was considered by the majority of the Indian population as the cornerstone of economic and social progress.

The joint family system, political turbulence, poverty and poor infrastructure were further impediments to the field of literature. The efforts and talents of writers from the Indian community often went unnoticed as there were hardly any channels through which literary efforts could be showcased and encouraged. A few schools took the lead in publishing the efforts of their pupils in the school magazine. Govender credits his school principal, Mr. Barnabas for creating opportunity such as the school magazine to motivate pupils' literary talents. Most South African Indian writers were influenced by the literary works that were taught at the school. Even though the set texts were Eurocentric, it was these western texts and writers such as Dickens, Wordsworth and Shakespeare, together with passionate and dedicated educators, that have instilled the love of literature in the majority of writers. Most writers were only introduced to writers of the East and Africa at tertiary level.

Let me say this: there were not many writers, Indian writers, in the first place even during the apartheid era. There are not many writers in the first place. And schools and universities were essentially colonial. In that literature meant English literature: Dickens, Conrad, Shakespeare, Hardy, Lawrence, and others, you see, it's colonial literature. And that also, secondly, at schools and universities all black literature was excised... [T]he government banned certain works by black writers - fortunately, my works [were] not banned, but they banned certain works by black writers, so students were not aware of black writing or Indian writing or of my own writing, they were not aware.... I do feel now, of course, that Indian writers have a better chance of having their works read at universities and schools.

(Essop in Rastogi 2008:186-187)

In spite of large levels of illiteracy during the apartheid era, there was a course of rich oral Indian tradition and it was not uncommon for members of a community, especially the older generation, to be able to recite chunks from Indian scriptures, mythology and religious texts. Storytelling was a great source of entertainment and a useful tool for education and fostering bonds between the storyteller, usually the grandparent, and the recipient, usually children. In the absence of written texts, the oral literary tradition kept alive the cultural heritage of a community. One of

Govender's strengths as an artist is his ability "to return the evocations of 'primitive' storytelling" (Govender 2008b:150) for which, as mentioned earlier he gives his grandmother, Amurthum, special credit.

Limited publishing opportunities, censorship, financial constraints and bannings often dampened the creative spirit of writers of colour. Organisations such as PEN and the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW), to which Govender was affiliated as a member, as well as literary magazines such as *Contrast*, *New Coin* and *Staffrider*, were the launch pads of a range of well established South African Indian writers. Ravan Press, established by Peter Randall, took the lead in publishing the works of black artists. *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as play (1981), Govender's first published text, was published by Ravan Press at a time when black writers struggled to have their works published. Govender reflects:

Publishing houses were not interested in publishing my plays...Getting published was not easy during the seventies and eighties. I tried a few times with the established publishing houses but was not successful. In fact, my autobiography was turned down by David Phillip Publishers because only the life narratives of eminent people were accepted...

(in Chetty 2002:340)

It was only in 1996 that Govender had the opportunity to publish *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* through Hibbard Publishers, as will be elaborated on in Chapter Three. Hibbard Publishers also published *Interplay: a collection of South African plays* (2005). Govender's two novels: *Song of the Atman* (2006) and *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel (2008) were published by Jacana Media, while interestingly, it was David Philip Publishers that eventually published Govender's memoirs *In the Manure: memories and reflections* (2008) after rejecting Govender's earlier submissions of his autobiography during apartheid.

As discussed in Chapter One, it was the short story and poetry forms that were the most feasible genres during apartheid. The cryptic nature of poetry rendered it safe a route by which writers could be truly expressive but covertly political. For Govender, it was play as genre that

served both his political and artistic aspirations during apartheid. However, as argued in this thesis, Govender's large repertoire proves that he moves between genres and that his choice of genre serves and complements his political intention in a particular socio-political period. Govender's plays for example, were effective in relaying political messages during apartheid because of their immediacy.

While some writers adhered to a militant protest agenda, others like Govender turned their attention to human behaviour and experience. What emerges quite clearly from an analysis of Govender's work rebuts the notion that he is essentially a protest writer. Govender presents a canvas of life's experiences through the power of characterisation and storytelling. Ahmed Essop who hails from the same generation of writers as Govender shares his views on the power of storytelling:

My stories manifest themselves most immediately as mirrors of life of the Indian community, and in a larger sense, South Africa as a whole...I think all our writers are not writing parochially, they are dealing with human nature, and human nature is the same all over the world, although values are shifting...

(in Chetty 2002:356)

Other writers who strengthened the canon called South African Indian Writings include, Aziz Hassim and Essop Patel. Patel acknowledges Ravan Press for publishing his early writing and like Govender draws inspiration from his community. Essop started his writing using short story as form during apartheid and, as mentioned in Chapter One, progressed to the novella. Post apartheid Essop, like several of his counterparts has also embraced the novel as form.

Post apartheid writings by South African Indian artists display a new confidence and lighter spirit, reflective of changes the new democracy has heralded. There has been a notable increase in the number of full length novels such as Farida Karodia's *Other Secrets* (2000) and Aziz Hassim's *The Lotus People* (2002). Post apartheid writings have, in most cases, shed the insular images of earlier works and engage in universal issues. Writers such as Govender are boldly taking on current issues through comedic and satirical approaches in novels such as *The Lahnee's Pleasure* (2008).

There is also substantial evidence of writers going back to their roots (see for example Hassim and Moodley in Rastogi 2008). Rastogi observes that “many Indian writers refuse to italicize certain Indian words, indicating the naturalization of Indian language in the national psyche” (Rastogi 2008:10). It is not uncommon to find existential philosophies, absurdist mind games and powerful satire of post apartheid South African Indian writings but it’s clear that “there is a direct and determinate relationship between political occasion and literary expression in South Africa even after apartheid” (Rastogi 2008:162).

Chapter Three

In Chapter Three I will focus on a selection of texts which are most suited to my purpose in exploring changing genre and political purpose in Ronnie Govender's works. To this end, I will closely examine *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as play (1981), *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel (2008) and "At The Edge" and "1949" (1996), first as short stories then as plays. Of particular significance to form change in this thesis, is the fact that Govender had created a playscript based on "At The Edge" and produced it at the Asoka Theatre in 1987, and 1994, well before publishing his story collection *At The Edge and other Cato Manor Stories* in 1996, Govender subsequently produced the play called *1949*, which dramatised four stories from the short story collection. Thus we have a pattern of play, short story, play emerging for this work.

The recasting of the above mentioned works in various genres serves to strengthen the arguments on form change as linked to political purpose in this chapter. The interrogation of political agenda spanning from apartheid to post apartheid allows me to look at the significance of past for the present, through the analysis of the reprised works. Further, this approach serves to advance the ongoing debate between aesthetics and politics, which has been mentioned in Chapters One and Two and forms a strong thread throughout this thesis.

The flexibility of the chosen works will lead me to draw on genre theory, particularly the form of the short story. As pointed out by Zoe Wicomb (2001) and Pallavi Rastogi (2008), the short story as form played a pivotal role in the development of artistic skills as linked to political consciousness during apartheid, especially for writers of colour: "It is impossible for a writer who lives in the conditions of oppression to organise his whole personality into writing a novel. The short story is used as a short cut to prose and gets same things off one's chest in a quick time" (Mphahlele quoted in Oliphant 1996).

Finally, through my analysis of the selected works, I will also briefly touch on Reception Theory in the form of audience reception in the plays under study, and reader reception in *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel because the audience and the reader are acknowledged in this thesis as vital stakeholders in communication and meaning making. A very direct relationship between audience and performance and a close interaction between reader and text becomes apparent as the analysis of the aforementioned texts progresses.

The nature of the audience reception of Govender's productions has been ascertained through my communication with Govender, as well as with performers who have repeatedly featured in the productions of his selected works, over a period of time, in various venues across the country. The involvement of these performers in the enactment of these texts both during and post apartheid provides a strong feedback, which I will link to Audience Reception Theories as expounded on by Susan Bennett (1990).

In *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel, the shift in emphasis from the audience of the play to the role of the reader will focus on the very direct, open relationship that the reader is engaged in with this text. I will very briefly draw on theories of Wolfgang Iser (1978), Stanley Fish (1980) and Hans Robert Jauss (in Bahti 1982) during my analysis of the novel in so far as they inform reader response in the novel. The close examination of selected works will enable me to comfortably explore Govender's switches and creative experimentation with form as well as change in emphasis in political agenda.

3.1. The *Lahnee's Pleasure* as play

The Lahnee's Pleasure as play, which was written in 1974 and published in 1981 following the success of *Swami* (1967), was regarded as a watershed play in the development of Indigenous theatre in the country, and held the record for being the longest running play in the 70s. Govender, together with Muthal Naidoo, had taken the Shah Theatre Academy into its tenth year of fostering indigenous drama and building the careers of performers such as Kessie Govender, as mentioned in Chapter Two.

Play as genre has always been Govender's strength, so it was a natural choice for Govender to create *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as play. Govender had by then broken new ground by tackling social issues that weren't usually confronted in South African theatre circles. "I am duty bound as a playwright to heighten the social awareness of the people" (see Anon 1987:11).

Socio-political conditions are often determinants in the types of genre peculiar to a historic period. While genres are responsible for codifying and classifying literary works, Frow points to the dynamic nature of genres which "actively generate and shape our knowledge of the world" (Frow

2005: 2). The dynamic nature of genre will be illustrated in my analysis of the selected works which as already mentioned represent at least three different forms.

Most black South African writers during apartheid employed forms that would serve the dual purpose of fulfilling both aesthetic and political needs. While it was the short story that proved extremely popular as form, Govender was drawn to the play as form, finding that the most effective way of capturing the essence of life by exploring the interiority and intricacies in a text through the medium of stage. Each genre is presented with its own set of challenges and for the play, working around time constraints is one of them: “You’re presenting the whole world, a time span in an hour and a half or so...I think literature is about economy. And that is no more so than on the stage ...” (Govender in Rastogi 2008:223).

The play as form continues to be a strong point for Govender, who presents himself as a fluid writer who has shifted genres several times in his career. In fact, after creating at least 16 plays, Govender published his anthology of short stories and subsequently established himself as a writer of novels.

As an astute political activist and writer, Govender has always been keenly observant and deeply moved by life around him. It was during one of his rounds as a salesman for South African Breweries, that Govender had found his moment that occasioned the creation of his tour de force, *The Lahnee’s Pleasure*, which was originally written as a one act play and presented as part of the Union of Black Artists Festival at the Orient Hall, Durban in 1974. Its present two act version was reworked and presented to a multi racial audience at the Himalaya Hotel on 17th January 1976.

I had the direct experience of Natal Indians working on the sugar cane plantations and I presented it in my plays ... In a pub outside Durban, I saw blacks and whites being served at different bars and using different glasses, while their money was going into a single bank account. I asked the barman to call the owner, and when he arrived, he shook my hand with reluctance...This experience was the basis of my play.

(Govender in Anon 1987:11)

Set in a shabby, partitioned non-white pub of an old hotel that sits among the undulating sugar cane plantations in Mount Edgecombe in the 60s, *The Lahnee's Pleasure* is a microcosm of the lifestyle of working class citizens whose lives are constantly challenged by the oppressive socio-political milieu of the time.

It is through the character Mothie's traumatising, deeply personal experience that the larger socio-political and economic forces at play during apartheid, surface. Political undercurrents filter through the play right from the beginning and while the story of Mothie takes centre stage, political issues are presented, sometimes subtly, but often head on, as will be illustrated in this chapter. *The Lahnee's Pleasure* proves to be a suitable text through which political purpose in this thesis is examined. Exploration of political purpose in this play, points to the view that socio-politics in art is unavoidable since life is shaped by existing socio-political conditions. Using characters in a play as vehicles of a playwright's own political stance is a popular way of merging one's aesthetics and politics. It is significant that *The Lahnee's Pleasure* was written in the early 70s when theatre, as mentioned in Chapter Two played a vital role in creating political awareness, in the absence of a free press which was constantly under threat due to bannings and censorship. The overtly political protest mode was prevalent in all aesthetic forms at the time. However, what lifts *The Lahnee's Pleasure* from being a limited protest play, is its authenticity and versatility. It is Govender's "return to the evocations of primitive fireside storytelling" (2008b:150) that distinguishes *The Lahnee's Pleasure* from other one dimensional protest plays of the time. Govender enriches the simple plot by investing in it the entertaining storytelling mode through his character's lively accounts of their personal experiences, which will be fully elaborated on in this chapter. Govender's preoccupation with reaching the essence of his characters' lives is the point of departure in his art. This stance clearly validates Ndebele's views on what constitutes literature that frees itself from the overt protest mode, which he argues, has stunted the creative potential of writers during apartheid (1994). Ndebele's suggestions that writers go back to their roots in order to unearth a treasure trove of material waiting to be explored is fully endorsed by Govender through his writing approach. These points support my argument that while *The Lahnee's Pleasure* is a political play, it cannot be stereotyped as a protest play by virtue of its rich cultural emphasis and its deeply sensitive portrayal on life through the power of storytelling.

The play's political agenda is exposed as soon as the play opens and the audience is conscientised about the prevailing status quo through the engagement between Sunny, the barman, and a middle class stranger who has been abroad for a period of time and needs to be filled in on the modus operandi at the White House Hotel.

Sunny: I get so busy here... I got to serve both sides man

Stranger: Both sides?

Sunny: See this portion here? That side for the white people, this side Indian people

Stranger: No trouble and all that?

Sunny: No, no trouble, nothing with these fellers man. You know bro, twelve and a half years I'm working here. (Govender 1981:60)

The entry of the protagonist Mothie, the middle-aged widowed labourer dressed in shabby overalls, smoothly shifts emphasis to his personal dilemma which sets the stage for lively interaction of the characters and lays bare the issues that concern the working class. Mothie's noisy entry stirs the calm atmosphere that prevails on weekdays and he becomes self conscious when he happens upon the stranger. The non-white bar usually comes alive on Friday afternoons, which is pay day, when workers come to the bar to unwind from the pressures of the working week.

Sunny, Mothie's junior, who resourcefully manages both the white and non-white sections of the bar, is concerned that Mothie has missed work and is drinking on a weekday. Sunny has an affinity towards Mothie, not only because Mothie was a friend of his father but also because he is aware of the challenges that Mothie faces as a widowed parent and a labourer.

It is Mothie's missing daughter that is the reason for his dishevelled state and disorderly behaviour. Except for the day he lost his mother, Mothie has never missed a day's work in his thirty years as a tractor driver on the plantations. Mothie's daughter has run off after she was caught in a compromising position with a young man at home and was beaten by Mothie who is at wits end as he must face his responsibility as a single parent of six children. To add to the worry about his daughter's safety, is the nagging anticipation of the reaction of his relatives and the community at large, and the prospect of having his otherwise spotless reputation tarnished, as well as the guilt that overwhelms him because his youngest son Prem had to miss a day of school as he was witness to

his sister's immoral conduct. Mothie's strong values are revealed when he voices his concern that his daughter has been a poor role model to her younger brother.

Mothie's disturbed state of mind drives him to drink away his sorrows by imbibing large amounts of cheap wine, as his economic status denies him the privilege of tanking up on cane spirits. Mothie's desperate, futile attempts to enlist help in finding his daughter adds to his turbulent state which results in untamed outbursts, much to the consternation of Sunny who is caught between his empathy for the old man and the fear of being reprimanded by the Lahnee, the white owner, for permitting Mothie's raucous behaviour.

Mothie's futile attempts to enlist the help of the police to search for his daughter points to an oppressive socio-political environment that complicates his life in untold measure. What could have been a simple exercise has turned out to be a humiliating experience at the hands of the very people who should be protecting the rights of their citizens. Not normally outspoken, Mothie lashes out in anger at the grave injustice he has just suffered when instead of being supportive, the policemen amuse themselves with Mothie's complaint. Even a black policeman like Moosa uses his authority to exploit the down trodden.

Mothie: Those bastards, man. They think that they can act like that and get away. You bloody see what I'm going to do today. I'll fix them up, one by one. I'll fix them up! Yeah, act like that to me and get away.

Sunny: What happened, happened, didn't go work today?

Mothie: I went there, I went there and they laugh at me, man. Police must look after us, not right Sunniya?
(62)

In sharp contrast to Mothie's urgent and painful outpourings is his indulgence in nostalgic recollections of the past, which creates a prism through which the rich culture and strong values of a close knit community filter. Mothie finds himself flashing back to happier times of revelry in order to escape from the difficult present. He prompts Sunny to call back the past with him as he reminds Sunny of his father, Kista.

Mothie: Arreh, our time, man-our time. Saturday night! Jolling night! Arreh, what big, big prayers we'll have. Wedding! big, big wedding we'll have. All Mount Edgecombe will be full up. People coming from Durban, Sydenham all over. Full, full, Mount Edgecombe. Saturday night, all night dancing! Wedding night! (64)

Mothie gets so caught up in the moment that he automatically begins to dance the lively natchania dance and has to be motioned by Sunny to calm down.

While Mothie lays bare his soul and indulges in his escapism, it is through Sunny's interventions with Mothie that reveal the games that the working class must play in their quest for survival and a decent lifestyle. Both Mothie and Sunny are bent on upward mobility of their respective families in order to break the cycle of poverty. Mothie's determination to educate all his children and the repetition of his statements of Prem's scholastic achievements is reflective of a community which saw education as the cornerstone of upward mobility, as mentioned in Chapter Two. Being a tractor driver for the past thirty years is the only vocation that Mothie knows, while Sunny has followed in his father's footsteps by becoming a barman, though his expertise with figures could have turned him into a successful accountant.

The difference between Mothie and Sunny is that Sunny is an opportunist and while his behaviour earns him the reputation of being a real stooge, he is simply mastering the art of survival. Mothie's main concern is to educate his children and put food on the table; while Sunny is in a slightly more privileged position, as through his crafty disposition, he is able to make a bit of money on the sideline, by pouring short tots and occasionally smuggling in his own stock of liquor which he sells at a tidy profit. Juxtaposing Sunny with Mothie is strategic in displaying the varying attitudes of the Indian working class.

In contrast to Mothie's straightforward, no holds barred approach is Sunny's nauseating Uncle Tom persona that ensures that he stays out of trouble and can indulge in a few of life's little luxuries, like owning a car, buying his wife saries and taking his family to the movies. Sunny is acutely aware of the racial imbalances and is sensitive to the reactions of the white man, but he plays the role of loyal servitude expected of him in order to get what he wants, a shrewd move in the game of survival. He ignores the condescending comments of the Lahnee and the white patrons

and refrains from negative outbursts in order to play safe. Much to the disgust of the stranger, he does nothing about the fact that he has longer service than the white barman who earns a lot more than he does or about being labeled a 'coolie'.

Sunny: Then suddenly this boere cop stopped me. I pulled up one side... what's a matter bliksem, don't you know your tail lights are not working... I said, sorry sir, I didn't know sir... He looked up at me and he says... Alright, you coolie.

Stranger: Coolie

Sunny: Yeah! Alright, you coolie- you better fix it up. Next time I'll fine you. I bet you if I didn't say sir he would have fined me.

Stranger: I would have paid the fine! Nobody calls me a coolie or bliksem- not even a cop.

Sunny: Yeah, but sometimes it pays to act stupid (76)

Sunny is so bent on ensuring that the feathers of the Lahnee are not ruffled that he constantly reprimands Mothie who is a source of embarrassment that may cast him in bad light. He fears that Mothie's behaviour would result in harsh stereotyping by the Lahnee and the white patrons. Sunny's compromising position is met with disgust by both Mothie and the Stranger, but only he knows the mockery and racial insults that rings in his ears on a daily basis. At the pub Sunny has managed to manipulate a situation to create a reasonably comfortable economic position for himself. Sunny's compliance is reflective of the majority whose conformity perpetuates their status and stifles their upward mobility due to their disempowerment.

As mentioned in Chapter One, Govender has been deeply inspired by Augusto Boal who argues for a theatre for the people and posits that theatre is a weapon against socio-political ills; as well as Paolo Freire, who championed the cause of the oppressed by creating revolutionary literary programmes that endowed them with a critical consciousness that could be used for self-liberation. In the absence of adult literacy programmes in South Africa in the 70s, Govender has used theatre to highlight working class concerns:

Not only in South Africa but in third world countries there is massive poverty. You could choose to write bestselling novels, ignoring these realities. You could also write one-dimensional plays which inevitably fail... or, you could look at life honestly, into the hearts of the beggar man, thief or the prince....

Theatre of oppression is about the eroding effects of poverty and the human condition.

According to Anamalai (1998), *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as play represents a paradigm shift where the working class is given a voice and a balanced account of history is presented. By capturing working class patois and placing emphasis on Mothie, working class concerns and their strategies for survival as well as inter-class concerns become pivotal, marking a break with convention where the working class is robbed of the acknowledgement and vitality it deserves.

Mothie's entrances and exists serve to change the emphasis of the conversations and it is during one of his exits that Sunny and the Stranger are able to use Mothie as vehicle through which working class concerns are driven.

Sunny: Poor people get all the trouble. He's a tractor driver. They only pay him R60 a month. They get a place to stay and rations. But he's got seven children. What can you do with R60 a month? But he's a good man. He keeps them all tidy and sends them to school. (67)

The Stranger, who is unknown to the community of Mount Edgecombe and is unfamiliar with the area, serves as a foil to Sunny and Mothie. According to Govender (Singh2009), not giving The Stranger a name is a deliberate omission in order to drive home the fact that the stranger simply does not fit into the working community and can never fully understand the motivation behind their attitudes and decision making, As a stock or 'Everyman' type of character who represents the middle class student activist who has the privilege of a tertiary education, the Stranger has had the opportunity of living abroad which has empowered him to fight for emancipation and command respect. He fails to realise that, while every individual has the capacity to be empowered, not every person has the equal opportunity of empowerment. The Stranger fits the stereotype of the intellectual elite: "Political elitism is a reference to those in the comfort of relative economic and intellectual freedom, who attempt to bring about socio-political change" (Annamalai 1998:9). By way of contrast, Mothie shares the oppression of Paolo Freire's illiterate peasants in Peru. Govender's concern with class shows a leaning towards Marxism and echoes the working class concerns that Bertolt Brecht voices, as mentioned in Chapter One.

It is Johnny who creates the dramatic tension in the play because he fits the description of the long haired young man with whom Mothie's daughter is in love. Sunny has quickly assumed that it could only be Johnny, the streetwise wheeler and dealer who cuts quite a figure with the ladies because of his charm and confidence; one who could be so brazen as to spoil a good girl's reputation and then leave for greener pastures. As the local Casanova, Johnny surveys the scene to pick up his bait in the form of luscious, innocent maidens. However, I draw Johnny in at this point of the analysis because he demonstrates an unconventional, resilient, hands-on approach to survival of working class citizens. Like Mothie and Sunny, Johnny is a victim of circumstances which drives him to operate in an under handed manner.

Johnny: Okay, okay, don't get so worked up. I also worked honest once. I left school because my parents couldn't afford to send me, like. I worked in this factory in Pinetown. Then this wit ou joined us. I had to teach him the job. He was a foreigner, and he couldn't even speak English. I taught him everything and then he started pushing me around. How you like that?

Stranger: Same bloody scene all over!

Johnny: I took a good look around. Char ous were working there for years longer than some of the wit ous- but they weren't earning more than even the laaitjie wit ous- even the foreigners!

(Govender 1981:97-98)

Johnny makes it clear that he had tried his best to keep a job but he was not prepared to put up with multitudinous injustice heaped upon him.

Johnny: Then I thought, why don't you be your own boss? That was it... I make more money in one month than you guys make in three months (98).

After exiting from the system, Johnny becomes "the exploiter of the exploited" (Joseph 1991:23). Beneath the impulsive outward persona is a young man with an uncertain future. Unlike Mothie and Sunny, he has a vision of a better life but is embittered in the knowledge that that vision will not materialise in this country.

Johnny: I'm going to pull out of this country, man. There's no future. Out there there's a whole lot of living. I want to go to a place where I get a chance to live like human being... (98)

It is clear through Johnny's interaction with Sunny and The Stranger in Act Two that he is no pushover and that, like the Stranger, he represents the young generation which is endowed with an acute political sense and take a stance against racism. However, while the Stranger is an activist who wishes to make a change in the country but is frustrated because there isn't enough support for the apartheid struggle to make a noticeable difference, Johnny decides to walk away and adopt a selfish attitude because he has not been empowered through education to fight for the country. Like Mothie and Sunny, Johnny doesn't even contemplate the vision of a better future through self empowerment.

It is Mothie's inebriated state that sets free his views albeit in a boisterous, crass manner, much to the dismay of Sunny. In fact Mothie is a great source of amusement when he boldly utters that he is entitled to freedom of expression in the bar, only to cower and bow to the Lahnee at the sight of him.

Sunny: Ssh man, don't make so much noise. The wit ous are laughing at us.

Mothie: Let them laugh, hell! I'm paying for my wine. Just because they white people must start shivering for them! Me, I don't fright for white people. White people can do me bugger all.

(Enter the Lahnee. Mothie turns suddenly to notice him behind the counter).

Mothie: Hello Boss... How you, boss...

(The Lahnee glares at him)

(To the Stranger): Hey, Hey you! That's Mr. Simpson. He's the Lahnee here. He likes me...

Sunny: ...Come here, I'll tell you something .Don't shout. White people are listening to us.

Mothie: Hell let them listen. I'm drinking here. My business if I want to make a noise. You saw yourself the Lahnee never say nothing ... (66)

It is this type of cowering together with the condescending attitude of the Lahnee that pushes the Stranger from a state of empathy to that of rebellion.

Lahnee: Aw, come on Sammy, have one on me...

Stranger: (Whirling around towards the Lahnee in absolute fury) My name is not Sammy! You got no right to call me Sammy! Sammy! (In the silence that follows, Mothie tries to restrain the Stranger).

Mothie: Boss only joking, bhai...

Stranger: Leave me alone!

Mothie: Bhai, don't be so angry (Tries to hold him by the arm)

Stranger: (Angrily pushing Mothie away) Leave me alone, you fool! (To the Lahnee) One day, white man, one day! (Exit) (Shocked silence) (102)

He is politically articulate and defiant and questions Mothie and Sunny's complacency. Though he quickly endears himself to the suffering Mothie and colludes with Sunny to bring the culprit who spoilt Mothie's daughter's reputation to book, he refuses to put up with the condescending attitude of the Lahnee and is revolted to find Mothie and Sunny in submission. The Stranger's desperate and angry attempt to change Mothie's and Sunny's mindset is a waste as they are set in their ways and are fearful of authority of the white man. The Stranger is a controversial character who challenges the status quo, urging Sunny and Mothie to fight back against racism. French professor, Alvarez-Pereyre (see Anon1989) who watched a production of *The Lahnee's Pleasure* in South Africa and wrote a treatise entitled "The Black Committed Theatre in South Africa during apartheid", stated that "*The Lahnee's Pleasure* together with a few plays by Fatima Dike and Maishe Maponye was an example of how committed plays present to people aspects of what they do in present South Africa and how they react to the system" (1989:5).

He added that by enlarging little shortcomings or little heroic acts, people became aware of their roles in the apartheid system" (1989) and credits both Mothie and the Stranger for having a conscientising effect on the audience albeit with different emphasis.

The Lahnee (the boss), hegemony personified, has the least amount of dialogue in the play, making brief appearances only thrice. This serves to emphasise the power that he wields by virtue of his race. He is able to command discipline even when he is invisible, for example: "Lahnee: (shouts from the white section). Sunny (Sunny jumps to attention...). (1981:65)

In fact he is even able to pull a few strings at the police station in order to get Sgt. Labuschagne to command the policemen to go and search for Mothie's daughter. Beneath the veneer of a caring man is a ruthless, exploitive opportunist whose perfect timing and shrewd eavesdropping have Mothie and Sunny eating out of his hands. He becomes a saviour because, in spite of Sunny and the Stranger going all out to catch the culprit, just one phone call from the Lahnee solves the mystery as

to the whereabouts of Mothie's daughter. Knowing full well that Sunny and Mothie are helpless and naïve, he freely releases his opinion of people of colour in one breath and makes it seem that he is truly happy to be of help to Mothie, yet the whole idea of helping Mothie is to get rid of him and maintain order in the bar.

Lahnee: No more drinks

Mothie: Please boss. One more

Lahnee: Look, do you want me to help you or not?

Mothie: Sure, boss. Right away boss. I'm going now Boss.

Lahnee: Okay, I'll phone Sergeant Labuschagne and tell him you're coming.

(Exit Mothie) (To Sunny after a cursory glance at the Stranger)

Crikey, what the hell do you people think this is- the Indian Market? (Exit Lahnee)

Sunny: You see, if you're nice to a white man, you see how they help you out. (84)

Audience Reception in *The Lahnee's Pleasure as play*

According to Bennett (1990) focus on audience reception and reader response theories has gained importance since the 60s and has added further dimension to the study of literature and the performing arts in general. The reader and the audience have been acknowledged as vital stakeholders in the process of meaning making and communication. "The audience has always held the power of making or breaking a play by attendance or abstention and has always been ultimately responsible for sustaining the performance." (Burns in Bennett 1990:19). Similarly, the theatre "cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual direct live communion. At least one spectator is needed to create performance" (Grotowski 1982:19).

The earliest forms of theatre had no definite barrier between spectator and performer as has been mentioned in Chapter One. Bennett (1990) posits that the ruling classes from the medieval age onwards took over the theatre and created barriers between the spectator and the performer, who had taken ownership of the theatre experience. While nineteenth century Realistic theatre manipulated the audience and lulled them into a sense of illusion, Brecht on the other hand demands an audience which is astute and critical. It is the audience's response that the performer feeds off and audience's response that determines the survival and success of a performance.

The Lahnee's Pleasure as play was recognised as a tour de force by reviewers and scholars such as Akhalwaya (1987) and Joseph (1991), not only because it was the first play to tell a story of life from the perspective of the working class Indian, but because for the first time in the history of theatre in South Africa, it managed to bring entire communities to be part of a theatrical experience. Earlier stagings of the play were met with great appreciation for its accessibility, its honesty, humour and pathos. For the first time audiences that were not part of the elite were taught that they too had stories to tell that were valuable and worthy of attention. The pure simplicity and the brutally honest, down to earth portrayal ensured that the play had numerous re-runs. The 'innocence' of the characters and the daily challenges and pleasures that they shared were all too familiar to audiences, who were immediately absorbed in the compelling drama. "It brought so called patois of Indian South Africans to stage" (Joseph 1991: 99).

The reprisal of the play on 17 January 1976 at the Himalaya Hotel in Durban catered for a multi racial audience for the first time. According to Mohamed Ali (interview Singh 2009a), an actor who played the role of Sunny the barman in both the first one act version of the play in 1974 at the Orient Hall in Durban, as well as in the reprised two act version in 1976, mentions that in spite of uncomfortable seating and poor air conditioning at the Himalaya Hotel, the run had to be extended twice over.

The Lahnee's Pleasure drew laughter and tears, and some very hushed moments as well. It took the audience on the gamut of emotions. According to Govender, some members of the audience, took what they saw very personally as they were emotionally drawn to the characters. Govender recalls how Sunny Clothier, who was a coloured actor who played the role of the Lahnee, was nearly attacked by a group of spectators in a makeshift theatre in Phoenix (Joseph 1991).

According to Bassy Bhole who played Mothie in the recasting of the play in 1989 to mark the 25th anniversary of the Shah Theatre Academy, 12 years after its run at the Himalaya Hotel, the play continued to draw enthusiastic responses at the Asoka Theatre at the University of Durban-Westville. In spite of a different generation of audience, there was a clear appreciation of the play. Many of the older members of the audience had decided to watch the production again after having watched it in the 70s. Was the enjoyment about or reliving the past albeit a painful one? Many who had seen it earlier came back with enthusiasm.

During the last run of the play in 2004 to mark its 30th Anniversary at the Supernova, Bhola recalls a group of ladies crying in empathy with the character of Mothie and his son Prem (interview Singh 2009c). I attended a production at the Supernova and observed that the audience, who were mostly Indian, were made up mostly of older people and large families. This almost exclusively Indian support is explained by Bhola: “We need to find a common identity...We haven’t found a South African identity. Once we start to embrace that, these barriers will break down.” (Bhola in Walne 2004b).

Ali (interview Singh 2009a) also speaks of emotionally charged audiences night after night but found that the younger audiences enjoyed the humour but missed the point of the story. He adds that it was however an important experience for younger generations of Indian descendant to learn how they came to be here in South Africa, to mark their achievements and look up to a proud history of survival. Ironically, this is achieved through a play such as *The Lahnee’s Pleasure*, which while observing Indian working class suffering, celebrates Govender’s achievement in dramatising this so vividly. The lasting impact of *The Lahnee’s Pleasure* as play bears testimony to the power of play as genre to effectively conscientise and capture the socio-political exigencies so immediately and vividly as only performance can do in a time of oppression. *The Lahnees Pleasure* as play has fulfilled Govender’s obligation as a committed artist “to heighten the social awareness of the people” (Govender in Anon 1987:11).

3.2. *The Lahnee’s Pleasure* as novel

As soon as the word ‘genre’ is sounded, as soon as it is heard, a limit is drawn... ‘Do’,
‘do not says genre...the voice, or the law of genre.

(Derrida and Ronell 1980:56)

Derrida’s ‘Principle of Contamination’, which advocates a blurring of the lines of demarcation that separates genres, points to the potentially dynamic nature of genre, which is pertinent to the study of form change in this thesis. Derrida’s ‘Principle of Contamination’ challenges the premise that genres should not mix.

The Lahnee's Pleasure published in 2008 as a novel, illustrates how a text adapts to genre change. Govender has exercised Derrida's 'Law of Impurity' in crossing over from play to novel by revisiting *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel. The blurring of lines is evidenced through the frequent insertion of dialogue, the foremost element of play as form. This "wandering along and across all margins" (Pechey 1998:64) includes the penetration of spatial, temporal and stylistic borders. Govender's defiance of the laws of genre by blending forms which Derrida refers to as "total genre" (1980:64), is also projected in his approach to his short story collection *At the Edge and other Cato Manor Stories* (1996). As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, theatre productions based on the play script born out of these stories occurred well before the publication of the collection itself.

The Lahnee's Pleasure as novel is Govender's second full length novel, following *Song of the Atman* (2006). It is significant that Govender broke into the novel mode during that phase of the post apartheid period which presented more favourable socio-political conditions which augured well for the strengthening of a lengthier genre that was previously severely challenging to pursue given the constraints of the apartheid period, as mentioned in Chapters One and Two. Greater publishing opportunities, a move away from hegemonic criticism to one which acknowledged and embraced multiple points of view, especially of the previously 'othered', as well as the feeling of euphoria that generally swept over the country, presented writers with ample opportunity to turn the novel into popular form:

The forms of genre are not arbitrary. On the contrary, they grow out of a concentered determinacy of the particular social and historical conditions. Their character, their peculiarity is determined by their capacity to give expression to the essential features of a given social-historical phase. Hence the different genres arise at particular stages of historical development...

(Lukacs in Frow 2005:13)

For Govender, a change in lifestyle has enabled him to pursue his dream of being a full time writer and move more firmly into novel as genre. As he mentions,

This has a lot to do with my move to Cape Town which saw me remove myself more time from my involvement in community affairs... I have finally been able to arrive at

a stage where I have far more time... The challenge of moving from one form to another excites me, or more accurately perhaps, is fodder for my creative 'impulsiveness'.

(email correspondence, see Singh 2009i)

It was Maggie Davey, Govender's commissioning editor who encouraged Govender to turn the play into novel following the success of *Song of the Atman* (2006) as he reveals:

At first I balked at the idea but the more I thought about it, the more the idea appealed to me. It provided me with the opportunity to explore the nooks and they lived with me for such a long time and given my familiarity with location, culture and crannies of the lives of the characters in the play. This wasn't difficult given that lifestyles.

(see Singh 2009i, email correspondence)

The advantage of the novel over the play is the luxury of time which allows opportunity to explore the environment in which the characters live and to uncover further points of interest in terms of the story. The challenge of turning a hugely popular play into a novel lies in maintaining an interest in the story. It is this challenge that has given rise to a satirical, light hearted tongue in cheek approach which sees a range of innovative techniques successfully merging especially in the sub-plot with all its diversions, which serves as a contrast to the realities that beset the lives of the characters in the central plot. This falls very much in line with the original plot in the play, except for some spicy additions. *The Lahnee's Pleasure* is a kaleidoscopic sketch of Mt. Edgecombe village life in the 60s, a sketch which captures the present while looking at the past. This "Janus-faced approach" (Chetty in Singh 2009i) "provides counter histories which rewrite history from the peripheries and [...] place the peoples objectified in the colonial encounters and marginalised by colonial histories into subject positions" (Petzold in Knapp 2006:21). It is the hero of the subplot, Fanyana Ngcobo who exemplifies this statement, which will be expounded on later in the chapter.

The past-present trope weaves through the text through the juxtaposition of the new South Africa with the old Republiek van Suid Afrika of the 60's, which thrusts upon the readers a sharp awareness of where they are right now. Soused with provocative name changes for the different race groups and suitably ridiculous titles for the motley crew that tends to create "a funny tale of a mix between Fawlty Towers and Bollywood" (Cohen 2009:13), the novel ingeniously tackles a political agenda by splicing satire with serious political statements. Set against the harsh socio-political backdrop of the 60's, Mothie's story brings to the fore serious concerns of the "melanin enriched" (Govender 2008:4) or the "melanin blessed". Of course through inversion in the subplot the "melanin restricted" (98) in the form of The Lahnee, hereafter referred to as Mr So-So is toppled from his ivory tower and reduced to a cuckold.

The structuring of the novel is an indication of Govender's bold experimentation with form, which sees him taking the liberty of employing traditional structuring techniques by dividing the novel into Prologue, Book the First, Book the Second and Epilogue. Using formal, typically English methods of expression and mischievous humour reminiscent of Chaucer's sometimes bawdy *Canterbury Tales*, Govender laces the text with a racy commentary on everything that's local:

Wherein lurks the subtlest hints of an impending drama and whereto for the reader is gently apprised of who was who, in the Mt Edgecombe zoo; whence forth issued their respective anxieties, idiosyncrasies, quirks, foibles... (Book the First).

Blending this 'Olde Worlde' charm with local dialects, including spicy slang and working class patois, adds entertainment value to the text, and is demonstrative of the blending of stylistic trends that writers like Kelwyn Sole (see Brown and Van Dyk 1991) and Elleke Boehmer (see Attridge and Jolly 1998) have been encouraging since the early 90s:

I'd like to see writers experiment, and make use of the varieties of cultural and formal traditions that exist in this country ... I am excited by innovations in artistic form...I'd really like to see literature as a form where many experiments and change can begin to happen.

(Sole in Brown and Van Dyk 1991:87)

Using the language of the coloniser to tell the story of the colonised is common practice. However, Govender goes a step further in adopting the emotive expression of the coloniser to offer criticism by craftily drawing on the satirical techniques of reduction and comic irony. The multi-layered text is an expose of establishments old and new with political commentary that represents multiple view points. Govender makes no qualms about laying bare the foibles of the powers that were and the powers that be, with his approach incorporating shades of subtlety as well as strong lampooning. Further, the polyphonic nature of the text allows it to explore a range of complex issues in a space of 175 pages. Concerns about the New South Africa, political oppression in the old nation, questions on relationships across the colour line, inter-generational conflict, class divisions and tradition and culture surface at different stages of the novel.

Thirty years after writing the play, Govender views his subject through post apartheid lenses. “Writing in the new South Africa, Govender has the luxury of hindsight” says (Cohen 2009:13), which gives the omniscient narrator the power of confidently flicking back and forth in the narrative. Set “at the tail end of the sixties” (Govender 2008:1) in the old South Africa in which the very specialised brand of apartheid law and order rules and divides the different race groups into “Pekkie Ous, Wit Ous, Char Ous and Bruin Ous” (7), it is Mt Edgecombe, a village in the “Last Outpost” (3) that is the scene for the “salacious saga” (12). In an intriguing introduction to the events that are to be visited, the senseless, foolish nature of the old South African regime is laid bare, only to switch to the new South African scenario, post first democratically elected government, with equally scathing wit.

Straight from scene of the “lascivious legend”(40) which the reader is urged to patiently await , is a smooth zooming, back to the present in which white insecurities about the present state of affairs following the completion of “the long walk to freedom” (2) are revealed. Lamenting the golden age, the “melanin challenged” (133) voice their very pertinent fears on crime and shrink away from visibility by “retreating into their gated villages” (2).

Quickly pulling the reader away from a comfort zone, Govender plunges headlong into the developments in the new nation with equal bite:

In time with Uhuru, it came to pass that the raucous melanin-enriched citizenry sought, with unseemly haste, to reclaim the spirit of the Zulu empire by changing Durban's name to eThekweni. eThekweni indeed! eThekweni - perhaps the only city in the world whose name begins a small letter ...eThekweni in Zulu meant the balls of a bull ...On their first sight of Durban Bay, the Zulus felt that it resembled the giant testicles of a bull ...At the best of times, name changing is a hazardous business ...one does not know how Mahatma Gandhi would have reacted to Point Road the heart of eThekweni's red light district, being changed to Mahatma Gandhi Street. (4-5)

The no holds barred approach picks away at the seams of the current establishment with quick paced wit that artfully presents the position on the new Black bourgeois:

Hence, these days, the gated villages from Umhlanga to Bishopscourt to Sandton, sprinkled with a few BEES (for those not acquainted with post-liberation double speak, BEE means Black Economically Empowered, whose rallying mantra is 'I didn't join the ANC to be poor'), resonate with the cry 'Bring back the death penalty!' (6).

The present is accentuated when, in strategic flashback into the 'halcyon days' (12) of the 60s, there is a return to the scene of the eagerly anticipated melodrama familiar to the audiences of *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as play.

The ironically named White House Hotel with its partition that ensures that the patrons do not mix is a landmark site in which much of the drama of the novel unfolds. It is here that racist mentality is revealed, broken souls are comforted, ruthless plans are hatched, delightful revelry is indulged in and pressing socio-political views are expressed. The manager of the hotel, Mr Richard So-So, recognisable as the Lahnee, ever present, ever watchful that law and order prevails, simply has to walk through or to call out to the Blithering Idiot No1, known to everyone else as Sunny, the barman, to maintain law and order. Mr So-So, like the rest of his race, has everything under control. He has made tremendous strides up the economic ladder, having moved from position as "Covent Garden barrow boy" (29) to manager of The White House Hotel. His formative years were not tainted by racial bias, having been raised by a black nanny whom he mistook as his own mother due to his own mother's preoccupation with social duties and the firm bond that had developed between him and Matilda his nanny:

They say the initial change in him came about the moment he became the manager of The White House Hotel. While he was training to be a manager it was stressed that in order to be a good manager, he had to keep the Charous and Pekkies who worked under him in their placethus a hitherto jovial, but somewhat rude and crude young man changed into a real Lahnee. (14)

Mr. So-So's resume at the beginning of Chapter Two is a strategic build up of the events leading to his fall from grace, for which the reader has to wait for quite sometime.

In a colorful digression so as not to get ahead of his story, the narrator introduces more of the motley cast from the scenarios that will play out. In an entertaining diversion which engages the reader in a flight of fancy, and the conjuring of tricks reminiscent of the magic realist tradition, the reader is introduced to Corduroy Bobby and Chaka Ronnie who exercise their own resourceful means of survival by living on the edge. Chaka's memorable trip to Durban creates a colorful carnival like atmosphere that displays a comfortable mixture of cultures and traditions:

Chaka bumped into Corduroy one memorable Deepavali, the Hindu Festival of Lights. It was meant to be a time of moral regeneration but for many like Corduroy and Chaka it was a time for extra boozing, feasting and letting off the big-bang fireworks... He then set off for Durban to visit his 'connections' for the occasion, taking with him the obligatory box of sweetmeats. He did it in style, hiring a rickshaw for the long trip. The rickshaw puller was adorned with colorful head-gear and a permanent grin showing a set of pearly white teeth. Before the start of the journey, Chaka peeled off a note with a flourish and indicated in broken Zulu that there was more where that came from. He had choreographed the journey and the rickshaw puller was dead on cue. Along the way Chaka lit his big-bang Chinese crackers with his cigarette and hurled them into the air. As they exploded the rickshaw puller did a smart jig and a whoop. It was quite a sight. (19).

Alternating the main plot with that of the subplot is guaranteed to hold the interest of the reader until resolutions are reached. The detailed description of the police station at which Mothie lays his complaint is illustrative of the advantage of the novel as an 'indulgent' form as compared to drama

as form which is challenged to economise in order to reach the essence of the play. Indulgence in detail serves to spice up the tales that are rendered and provide an opportunity to explore the environment in which the characters lived.

Chapter Four in Book the First is most suited to illustrating the slick combination of traditional English storytelling technique with local dialect. In one moment Govender uses Tennysonian rhyme and then adapts it to suit the local with relish. A few pages later he alternates local Indian patois with a splash of Fanagalo uttered by Mr So-So “Hey wena! Figaro lapa! Tata lo bottle and faga it lapa!” (66).

It is the long suffering wife of Mr So-So, Bronwyn Mary-Anne Braithwaite, who creates the eagerly anticipated ‘salacious saga’ (12). “Our lady of Shallot” (37), a romantic who whiles away her time daydreaming as she looks out of her upstairs bedroom in The White House Hotel, is lonely and stuck in an unhappy marriage. Her moment of enlightenment arrives one Sunday afternoon when she spots from her ‘tower’ her own unusual knight:

He strode between the sisal sheaves,
The sun came dazzling through the leaves
And flame upon the brazen flesh
Of bold Sir Fanyana Ngcobo.
A muscled knight forever kneeled
To a lady in his shield,
That sparked on the yellow field

Beside remote Mt Edgecombe (30)

So begins the dangerous affair across the age and racial barrier. Fanyana Ngcobo is all of eighteen years old, a member of Umkonto we Sizwe, a part time law student and an employee of Mr So-So at The White House Hotel. Therein lies the link between Mothie’s troubles with his errant runaway daughter and the delicious subplot which brings forth plots of revenge from more than one injured party.

In an exciting tale of rivalry, 'Black Cat' Bambata appears on the scene which shifts between the soccer fields of Mt Edgecombe to Grey Street in Durban to banana bushes that surround The White House Hotel. In a slick shift in order to get the main plot steaming along the scene is set for the knockout soccer match between the Young Springboks and Mt Edgecombe Rovers. The Cat, family man, quiet bar boy at the hotel who dutifully paid his shillings every month to the Inkatha's clan headman has his life thrown into turmoil as soon as Fanyana bursts into the scene. Besides his prowess at soccer, Fanyana emerges the winner in every situation from winning the attention of the housemaids to refusing to pay the headman fees. To add salt to Cat's wounds, Fanyana purchases the exact suit that the Cat had purchased from Moosa's Outfitters at a cheaper price. It is the episode of the suit that brings the exploitative nature of Indian businessmen into the spotlight, so it is evident that no race is spared as both the 'Bruin Ous' and the 'Char Ous' are met with intermittent comments in the novel, not to mention the Wit Ous':

It was not long before Fanyana also bought himself a suit from Moosa's Outfitters. When Moosa told him that the suit was one hundred per cent wool, genuine imported, Fanyana smiled and moved on, making as if he was about to leave. He had learnt quite young that businessmen were businessmen ...although the Wit Ous were a little more polished about the way they ripped you off. At the time there were no Pekkies or Bruin Ous selling suits. As he reached the door, Moosa called him back. He reduced the suit by a third. Fanyana bought the suit, which was exactly the same as the Cat's. That was it! All his life the Cat had been a good man ...He told Fanyana that the Char ou had taken him for a ride and that one day he will get even with these Char ous. Fanyana smiled and said, 'businessmen are businessmen!' (69)

The rivalry between Fanyana and the 'Cat' on the soccer field introduces a range of entertaining issues that enrich the already steamy main and subplots. In fact the soccer match between the Young Springboks to which Fanyana and Johnny belong and Mt Edgecombe Rovers to which the 'Cat' belongs not only demonstrates the unifying power of sport and the popularity of soccer in the community, but also throws up the hilariously superstitious nature of the characters as they engage the local witch doctors in ensuring a winner. In addition, one gets a clear view of the patriarchal mindset which ensures that all the women, with the exception of Kamatchi and Koonthi watch the match through their lace curtains.

The 'Cat's' determination to ensure the fall of Fanyana pays off when the secret of Fanyana's liaison with Mr So-So's wife is revealed by a house maid who mentions that a pale, ghostly, long haired figure haunts Fanyana's back room at night. Sporting the guise of a Tokoloshe, the 'Cat' tries to terrorise the resilient Fanyana. Unable to contain himself any further, he enlists the help of Koodikaran, alias the bar fly who scripts a pedantic note with a flourish, anonymously informing the recipient, Mr So-So, of his wife's shameful liaison. Suddenly Mr So-So is no longer the superior human being who has everything under control. He is parodied as he struts about The White House Hotel struggling to keep a respectable presence rounding his vowels and pointing his consonants, especially with words such as "You Blithering Idiot!" (91)

Having dispensed with the subplot, Mothie's case receives attention. Details of Mothie's dilemma will not be elaborated on in this segment as it is very similar to that of the play. The spicy additions which are found in the Epilogue, would include the indulgent gossip between Koonthi and Kamatchi as they speculate whether their neighbours daughter Poolmathi is secretly meeting with Johnny, the same Johnny that Sunny suspects is the culprit that has ruined Mothie's reputation by despoiling his daughter. In addition, it is revealed that Mothie is a grandfather of a baby girl and that his son Prem has qualified with a Doctorate in Education and that this enables Mothie to move away from consuming cheap wine to more expensive drinks. Johnny at last confirms the suspicions of Koonthi and Kamatchi by marrying Poolmathi after their passionate escapades culminate in parenthood.

The Epilogue which concludes the travesties and melodramas that have energised the novel, ends on a curious mix of the philosophical and the political as the lives of the characters are summed up against the backdrop of the political changes that occurred from the 70s to the 90s. The White House Hotel, for example, has been purchased by an Indian, a move that gives Sunny the position he so much deserves. As a manager of The White House Hotel, Sunny can now afford to buy a brand new house.

Details of the Stranger's love life and details about a shift in political perspective are revealed. The Stranger is stuck in a dilemma as to whether to continue hating the oppressor, especially in light of the newspaper article on Ian Player who was a compassionate and caring human being in contrast to the "Philistine" (56), his brother Gary Player who had smugly watched Papwa Sewgolum (who had defeated him in a Golf Championship) receive his trophy in the rain during

apartheid. The Stranger's dilemma points to the need to release these past prejudices which ground an individual so as to reconstruct one's history, thus concluding the novel in a spirit of reconciliation. Ndebele's question, "How representative is South African writing?" has been answered by Govender through "representations of a multicultural society" in *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel (Ndebele 1990:12). To use a famous quotation of the 90s: [Govender] "has successfully managed to do what conventional literature ... to kick and pull and push the drag literature into the form we prefer" (Mutiloatse in Sole 1990:5).

Reader reception in *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel

Over the last two decades or so, two questions have loomed large in the discourse of literary studies: 'What role do readers play in determining the meaning of texts?' and 'in what ways can literary theory influence the practice of interpretation?'

(McCullum 1992: 213)

The Lahnee's Pleasure as play which appealed to the oppressed Indian working and middle class in a time of apartheid now translates into a novel requiring more leisure and levels of literacy in a post apartheid age. According to Bennett (1990) and Lategan (1992), Reception Theory or Reader Response Theory are umbrella terms which incorporate a range of approaches to the reception of text. While Reception Theories grew out of studies undertaken by members of the Constance School, such as Wolfgang Iser and Hans Robert Jauss, there also arose individual approaches to Reader Response Theories with proponents such as Stanley Fish. Bennett draws attention to conflicts apparent between the various approaches and sends out a note of caution about the limitations of these approaches. However, the common point of departure in all approaches to Reception Theory is the relationship or interaction between the text and the reader, a move away from earlier approaches which was artist-text centered. The nature and emphasis of this thesis limits the extent to which the various approaches to Reception Theory will be examined. I will therefore draw on certain key concepts of Iser, Fish and Jauss only in so far as they inform my investigation into the text-reader interaction in *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel, in which a very powerful, relationship between text and reader exists. I argue that while Govender may not necessarily have a target reader or what Iser calls the 'Implied Reader' in mind, it is the middle class, intellectual reading community who would grasp the deep, intricacies of the novel and turn into the 'ideal' or 'optimum reader' (Hawthorn 1994: np).

Stanley Fish (1980) puts forward the concept of the 'Informed reader' who is defined by linguistic competence. *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel certainly requires a reader who possesses heightened intellectual and linguistic ability in order to unpack the multi-layered text. This marks a significant change from the reception of *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as play in the 70s, which represented a cross section of the mostly Indian theater audience. It must be noted that because of its simple language and plot, plus its accessibility, it contained working class appeal and reached a wide audience across the country, earning the reputation of being the longest running South African show in the 70s. Govender's engagement with the more lengthy and linguistic complex mode as is evident in the novel, once again points to the correlation between artistic output and socio-political conditions. As mentioned in my introduction to *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel, greater publishing opportunities, a move away from hegemonic criticism to one which acknowledged and embraced multiple points of view, especially of the previously 'othered', as well as the feeling of euphoria that generally swept over the country, presented writers with ample opportunity to turn the novel into popular form. Further, raised levels of literacy and financial stability ensured that the novel became an increasingly popular genre.

Points raised by Iser which I draw on, have been, according to Holub (1984), influenced by Ingarden's conception of the literary work of art. The first point is that the text has the potential to allow and manipulate the production of meaning, and this to Fish (1980) adds that manipulation can take place irrespective of the reader's levels of competence. This I will prove through presentation of my arguments based on the narrator in the text. The second is how and under what conditions a text has meanings for a reader, which leads to Jauss's significant concept, 'the horizons of expectations', which provides a frame of reference based on the reader's previous experience and perceptions and expectations of the future against which the text is measured. Jauss posits that literary history plays a vital role in the making of the meaning in a text. He argues that what is needed in literary study is:

The capacity to rescue works of art from the past by means of continually new interpretations, to transfer them into a new presence, to make the experience preserved in past once more available, in other words: to ask questions - which must

be discovered by each new generation - questions to which the art of the past can respond for us once again.

(Jauss in McKnight 1992:266)

What the above statements imply for *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel is that frames of reference are dynamic rather than static and vary due to differential viewpoints and experiences propelled by race and class determinants, as well as temporal change. Events in the novel are in a constant state of flux as the action deftly moves from one scenario to the next, each issuing forth its own set of prejudices and anomalies thus unsettling the audience by breaking stereotypes through Kamatchie and Koonthi who dare to watch the soccer match amongst the male spectators while the rest of the Indian female of the species watch from behind the lace curtains, and through the reversal of power as exemplified by Fanyana and Mr So-So.

It is through the omniscient narrator who seems to play safe behind the identity of the collective 'we' that the text manipulates the reader through effective strategising that projects quickly changing voices which echo the polyphonic nature of the text. Govender employs the omniscient narrator as effective "to engage or draw the reader into a believable illusion replicating the 'maya' of real life" (Singh 2009i). Addressing the reader in the new South Africa, the narrator expects a readership with masterful instinct, endurance and the creative ability to fill in blanks which Iser refers to as 'ideation'. Iser argues that "blanks represent what is hidden in the text... blanks allow the reader to bring a story to life, to assign meaning ..." (Iser in Bennett 1990:47).

In *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel, the reader is steered on a journey of winding pathways into the past, into the present and into the unknown. The story teller extraordinaire that immediately pulls the reader into the plot forcing an engagement with the plurality of the text. By drawing the recipient closer with terms such as 'my dear' (Govender 2008:14) and 'dear reader' (39), the chord of familiarity allows the narrative voice to interpellate the reader. It is with conviction that the conditions that prevailed in the old days are laid bare. The reader is assaulted with a rapid round of questions which causes turbulence as issues are left in mid air, dashing the hopes of the reader to reach conclusions. Inviting the reader to savour the text, the narrator urges the reader to be tolerant: "Patience dear reader patience. We have already said that things take time in the new South

Africa...” (32). The methods of engagement with the reader in the text are ever changing as is illustrated through the various approaches in which the reader is addressed, from casual and relaxed: “be patient ekse” (26) to cordial and polite, “dear reader” (32) to provocative and insulting “if you’re one of those smart alecks who skip to the last chapter to avoid buying the book, we’d like to say we know what a ding-dong you are all about, you tight fisted creep” (42).

The narrative voice in *The Lahnee’s Pleasure* as novel is led by the power of hindsight. It is an intricate voice that combines the light hearted, teasingly provocative, with serious socio-political criticism. It proves to be a far more complicated voice than that of the play and demands the kind of recipient that Brecht sought out as mentioned in Chapter One, an audience that was critical, sensitive and astute. So effective is the narrative voice in the novel that it pulls the reader along until the text runs its course. Further the provocative stance of the narrative voice dares to question the ability of the reader: “By now you know our immediate response to those compelling questions – patience, patience, patience - all will be revealed in due course, depending on how fast a reader you are” (42).

In the light of the above, it is safe to conclude that the ‘optimal reader’ (Hawthorn 1994: np) of *The Lahnee’s Pleasure* as novel uses multiple perspectives to crack the surfaces of the text and untangle the thread that compound the text.

3.3. The short story as form: “At the Edge” and “1949”

I will now move to a brief investigation of short story as form through an analysis of “At the Edge” and “1949” which draws to a conclusion the study of Govender’s texts best suited to the exploration of form change and political purpose in this thesis. These two short stories are forwarded as versatile texts which have moved between genres and have been revisited as plays and in their original form as short stories. What is also of significance to this study is the manner in which political perspectives arise out of the concerns in each story. As mentioned in the Introduction to this chapter, these stories present as unique examples of versatile form in that they were written between the 50s and the 60s, and remained unpublished until post apartheid (1996). However Govender transformed the stories into playscripts, and produced these plays which were performed as early as 1987, strongly illustrating the permeability of genre and mutability of form. Further, it is interesting to observe that Govender reached a wide audience through the stage

productions based on his short stories during apartheid which meant that the play as form was most suited to his political intentions than as compared to the short story which at that stage he had not even considered publishing. As a result of the order in which these works were received, audience reception of the plays preceded reader reception of the short stories. Govender (in Rastogi 2008) notes that in spite of post apartheid publication of *At the Edge and other Cato Manor Stories*, except for a few changes made where opportunity for enhancement arose, the stories remained largely unchanged. He adds that he prefers to view the anthology as stories of people “living in apartheid” times rather than as apartheid stories (in Rastogi 2008: 225).

The short story has been viewed as “the poor relation to that prosperous, potbellied and commodious form, the novel”, yet it is the short story that proves resilient and adaptable to change as it “can lead to a legitimate novel” (Wicomb 2001:157), or can make a smooth transition to play as form, as has been practised by Govender. Govender’s insertion of dialogue in the short story facilitates its shift into play as genre and it is Govender’s skills as playwright that he himself credits for instilling within him the discipline to create the short story. Although, like the play as form, the short story is of short duration, the advantage of the short story over play as form is the opportunity it affords the writer for exploration on the page. The short time frame required for the creation of the short story as compared to the novel, as well as its easily adaptable and accessible nature has guaranteed it staying power.

The short stories in *At the Edge and other Cato Manor Stories* present the shared histories of the people of Cato Manor which can be traced back to the 40s and 50s and were born out of Govender’s experience and observations of Cato Manor since his childhood. Govender belonged to a close knit community that was strengthened by the joint family system, nourished by its strong value systems and firm religious beliefs. It was religion that offered a disadvantaged community such as Cato Manor comfort and hope to cope with life’s daily challenges such as poverty or illness. It was common practice for families to perform a ritual which was meant to heal a sick member of the family because medical assistance was unaffordable and proper medical facilities were lacking. In a community that was raised to be God fearing even Govender, who as a youth was a religious sceptic, shirk feared the consequences of ignoring the religious duties he was tasked with. “The one task he dared not dodge was lighting the lamp. God was everywhere,.. you couldn’t bluff him”

(2008b: 27). The short story “At the Edge” provides further insight into the strong spiritual foundation of the community.

The shared history of the community of Cato Manor would be incomplete if only one sector of the community was represented. Govender has chosen to capture the issue of race relations through the short stories “1949” and “Call of the Muezzin”. “1949” is based on the riots that broke out in Cato Manor as a result of the simmering tensions between Indians and their African neighbours, as discussed in Chapter Two. The riots of 1949 were a traumatic encounter for the residents of Cato Manor and placed a wedge between Africans and Indians throughout the country. Govender through “1949” rewrites the histories of the oppressed, as is evident through the arguments posed in my analysis of the story. In his autobiography *In The Manure: memories and reflections*, Govender attempts a balanced account of history by highlighting incidents that captured the mayhem and destruction as well as the acts of bravery that were performed by both Africans and Indians in order to save families from the wrath of the mobs. As a writer, Govender found that it was vital to capture the memories and viewpoints of this community for posterity through literature, not only because it was a community he held dear, but because of the willful destruction of Cato Manor which destroyed the spirit of a close knit community as discussed in Chapter Two.

No one could prevent the destruction of Cato Manor. Weary from struggling to survive, and cowed by the might of the state, the people moved out to makeshift townships...each one a racially exclusive area...Some residents, unable to come to terms with enforced separation from their beloved hearth and home, committed suicide, if not physically then certainly in spirit...When the warmth of human communion goes, what else is there? In the desolation that followed, Sathie felt a great need to tell the stories of the Cato Manor that he knew and had grown to love...It would take some years before his collection of short stories was published.

(Govender 2008b: 89)

It was Tersia Hibbard, an Afrikaner from Pretoria, who encouraged Govender to publish his short stories after listening to Govender in a live SABC interview. Hibbard, a small educational

publisher was also responsible for entering the book for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize which earned Govender the prize for the Best First Book in Africa in 1997.

Govender's attempt at the short story as form in the 50s and 60s is reflective of a period in which constraints imposed on writers prevented them from writing on a full time basis, which is why Govender wrote bits of his stories in the early hours of the morning, before embarking on a tight schedule which lasted well into the night.

“At The Edge”

The title “At the Edge” (both of the volume and main short story) opens itself to several levels of interpretation including the political and philosophical. It is a story in which the surface must be broken through to reach the depths of the rich hidden meanings.

As the title makes clear, the term “At the Edge” is the key to the volume's concerns and its valences are complex...despite the fact that ‘the edge’ is a term which appears infrequently...the stories themselves consistently explore edges, approach them, move over them, at times reinforce them...The stories negotiate internal and external liminalities in a way far removed from metropolitan postcolonial thinking...

(Brown 2005: 111-113)

Brown's approach to the ‘edges’ of society as fluid and multi-directional is complementary to the arguments presented in this thesis.

The short story “At the Edge” is a mystical account of an exorcism performed by Govender's grandmother, Vellamma, that he witnessed a child. At one level the story brings up questions about religion, spirituality and the nature of existence and on another level serves to intensify the plight of the people in the face of the imminent destruction of Cato Manor:

I witnessed this incident of exorcism by my grandmother and the tremendous spiritual kind of power...and for me that was...rebellious against all the myths and rituals –as a young man, suddenly I had been up to the edge of...prevailing realities. And suddenly

you were at the edge of another kind of consciousness. Perhaps this was also a metaphor for Cato Manor's destruction and people being pushed to the edge.

(Govender in Rastogi 2008:226)

In addition to politics as ever present reality in the 50s and 60s are other large issues such as struggle of women in patriarchal society, which surfaces through the account of Vellamma's transcendence into the spiritual plane. Vellamma had been constantly 'pushed to the edge' since childhood when she had her first taste of being displaced with the eviction of her family from the fishing village of Fynnlands. She was married off as soon as she reached puberty to Karuppanna who was "her elder by far" (1996:60) and had experienced the trauma of losing two of her children through natural causes at a young age. Though she was able to face her challenges with quiet dignity, the last straw was the death of her husband which she simply could not accept until her contact with God whom she sought through prayer and meditation. This was her release from the bondage that she knew, the subliminal moments that led her to her 'nirvana', the highest point of spiritual satisfaction.

And then one day, in the stillness, the song arose from within her ...

Woolegalam woonen thothet karaevan ...

And she was at the edge

At the edge...where life meant something else, something far removed from what she had known and felt... (60)

While the religious experience of Vellamma is culturally specific, I would argue that its universal appeal lies in Govender's message that God is within every person, that death is difficult to understand and accept, and until this acceptance is reached, human beings will be on the edge and know no peace. Vellamma's endeavors to bring relief to those around her whose suffering took various forms, points to a quiet voice urging compassion within us, and serves as a reminder of the inner calm that arises out of spirituality: "People streamed to her for help. What could she do but pray for them. She insisted that if a prayer was answered, it was through the hand of God. She refused to accept payment ..." (60).

Through the story of Vellamma, Govender has managed to explore the ‘in-between spaces’ (Kruger 2001:3) against the backdrop of apartheid, spaces that are not usually explored. Govender emphasises the importance of prayer in strengthening a community that battled against so many odds:

The people of Cato Manor had many reasons to pray. They prayed out of the truth of their lives. They prayed...for their soul to merge with that greater consciousness or paramatman – the absolute truth, or God...They also prayed that members of the household would find jobs...against the ravages of endemic employment, job reservation, scourge of TB and racism...

(Govender in Anon 1994: np)

Vellamma’s transcendence has defied the gravitating forces that hem in and ground an individual. By crossing the edge, Vellamma has freed herself from her overwhelming state of grief which led to her doing battle with God, to a state of self empowerment which allowed her to cement her family together and cherish her independence by refusing to leave the home that Karuppanna had built even when the children had built their own homes. In fact her little temple became her sanctuary, which was intruded in on weekends when her grandchildren visited.

Govender has presented a contrasting view of religion through Vellamma’s grandson, Garana, whose scepticism, doubt and amusement at the scenario that unfolded creates light relief from the seriousness of the narrative:

Garana was at his granny’s the day they brought a reluctant Mrs. Munien to be ministered. The woman needs to see a doctor, he thought, but when you’re poor what can you do? Prayer didn’t help. It hadn’t when his father lost his job. There was a very real element of the comic in the desperate way in which Mr. Munien cried out aloud ...in his funny, high pitched voice...(Govender 1996:61).

By the end of the exorcism on Mrs. Munien, Garana has been awe struck and automatically joined his hands and partook in the rendering of the beautiful invocation to God, bearing testimony to the power of the supreme.

The issue of forced removals in Cato Manor in the late 50s forms the next layer in the text and effectively reflects political purpose in the story. The people of Cato Manor are moved to the edge of despair when they are forced out of the only community they know, to be subjected to the rigid boundaries of the new racially segregated areas, the edges of which dare not be crossed. Cato Manor, like Sophiatown and District Six, is a vital political landmark in the history of this country. Cato Manor forms the backdrop to the narratives in *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* as well as Govender's first full length novel *Song of the Atman* (2006).

Cato Manor enjoys the same tyranny of place in his stories and plays, in a way akin to Firosha Bhag in Rohinton Mistry's oeuvre, Malgudi in RK Narayan's stories, and Marabastad in Es'kia Mphahlele's writings. Govender opens our eyes and hearts to the rich complex patterns of Cato Manor.

(Chetty in Singh 20091)

What is of significance to this thesis is that political purpose in some of the short stories such as "At the Edge" is muted or nuanced so that the characters themselves are the focal point in the narrative. Govender is drawn to this particular short story because it is so personal and intense:

"At the Edge", for many reasons is the work that I've felt very deeply about...perhaps because this work is so close to the hearth where I was reared.

(in Chetty 2002: 340)

"1949"

"1949" marks a move away from the conservative views held and expressed by the Indian community on the traumatising riots of 1949 in which racial hatred fuelled and exploded into carnage and looting. While the story is strongly political, as compared to the more nuanced approach of "At the Edge", "1949" presents a powerful yet poignant account of a shared history that upsets stereotypes and debunks the myth that all Africans were brutal and held Indians in contempt. In fact it is only when Dumisane notices an agitated Poobal, a good friend who is a petrol attendant at a service station in Bellair Road in a car packed with passengers, that his curiosity turns to horror when he discovers the gruesome events that unfold as he speaks. Dumisane empathises with Poobal

as he voices his fears and his endeavors to protect his family from the mayhem that is spreading like wild fire, by fleeing to family in Pietermaritzburg for refuge. At the risk of facing the wrath of his fellow workers, Dumisane desperately tries to convince the highly incensed group to be humane and realistic but to no avail.

Dumi pleaded with his friends in hushed tones. 'We are Christians. These people are our friends. Only a few are rich. The rest are poor, like us. This is wrong.' He told them about Poobal who did the same job as he was doing. Together with his brothers who worked in factories, they built a brick house and were sending all their children to school...He told them about R.D. Naidu and Billy Peters who were fighting against the colour bar and who were being thrown in jail all the time for their beliefs...That evening the arson, looting and raping increased. The smell of paraffin and petrol were in the air and the night sky was lit by soaring flames. (Govender 1996: 110)

Through the stirring account of Dumisane's life and the horrifying events that unfold emerges a clear view of the cordial relationships and the peaceful co-existence of Africans and Indians in Cato Manor, until the 'third force' instigated the conflict that was to leave severe racial scars and split a community that has been generally racially tolerant in spite of racial bias:

He always paid his rent on time and Mr. Maniram liked him but kept his distance. Dumi felt slighted, but you couldn't easily find such good accommodation...Mrs. Maniram, a kindly lady, had taken to his wife and every now and then would give the family some curry and bread (103).

For Govender "the burgeoning kind of racial interaction that was taking place [in Cato Manor]...if left unhindered...would have led to a South Africanism which we dearly long for" (Govender in Rastogi 2008: 225).

Racial inequalities are clear in this story: Indians in this particular story are presented as a slightly more advantaged group as compared to their African neighbours. Whites are further privileged - as Dumisane walks the township of Cato Manor a clear picture of the stark contrast in living conditions in "Umkumbaan, the sprawling shantytown, where there was no water and no toilets" (Govender:103), and the "staid brick and tile houses which could have been transported

from some lower middle-class English suburb” (104) on the Berea emerges. He wishes that he could send his children to the community built Cato Manor government-aided Indian school but is fully aware of the prohibitions.

Situated in the midst of two worlds, Dumisane is exposed to white mindset and attitudes as portrayed by the Osbornes, as well as positions and perceptions of the Indian as reflected by the Manirams and the Mahomedys. Although the entire story is foregrounded by mounting political tension, a brief glimpse into lighter moments provides relief to a painfully emotive story. It is Govender’s agile switch to dialogue and colourful use of patois that evokes a range of emotions, turning the story into a very viable piece of theatre (see later).

Dumi is particularly amused at Mr. G.V Naidoo, whose home is titled ‘The Lions Den’. Mr. Naidoo is an extremely talkative character whom Dumisane meets nearly every morning en route to the petrol station.

Hau, this man can talk-even in Zulu!

‘Woonjani, we Dumi?’

‘Kona!’

‘I see your shoes is shining special!’

but my shoes is always shining, thought Dumi. This man just felt he had to say something.

‘your teeth too!’

But my teeth are always shining too! Hau, this man should be an imbongi...he is never short of words, but he is good for a laugh... (104)

The New Year’s Eve bash to which Dumisane chauffeurs the Osbornes is cleverly juxtaposed with the shocking incident at the service station to expose the complex nature of the apartheid monster. In one frame is a picture of a happy group celebrating life and embracing the ‘other’. Dumisane, as ‘other’ is invited to share drinks with the Osbornes and finds an appreciative audience when he belts out favourite tunes. In the blink of an eye the scene changes to a horrifying expose on apartheid crimes committed in a desperate attempt to maintain total power. Dumisane is stunned at Mr. Osborne’s reaction to the wealthy Mahomedys move into the property adjoining the service

station, but he recoils in horror when he hears Mr. Osborne inciting the workers to commit arson in order to destroy the Indian community, who in his narrow view posed a threat to white supremacy.

The Indians deserve what they are getting. They make a lot of money from you people and they have no respect for you...This is your country. We white people have come to improve it for you...These people have only come to make money. They have houses. You haven't. You can tell your friends they can have all the paraffin they want free of charge! (110).

Despite the fractured lifestyle, the humiliation and disappointments that the oppressed must face on a daily basis, Dumisane represents that rare brand of humanity who live by the motto "terrible is the temptation to do good" (Brecht in Bentley 2007: 25). Through this heart-wrenching tale of human sacrifice, Govender attempts to provide a more balanced account of a particular historical incident in Cato Manor's history. Govender's presentation of Dumisane as a central and vital character, torchbearer of civilisation, points to the dialogic between politics and art, and to a writer's commitment to addressing past imbalances: "I think 1949 is for everyone as it is both universal and local...No one race is genetically programmed to be racist. Racism is bred by ignorance and fear. We need to confront all these issues..." (Govender in Moodley 2002:1).

Upon the realisation that the escalating violence was right at his doorstep and that without a vehicle to flee in, the Manirams were in grave danger, Dumisane bravely steps into the household of his landlord for the first time only to find the family huddled together vulnerably, the only protection being the kitchen knife wielded by Mr. Maniram. Without considering the imminent danger he is exposing himself to, Dumisane ushers the family into his outhouse where they conceal themselves in the cupboards and under the bed. It is not long before the merciless mob discovers the whereabouts of the Manirams and sets the place alight. Dumi faces the wrath of the mob for desertion.

All mercy deserted them. It deserted the souls of fathers, mothers, sons and daughters, giving way to the savagery that lurks eternally in the human heart. Out of the time warp of primeval hate flew the spear. It shot straight through Dumi's chest. There was no pity, no reason in the hearts of these malleable souls, held captive by the minds

more savage in their cunning-the cunning on which empires have been built.

(Govender 1996: 111)

The story of a brave and heroic deed reminiscent of Brecht's epic dramas ends on a sombre note as the sad reality of the prevailing malady hits home. "1949" is an insightful narrative that is a touching reminder that "in the bloodiest of times there are good people" (Brecht 1976:36).

The rich assortment of characters that people Govender's short stories which project individual and collective identities, and the change in approach as each story is forwarded reveals a writer who does not shy away from a challenge, a fluid writer who breaks stereotypes and constantly reinvents himself. While each story is unique and can exist independently, every story is linked by the collective identity forged by the community of Cato Manor and each story is attached to a particular political agenda. Further, Govender presents as a writer who is comfortable in switching form as evidenced in the transformation of his short stories into plays, but also illustrates that the short story as form is pliable and renewable.

Reader Reception: "At the Edge" and "1949"

In focusing on reader reception in the short stories "At the Edge" and "1949", I first draw attention to some of the factors that must be considered when examining the reception of written works, which I argue have impacted negatively on South African readership potential. I will then move on to an investigation of reader response in these short stories.

About two thirds of South Africa's adults are illiterate. From a writer's perspective this means that there are millions of South Africans who cannot be reached by writing, who cannot enter that world of books where you can choose what you want to learn, and learn much more than you planned to. A democratic society is dependent on informed citizens, who can make responsible choices. While there are clearly other than literate channels of communication, education in literacy must be a priority.

(Voss 1992: 1)

Even before considering the role of the reader in assigning meaning in a text, it is important to pose the question, Who are the readers of published literary works? It is clear from Voss's comments (though written 17 years ago) that the majority of South Africans do not form part of the

country's readership which in effect means that the reading of literary works is undertaken by the educated, mostly in the form of academics, students and art lovers. Popular reading material in the form of magazines, celebrity diet and cookery books, motivational accounts and autobiographies of the rich and famous hold the attention of the reading public, much to the detriment of valuable literary works.

Fortunately for Govender, *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* was selected by the Department of Education and Culture as a Matric school set work for English literature in 2002 and 2004 and this guaranteed that his anthology of fourteen short stories reached thousands of matriculants in schools across KwaZulu Natal. Winning the Commonwealth writer's prize for Africa's best first book and receiving favourable reviews did not do much to influence sales of the book in leading bookshops (Govender 2009). However, "At the Edge" and "1949" as plays enjoyed a larger reception from the public, than the short stories themselves, pointing to play as popular form and confirming the arguments presented above. On a positive note, Govender's first novel *Song of the Atman* (2006) has been published by Harper Lee in India under the title *Black Chin, White Chin* and has printed 3000 copies to date.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, Govender's defiance of the laws of genre by blending forms which Derrida refers to as 'total genre' (1980:64) are evident in his prose works and is included in his approach to his short story collection *At The Edge and other Cato Manor Stories* in which Govender successfully alternates between prose and dialogue using his strength as playwright to animate his stories.

The following points raised on the reception of "At the Edge" and "1949" as short stories by young readers are based on feedback from my interaction with educators and two subject advisers in English from the Department of Education all of whom have mentioned the generally positive responses to the anthology by the pupils.

At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories when compared to *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel makes a lighter read because of the shorter form and simple language. Artful renditions of stories of the past take the older reader on a nostalgic journey into the community of Cato Manor. The uncomplicated language, flowing narration borrowed from "the time honoured canons of

storytelling” (Singh2009i:1) and lively dialogue lend it sound educational and great entertainment value. Further, the brevity of each story, and the feast of themes and colourful characters gently encourage the reader to complete the anthology. Educators such as A.Harilal (see Singh 2009e), who taught these stories, spoke of the role these stories played in creatively bringing the history of a particular place and era that had been left out of the history books to the pupils. Through stories like “1949” and “Over My Dead Body” issues like inter-racial conflict and forced removals were contextualised and enabled pupils to trace their roots. Studying a text written during apartheid in the late 90s with peers from all races encouraged heartening discussions on racism which was motivated through the study of “1949”. Further, the hosts of youth who people the stories lead to several points of identification. “At the Edge” served as a stimulus for robust debate on religion and its role in society (see Singh 2009o).

Jauss’s claims for the validity of a literary history (in Bahti 1982), is clarified in “At the Edge” and “1949” in which the reader may compare what was before to what is now. Jauss sees the text as mediator between past and present through which “a vital link is formed between the artifacts of the past and the present” (Holub 1984:54). Educators also noted that because of the simple language and the use of patois, students were willing to read the text and engage in discussion and dramatisations and teach backs based of the stories. Interestingly it was noted that African pupils were generally surprised to discover that all non-white races were victims of apartheid. According to A.J. Mottian (2009f), ex Subject Advisor in English and S.B.Singh (2009g), Subject Advisor English, texts were well received and clearly understood in schools with predominantly Indian pupils while other schools found it difficult to grasp the patois and the historical background. However, once explanations were given, non Indian pupils generally understood the text.

The reader becomes engrossed in the happenings of the individual lives of the characters in these stories which portray social and human conditions powerfully. This strikes a familiar chord with Ndebele’s injunction in his essay “Rediscovery of the Ordinary” mentioned earlier in which he urges writers to pay careful attention to the details of the way ordinary people live and capture those little moments that often have large impact (see Ndebele 1994). Govender is of the firm belief, that although the writer influences the construction of meaning in a text through the selection of material he wishes to explore, it is vital for the writer to:

...be aware of and interested in matters of the intellect and of human activities such as political philosophies and attendant activities that affect life around him/her. This should inform his/her writing if it is not to be shallow or insipid or removed from reality. This does not imply that a work must be didactic. Provocative perhaps, but never directly positing solutions.

(Singh 2009i:1)

3.4. Audience Reception in “At the Edge” and “1949” as plays

Govender, as a writer, made the following comments based on the plays “At the Edge” and “1949”:

Both plays tell stories which are based on the lives of real people whom I knew in Cato Manor. In that respect these are people who were either crushed by, or triumphed over racial and economic oppression. Yet these stories are not diatribes against these evils. Neither are they didactic. While they lived in a certain geographical area, spoke in a particular way, and while their food and dress were of a certain kind, they could have been people living anywhere in the world...yes they are political in the sense that they do not avoid political realities of the day.

(Singh 2009k: 1)

Both “At the Edge” and “1949” present selected stories from *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* through a solo performer who nimbly switches from one character to the next. The use of minimalist staging and a solo performer illustrates the trend to economise in the theatre and also facilitates the touring of these productions. Further, what the above also points to is that the strict discipline that artists of colour during apartheid had to practise due to financial constraints has been firmly entrenched. The colourful patchwork of incidents is stitched together by narration which is occasionally accompanied by music. By choosing different stories for each play, Govender has ensured that a large portion of his anthology has been dramatised.

Hansen (2001) credits Govender for initiating the change in the early 90s from farces and satires to the subtle, poetic and socially relevant. The production “At the Edge” which featured Pat Pillay

has enjoyed several runs both local and abroad at festivals in Grahamstown, Chennai, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

A presentation of the play “At the Edge” literally moved a group of Scottish women to tears at the Edinburgh festival (Govender in Chetty 2002) and the play was hailed as “a resounding hymn to humanity” by the *London Stage and TV Today* (Bramdaw 1994:6).

Charles Pillai, who featured in the 1996 run of the play “1949”, believes that stories like “1949” need to be told in post apartheid South Africa to afford the younger generation an opportunity to catch a glimpse into the past and appreciate and celebrate diversity. “In the age of Truth and Reconciliation, where people everywhere are telling their stories, “1949” is one such story” (Pillai in Anon 1996:17).

Both Pat Pillay and Jayloshini Naidoo who featured in the 2002 and 2008 runs of “1949” attest to the power of the audience in creating a successful production. Naidoo (2009) believes that an actor feeds off the positive energies radiated by the audience and can easily feel the tensions and emotions that arise out of the audience. The popularity of a production is often gauged by the duration of its run. The 2002 production of “1949” was extended from a 4 week to a 12 week run, with all shows sold out. However it is significant that the 2008 run did not attract a large enough audience for all shows because, perhaps, the particular moment had passed.

Naidoo adds that the Baxter Theatre run which played to rave reviews, generally attracted art lovers and academics that were mostly white. She was pleasantly surprised that the audience was in awe of the production and was very responsive to the characters on stage, after feeling apprehensive about the absolute silence that prevailed in the first show. Through her interaction with some of the audience, it was revealed that they were silent because they were not quite sure whether they should laugh. Naidoo believes that one of the reasons for the success of “1949” is that it was presented in a simple, honest manner instead of being presented as an embellished tale. She was particularly surprised that a coloured couple had attended the Baxter Theatre run five times and had already absorbed some of the lines of the play. Amongst the Indian audience at The Playhouse, the older folk were generally nostalgic and often tearful. An old lady was particularly affected by Maniram’s family hiding in the wardrobe in the enactment of the story “1949” as she relived her own memory of doing just that. Part of the success of the production of “1949” also, however, lies in its universal

appeal. The values, the spirit of sharing and the culture of hard honest work provide a firm background for the new generation in discovering and appreciating their roots. “You can never know where you are going if you don’t know where you came from” (Naidoo in Singh 2009d).

From the point of view of changing form and political purpose what clearly arises out of the investigation of audience/ reader response in the works selected for this study is that while the short story takes first place as most flexible form, the play as form is best suited to political conscientisation because of its immediacy and because it by its very performative nature attracts an audience more easily than would a written text.

Chapter Four

This thesis has investigated form change as linked to political purpose in a selection of Ronnie Govender's works which best exemplify the shifts and the merging of genres in Govender's writing from apartheid to post apartheid. I argue that Govender is an unusual artist in that he has chosen to recast his popular works in changed form, reinventing himself through such reprisals and through continuously creating new works. The preceding chapters throw light on the impact of socio-political climate on artistic output and its influence on the dominant genre of a particular era. Further, through the analysis of the texts as well as the setting up of the historical context for this thesis, viewpoints and questions surrounding the relationship between politics and the arts have been raised. The texts that have each been forwarded as exemplars of a particular genre with a particular political agenda have allowed a further dimension to this multi-faceted study by creating the opportunity of investigating the reception of text as determined by form and socio-political dynamics.

This thesis reaches its conclusion by focusing on Govender's work in progress and his visions for the future of theatre and literature. Further I will draw on comments by academics such as Chetty on the growth of the sub-genre, South African Indian Writings and writers such as Mda on new directions in South African literature post apartheid, in order to support the points raised in this thesis. Govender's work in progress serves as an affirmation of his belief in the power of literature and performance to conscientise society by bringing to its attention pertinent socio-political issues that need to be addressed. Further, the fact that these works are not limited to a single genre validates my argument in this thesis that Govender presents as a fluid writer who moves between genres and boldly experiments with form.

2008 marked Govender's inward journey towards self reflection on his contribution to theatre, literature and his political activism. It is significant that his memoirs titled *In the Manure: memories and reflections* (2008) were published a year before Govender's 75th birthday. Govender describes his memoirs as: "a kind of rambling account of things I was involved in, and my growing up" (In Rastogi 2008:234). In taking stock of his life, Govender, has followed the post apartheid trend particularly by writers of colour, as mentioned in Chapter One, who have written autobiography as a way of remembering their pasts, while simultaneously looking to the future:

The autobiographical act in South Africa, more than a literary convention, has become a cultural activity. Memoir, reminiscence, confession, testament, case history and personal journalism, all different kinds of autobiographical acts or cultural occasions...have pervaded the cultures of the 1990's and have spread into the new century.

(Nuttall and Michael in Govinden 2008:77)

2009 has been a productive year for Govender in that he has had a packed schedule of activities and projects including his 75th birthday celebrations for which the production "Thunsil", in which excerpts from his productions over the years was enacted. His participation in conferences such as the Pan African Writers Conference in Ghana and the Words on Water Festival in Durban gives expression to the previously neglected 'little canon', South African Indian Writing. In August 2009, Govender delivered the keynote address on the launch of "Beyond Bollywood and Broadway" at the Graduate School, City University of New York, where a reading of *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as play was done by of a group of professional performers from New York. According to Govender (Singh 2009l), through this interaction, opportunity has arisen for the play to be staged in New York in the future. As mentioned in Chapter Two, because of his commitment to the cultural boycott in the 70s Govender refused to showcase his productions abroad.

Following the success of his first novel *Song of The Atman* (2006) which was nominated for the Jacana Prize for best first novel by the European Union and the Commonwealth Writers Prize, as well as the publication of *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel (2008) Govender is currently writing a new novel that is yet to be named. According to Govender (Singh 2009m), the focal point of the novel is evil as manifested in people in particular circumstances which entangles them in a web of conspiracy and deceit. Through the novel Govender wishes to lay bare the downside of human nature and its impact on society. Govender has a clear vision of the directions that he will follow as writer post apartheid:

I am constantly asked "What will you write about when apartheid is dead?" My answer is that I shall continue to write as I have always done and that is to write about people as psychological beings within the broader socio-political parameters of their lives.

(Govender 2005:7)

Govender is currently completing the final touches to his satire *To Market to Market to Stuff the Fat Pig* (2009), an expose on the controversial morning market fiasco in Durban in which stallholders have been evicted by the eThekweni Municipality. He is also engaged with the filming of his play *Your Own Dog Won't Bite You* first produced in 1998 which deals with the issue of inter-racial marriage and religious intolerance. From the above it is clear that Govender has sustained his career as a playwright, writer and an astute political commentator whose repertoire validates the argument that it is difficult to separate politics from art. Govender's foray into film as form proves that he continues to explore a range of forms, now including film. Govender has signed a deal with for the filming of the epic *Song Of the Atman* in 2007 which is in the pipeline.

Govender points out that politics will continue to underpin his writings and that the interesting times South Africans are living in provides a wealth of ideas which need to be explored. He enthuses:

What is happening in our country now has happened the world over in emergent democracies. There is much material for satire and a topicality about the grand themes of greed and the corrosiveness of power. The danger now is perhaps not as close and personal as it used to be. Yet it remains a sullen, ever present, mildly festering threat. Are we only stirred when there is suppuration or painfulness closer to home?

(see Singh 2009i)

Rajendra Chetty views South African Indian Writings post 1994 as reconciliatory and reconstructive in nature and poses two pertinent questions that relate to the relationship between politics and the arts: "Does social change impinge on textual production?" and "Do texts effect some shifts in social transformation?" (2003:11) In voicing pertinent concerns about a host of topical issues such as the shifts in power since the new democracy, uninformed name changes, crime and white fears and insecurities, *The Lahnee's Pleasure* as novel is an affirmation of the influence of social change on a text. I argue though that while a text very effectively reflects social transformation its power to effect shifts in social transformation is limited, due to, as argued in Chapter Three large levels of illiteracy which limits the readership of such texts to the privileged

classes. Chetty is optimistic about the growth of South African Indian Writings and credits writers for their ability to release themselves from the shackles of the past and invigorate the 'little canon':

I feel that SA Writing is entering its most exciting period now that the traditional dichotomies, binaries and divisions are fast disintegrating. The sad historiography of the little white canon versus the other, eurocentrism versus afrocenrism, black writings versus white writings, protest writers versus aesthetics, etc. does not hang like a milestone around our necks anymore... A wealth of biographical writings has emerged and they are relevant for their historical value. The themes of trauma and reconciliation have now given way to a plethora of texts that know no boundaries and portray South African life and experiences in a creative and refreshing manner...

South African Indian writings too seem to go through a prague spring with some exciting works being written. The wide repertoire of writings that have emerged post 1994 is encouraging. Imraan Coovadia is the new authorial voice with the most entertaining prose and wildly imaginative Rushdian style. There's Sherin Ahmed's beautifully nuanced debut novel, Aziz Hassim's spirited fiction and the talented Ronnie Govender whose works continue to exemplify the sweeping, cumulative signs of change in this sub-genre of writings. I am optimistic that SA Indian writers are transcending their morbid obsession with the ambiguities of transition!

(Singh 2009n, email correspondence)

Zakes Mda made the following observation about the South African literary canon post apartheid:

"I am always impressed at the great amount of novels published each year. Ideally I hope that [new South African literature] would not take any one direction but would be a feast of subjects."

(Singh 2009h, email correspondence)

As is evident through his expansive body of work which is politically conscious, Govender is determined to continue the fight against racial labelling and prejudices both past and present in an attempt to foster harmony and create a national identity. The closing poem below conveys this:

WHO AM I?

Who am I?

I have been called

An Indian,

South African Indian,

Indian South African,

Coolie,

Amakula,

Amandiya,

Char ou

Who am I?

I am,

Like my father and my mother and their fathers

And their mothers before them

A cane-cutter, house-wife, mendicant, slave, market gardener, shit bucket
carrier, factory worker, mid- wife, freedom fighter, trade unionist, builder of
schools, of orphanages, poet, writer, nurse

Embraced by the spirit of Cato Manor

Unbowed, unbroken

I am of Africa...

They will not displace me

For I know who I am

I am an African

(Govender 2008b:64-65).

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