

Fictional Reconstructions of Cato Manor

*In At the Edge and other Cato Manor Stories and Song of the Atman* by Ronnie Govender

by

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## DECLARATION

Submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts  
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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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## INTRODUCTION

In this thesis I will be exploring the fictional reconstructions of Cato Manor through the selected texts, *At the Edge and other Cato Manor Stories* and *Song of the Atman* by Ronnie Govender. I wish to establish a greater understanding in respect of the South African Indian context in respect of the connection between the writer, place and identity. The history of Cato Manor has been documented especially with regards to the 1949 Riots and the Beerhall Riots, however, there has been very little written or documented in respect of the vibrant community that was created by the Indian indentured labourers who had lived there. My interest lies in the *literary* representation of Cato Manor through one of its sons, Ronnie Govender. Govender is the recipient of many highly acclaimed literary awards, however, very little has been written that critically engages with his texts. This thesis, through a study of the selected texts of Govender, aims to add to the body of knowledge on South African Indian writers generally, but chooses to focus specifically on Ronnie Govender and his fictional reconstructions of Cato Manor.

In Chapter One I will be discussing the point that when considering literature from a spatial viewpoint it is imperative to take cognisance of the difference between the seemingly interchangeable terms of 'space' and 'place'. I will refer to spatial theories and show how space becomes place. Place according to Barker is the "focus of human experience, memory, desire and identity" (Barker 2000:291), thus it can be reasoned that place is socially constructed. Space only becomes 'place' when there is an emotional and social connection with it. I will focus on theories that link space, place and power. I will also be looking at Michel de Certeau (1984, 1993) who argued that it takes people to turn a space into a place; a place is valueless without people. As people walk, they weave spaces together that can never be plotted on a map. Cato Manor in respect of 'place' became 'home' to the indentured labourers who bought land from the sugar baron, George Cato. The word "home" alludes to identity, a place of belonging and nostalgia. Rosemary Marangoly George argues that "the politics of location come into play in the attempt to weave together a subject-status that is sustained by the experience of the place one knows as Home" (1996:2).

This thesis will investigate the concepts of memory and nostalgia with respect to the reconstruction of Cato Manor as a place in the selected texts of Ronnie Govender, *At the Edge and other Cato Manor Stories* (1996) and *Song of the Atman* (2006), in order to show the sense of dispossession and the struggle by Govender to maintain a sense of 'home' in Cato Manor.

I will argue that the 'home' that Govender speaks about in the selected texts has been shaped and defined by the political landscape of South Africa. The widespread consequences of apartheid ensured that there was no unified South African identity. It generated fractured or dislocated societies. This dislocation is echoed in the literature of the writers of the time including Govender. Space became the pervasive tool for the ruling government of the day to wield and implement power. Entire communities were displaced at the will of a discriminatory government which validates Foucault's view that space is inextricably linked to power. For Foucault, the one is understood in terms of the other, and it is important to take cognisance of "[t]actics and strategies deployed through implantations, distributions, demarcations, control of territories and organisations [...]" (Foucault 1980:68). Correspondingly when one looks at Cato Manor, a melting pot of cultures, one sees a space that was exposed to the oppressive power of the apartheid government. With regards to the literary text, Foucault viewed the text in the context of it being, for example, part of a greater framework of texts and institutions. He was mindful of the space that the text was created in and the spaces produced by the text. This thesis will investigate Cato Manor during the formative time when Govender lived there, as an example of spatial relations that have been manipulated by those in power.

This thesis will investigate primarily the experience of the Indian residents of Cato Manor, which I will argue in this chapter is a typically diasporic experience. I will be using the work of the theorist Vijay Mishra (2006), who posited that the first Indian diasporic communities which entrenched their 'roots' in places like South Africa, would forge their own identities and try to re-build or reconstruct 'mini-Indias' so that

they could hold on to the identity of their motherland. Cato Manor became a typical 'mini-India'. The focus of the thesis is Cato Manor, a township that became 'home' and a 'mini India' to the indentured labourers who had decided to stay on in South Africa after their indenture. I will also discuss the dual identity or hyphenated identity of the residents of Cato Manor as discussed in Chetty (2002:337-346). Firstly I will examine the residents' preservation of their cultural heritage and secondly I will look at their assimilation of a South African identity. The notion of a separate 'Indian' identity was a source of passionate disagreement to many, including Govender who discusses this in an interview with Chetty (ibid).

I will also explore the concept of memory, nostalgia and literature as described by Boym (2001). When roots are put down in a place, like the indentured labourers did in Cato Manor, and made it a home, attachment to the place becomes the norm. I will argue that the land became a part of the fabric of their lives. The theorist, Rosemary Marangoly George posits that when the 'home' becomes a "contested ground in times of political tumult" (1996:18), 'homesickness' or nostalgia ensues. Through the Group Areas Act, Cato Manor was destroyed. It can be argued that the loss of a home is a loss of identity. This imposed loss resulted in a yearning for their home, for all that was familiar. Govender's writing reveals a constant re-visit to Cato Manor of the past, the place he considers home. Writers and place are inextricably linked and we see this to be true of Govender.

'Home' as illustrated by Govender's writings is not just a geographical location on a map. I will argue that the 'home' that Govender speaks about in the selected texts has been shaped and defined by the political landscape of South Africa. In Chapter Two, I will be using the work of the theorists Foucault in respect of theories of space and power (1993) and de Certeau's "Walking in the City" (1993) to bring to the fore the spatial historical context of Cato Manor and of Govender's history. To understand the historical context of Cato Manor and Govender, who is a descendant of indentured labourers, it is important to look at the journey of the indentured labourers to South

Africa and then to contextualise the history of those who stayed on in South Africa in places like Cato Manor. Market gardening became a preferred source of income for the majority who stayed on to build a life for themselves in South Africa. Despite the harsh laws of apartheid, a vibrant and culturally rich Indian community of which Govender was part, evolved in the Cato Manor area.

In Chapter Three, I will make a close examination of the selected texts of Govender; his short story collection, *At the Edge and other Cato Manor Stories* (1996) and his novel, *Song of the Atman* (2006) to show how land, in particular Cato Manor, has been fictionally reconstructed in the works. I will use the theories discussed in Chapter One, in respect of space (Foucault, 1986, 1993), place (Chris Barker, 2000), nostalgia (Boym, 2001) and diasporic culture (Mishra, 2006) to situate the selected texts of Ronnie Govender. I wish to explore how Govender, through his selected texts, gives voice to a community which was rendered voiceless through apartheid legislation. Communities like Cato Manor and District Six were snuffed out by the Group Areas Act, and re-housed in race-allocated places like Chatsworth, Phoenix, Rylands and Mitchells Plain. If it were not for writers like Ronnie Govender and Richard Rive, the history and lived experiences of places like Cato Manor and District Six, respectively, would have been lost to the future generations.

Unfortunately, Cato Manor continues to be fraught with problems. Despite plans of restitution and development after the initial damage to this land, Cato Manor is still very much an undeveloped area. Govender can now never go back ‘home’, but it is through his writing that he recreates Cato Manor as he knew it.

This thesis ends with reference to Govender’s latest works as well his works-in-progress. Approximately thirty years after he started writing about Cato Manor, Govender has relocated to Cape Town; however, Cato Manor and the greater area of Durban still form the setting for his current works. In an interview with Chetty (2002:337-346), Govender states that “there were a host of haunting memories of a

lifetime spent at the earth of his atman". The annihilation of Cato Manor as a community impacted on Govender greatly. His nostalgic attachment to his 'lost home' is evident in that Govender continues to set some of his current writing in Cato Manor.

## CHAPTER ONE

Just over 150 years ago the first Indian indentured labourers braved the capricious *kala pani* (black waters) to embark on a journey of hope. South Africa epitomised a vision for a better life as presented by the colonialists, the master puppeteers of power, in India. The harsh realities of an oppressive system of government resulted in severe challenges for the majority of the indentured labourers. As discussed by Desai and Vahed in their text, *Inside Indian Indenture: A South African Story*, indentured labourers endured many adversities during their indenture in South Africa.

It is unclear whether the kind of life that they would come to live was immediately apparent to the indentured when they signed or thumb-printed the contract – that they would be bound in ‘legally authorised domination which denied them the choice as to work, residence or remuneration, and assumed that their labour lay in the ownership of some lord, master, employer or custodian’. (2010:1)

However, despite the adversities, the indomitable spirit of many indentured labourers saw them triumph, put down ‘roots’ in this country and create a place called ‘home’.

Vijay Mishra states in his text *The Diasporic Imaginary: theorizing the Indian Diaspora* (1996:421-447) that the first Indian diasporic communities which entrenched their ‘roots’ in places like South Africa, would forge their own identities and try to rebuild or reconstruct ‘mini-Indias’ so that they could hold on to their identity of their motherland. Cato Manor in Durban became such a ‘mini India’. October 1860 marked the arrival of the first Indian indentured labourers to South Africa. The British colonialists had realised the immense potential in growing sugarcane along Natal’s coastal belt, however, the paucity of local labour was a stumbling block. Sugar, the ‘green gold’ of Natal, was the reason for the colonialists persuading their government to import labourers from colonies under their rule. As Hughes affirms in her article, “‘The *coolies* will elbow us out of the country’: African

reactions to Indian immigration in the Colony of Natal, South Africa”, the colonialists, “[m]anaged to persuade the colonial government to organise the importation of bonded labour from another British possession, India” (2007:157). The indentured labourers, who came to South Africa, were also accompanied by ‘passenger Indians’ (traders or businessmen who saw the potential of supplying their trade in this province). The indenture was for a period of five years. Some of the indentured labourers, as Desai and Vahed state,

established family, the attempts of others ended in failure or tragedy; some prospered while others lived in abject poverty; many simply endured the hardship of indenture; some collaborated, a few chose to fight; many, too many, took their lives; most made Natal home, others returned to India; many others tried to go ‘home’, only to return.

(2010:2-3)

For those who stayed on or who returned to South Africa, they had a chance of forging a new life in this country and finding a space that they could make their own. From indenture to landowners, from the arts to medicine, from academia to politics, the Indian community has become part of the fabric of South Africa. Indenture will be discussed in more detail in Chapter Two of this thesis.

Renewed contemporary interest in the history of this community is clear in the number of recent texts about South African Indian writers (see Chetty 2002, Govinden 2008, Desai and Vahed 2010, Frenkel 2010). The Indian community has, by and large, rejoiced in all that their ancestors have achieved under the most difficult of circumstances even though it was coloured with pain, torture, and imprisonment. Academic scholars and writers have given a voice to a community which was not easily part of the binary opposition of South Africa (the indigenous black community and the white oppressive leaders). As Govinden in her book *A Time of Memory: Reflections on recent South African Writings* states, “South Africa is living through a time of memory ... we are reconstructing past images of places and spaces, birthed by the logic of apartheid, but also signifying resistance to apartheid”(2008:9).

In this chapter, I will introduce some of the general theoretical issues surrounding space and power, in order to form a theoretical base to explore the fictional reconstructions of Cato Manor in the selected texts of Ronnie Govender in the chapters to follow. First, I will define the terms ‘space’ and ‘place’ as it is important to differentiate these terms when exploring and critiquing literature in terms of spatial discourse. Next I will establish a connection between place and literature, showing that place can shape literature. I will be focusing on Cato Manor as a politicised space specifically in this thesis. Following this, I will examine the notions of ‘home’ and I will show that ‘home’ is not only a geographical location on a map. I will argue that it is crucial to take cognisance of the link between ‘home’, ‘space’ and ‘power’. I will then explore how ‘home’ for Govender has been ‘shaped’ and defined by the political landscape of South Africa. I will focus on the extent to which literature is used to make visible a community which was rendered invisible because of the political climate. To conclude this chapter I will investigate the ways which communities recall and reminisce about their past and I will look specifically at how memory and nostalgia underpinned the lives of many South African Indians who suffered greatly at the hands of an oppressive system. By this stage, I will have a firm theoretical basis from which to analyse the fictional reconstructions of Cato Manor in the selected texts by Govender in subsequent chapters of this thesis.

### **Space and Place**

Contemporary cultural and literary theory scholarship has a special interest in space and place. As Crang and Thrift in *Thinking Space* state: “Space is the everywhere of modern thought. It is the flesh that flatters the bones of theory” (2003:1). Previously, the emphasis by theorists was placed on time, however, they soon realised that the link between place and time is inextricable. Crang and Thrift argue that the concept of place and time cannot be separated. They also argue that there is a departure from the Kantian viewpoint on space “as an absolute category – towards space as process and in process (that is space and time combined in

becoming)” (3). It is important to view time as a course of events through the extension of space. Time and space are essentially vital to each other, thus it would be correct to speak of time-space. Michel Foucault, the renowned French theorist, who can also be described as a spatial thinker, argues that time has been theorised in varied ways through history and that the traditional linear notion of time can be challenged. Foucault stated that “history does not run through time, rather it develops through the relations of a time that is spatialised” (in Philo 2003:226). He further vehemently disagreed with the notion of a ‘total history’, instead he maintained that the world should be viewed as being made of “‘spaces of dispersion’: spaces where things proliferate in a jumbled-up manner on the same ‘level’ as one another” (in Philo 2003:207). As Foucault reasoned,

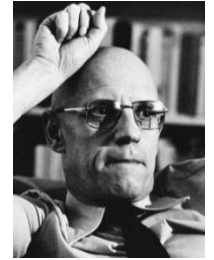


Figure 1 Michel Foucault

A whole history remains to be written of spaces – which would at the same time be the history of powers – both these terms in the plural – from the greatest strategies of geopolitics to the little tactics of the habitat. (1980:149)

The geographer, Edward Soja, writing in his book *Postmodern Geographies*, recognises that this spatialisation of theory has helped us to grasp and make sense of “how relations of power and discipline are inscribed into the apparently innocent spatiality of social life, how human geographies become filled with politics and ideology” (1989:6). The world as we know it, is arranged or partitioned into different ‘spaces’ where we function within various social norms, be it a place of employment, a place of relaxation or a place where we sleep. Thus, this dogma impacts on literature, for as Crang and Thrift draw our attention to the point that space is not an objective medium, it is important to take cognisance of the point that writers are not unaffected by time and space, in fact all literature falls within the realm of the historical and geographical context of that particular ‘space’. One needs to think of literature or writing as a space, “a space to be travelled and negotiated” (Crang and Thrift 2003:23). This thinking is further corroborated by Darian-Smith et al in *Text*,

*Theory, Space: land, literature and history in South Africa and Australia*, when they concur with Foucault that ‘space’ is linked to ‘power’ and they further argue that “there is a growing body of historical and literary criticism which deals with the peculiarities of colonial space and its relationship to, and representation through, the eye – and the pen – of the imperial beholder” (1996:2). This point can be directly linked with South Africa’s colonial and apartheid history which I will discuss later in the chapter. As Darian-Smith et al suggest, space is a multidimensional entity with social and cultural as well as territorial dimensions” (ibid). It is a magnetic field of tensions as South Africa’s struggle history reveals. The relationship and interaction of space and power is dynamic. The psyche of those in power is based on control. There is an intricate interplay of internal and external relations in respect of geography, time and history. Foucault, in an interview with Paul Rabinow, categorically states that “space is fundamental in any exercise of power” (in *During* 1993:168) and in his text *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings*, he stated that “territory is no doubt a geographical notion, but it’s first of all a juridico-political one: the area controlled by a certain kind of power” (1980:68). The multifaceted link between space and power is an important consideration in the work of Govender as this thesis will demonstrate. Paul Carter in his text *The Road to Botany Bay* suggests that spatial history is “an alternative to histories of imperialism [...] space is a text upon which histories and cultures are inscribed and interpreted” (cited in Darian Smith et al 1996:5). Therefore a study of literary space will result in establishing a spatial history. McNulty affirms in his thesis the point that “space can be used as a tool of analysis” (2005:6) in literary criticism. My thesis will be looking at Cato Manor (a controlled space during the apartheid era) as a ‘text’ upon which its struggle history has been engraved and by extension how it has been shaped again in selected fiction by Govender.

With regards to the literary text, Foucault viewed the text in the context of it being part of a greater framework of texts, institutions and so on. He was mindful of

the space that the text was created in and the spaces produced by the text. For Foucault, space is an effective vehicle of control for those in power. Control over individuals (physical and psychological) can be effected through control and manipulation of spatial relations. He argued that: "... societies are discursively constituted through a series of normalising judgements that are put into effect by a system of divisions, exclusions and oppositions" (in Gregory 2003:314). Thus those in power achieve and maintain control by their manipulation of spatial relations. This thesis will investigate Cato Manor during the formative time when Govender lived there, as an example of spatial relations that have been manipulated by those in power.

Foucault's theories can be used to analyse and critique the spatial policies and architectural designs of apartheid South Africa. The panopticon principle which Foucault speaks about is an instrument used by those in power to keep the citizens under continual surveillance and it pervades every aspect of modern society. According to Foucault it is "diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; it's functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system." (1980:201). Darian-Smith et al also discuss "how urban planning thus utilised the lines of the map as a technical means of politically defining space" (1996:14). Thus power is inscribed in architectural structures and the designs of urban spaces. The Group Areas Act, the policy of forced removals and the strategy of creating buffer zones between the white suburbs and the black settlements are striking signs of the manipulation of power through the landscape in South Africa of the apartheid era. The various pieces of legislation which were promulgated during the dark days of apartheid such as the Land Act and the Group Areas Act illustrate very clearly Foucault's point that space and place are interwoven with history and power. The strategic mapping of South Africa during the apartheid era ensured that space becomes a grid whereby control becomes easier. However, there were areas like Cato Manor, Grey Street, Sophiatown and District Six that did not slot into the grid of easy control. Cato Manor was not a

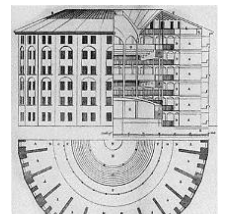


Figure 2 Diagram of a panopticon

flat terrain; it was a hilly settlement, which developed into a thriving, vibrant multicultural community. This posed a challenge to the police to enforce the discriminatory laws. Surveillance was not as easy, as residents were often able to outwit the police by escaping through routes which were unknown to the police. Similarly, District Six and Sophiatown also had complex crowded environments making surveillance difficult. This thesis will be focusing on Cato Manor, a contentious space, where many battles were fought by the residents for ownership of their space, their homes.

When considering literature from a spatial viewpoint, it is imperative to take cognisance of the difference between the seemingly interchangeable terms of space and place. Chris Barker refers to space as “an abstract idea, an empty or dead space which is filled with various concrete, specific and human places”(2000:292); and place can be considered “a site or location in space constituted and made meaningful by social relations of power and marked by identifications or emotional investments” (2004:144). Space therefore becomes ‘place’ only when people attach an emotional or social connection with it. As de Certeau (cited in Crang 2003) suggests, it takes people to turn a space into a place; a place, no matter how efficiently planned, is insignificant or valueless without people. As people walk, they weave spaces together in a personal manner which can never be plotted objectively on a map. Ronnie Govender in his text *At the Edge and Other Cator Manor Stories* (1996:4-5), draws a map of Cato Manor to accompany the stories; this is reflective of Cator Manor as he maps it through his knowledge of growing up there. This thesis will be focusing therefore, on not only how power and people shape space, but also on how Cato Manor as a place shaped the writer, Ronnie Govender. For this thesis, it is also vital to define ‘place’ in the post-colonial and post-apartheid context. Ashcroft et al provide the following definition:

By ‘place’ we do not simply mean ‘landscape’. [...]. Rather, ‘place’ in post-colonial societies is a complex interaction of language, history and environment. (1995:391)

As Govender states in an interview with Rajendra Chetty, “Writing is informed by realities, by the environment, by interaction.” (2001:252). Cato Manor was home for Govender; this is evident in the poem that he writes about Cato Manor in his text, *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*:

CATO MANOR

Beneath the heaving crowns of mango  
flowers bearing promise of a child’s summer  
the games we played  
the friendships we forged  
the battles we fought  
and the love we made  
beneath those heaving crowns  
of mango flowers. [...] (1996:147)

This poem reflects Govender’s emotional connection to Cato Manor. Govender’s emotional link to Cato Manor is further emphasised in the blurb of the back cover of his text *At the Edge and Other Cator Manor Stories*, where it is stated that “Nobody had ventured to explore the lives, tragedies and patois of the Indian communities in South Africa until Ronnie wrote these stories...” (1996). Govender gave a voice to the community of Cato Manor. This is important because, as he stated to Chetty, “We are beginning to tell our own stories, taking a great deal more interest and pride in ourselves” (2001:249).

A key facet of post-colonial literature is the concern with place and displacement. The residents of Cato Manor were displaced through the Group Areas Act of 1950. This impacted greatly on its residents as this thesis will illustrate. Ashcroft et al point out that “the dialectic of place and displacement is always a feature of post-colonial societies whether these have been created by a process of settlement, intervention, or a mixture of the two” (1989:9). It is evident that the concept of place is varied and subject to interpretation; however, what emerges is a

common thread amongst all definitions and which agrees that space only becomes place:

by being named; as the flows of power and negotiation of social relations are rendered in the concrete form of architecture; and also, of course, by embodying the symbolic and imaginary investment of a populations. Place is space to which meaning has been ascribed. (Carter et al 1993: xii)

Lombardozi explains in her thesis that, “place is a fundamental experience of being” (2007:17). It is people’s interaction with space that creates places filled with personal experiences. Hence, the emotional attachment and longing for a place, that can be considered an extension of one’s existence, as is reflected in the writings of Govender. Foucault further defines the notion of internal space as a space “imbued with quantities and perhaps thoroughly fantasmatic as well [...] the space of our primary perception, the space of our dreams [...]” (1986:23). External space is socially produced, and it is this:

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

Space is thus heterogeneous space; it can never be empty space. Noyes in his seminal text on spatiality agrees that it is people, their interactions and their values, which give space its meaningful place.

Colonial landscape is not found by the colonizer as a neutral and empty space, no matter how often he assures us that this is so [...]. Colonial landscape is produced as one possible level of spatiality onto which desire may be mapped in the service of social production. (1992:6-7)

Literature defines its own borders through the creative process of writing. The writer constantly re-imagines place through the characters that he creates. Robinson and Anderson affirm that:

Works of literature are recognised as expressive of economic, cultural and political change, replete with intimate and revealing perspectives on the relationships between people and place at various space scales. (2002:3)

Writing is an illustration of spatial expression and Govender's fiction establishes place (Cato Manor) via the landscape of his imagination. His attention to detail for example the hedge of Thumba's yard in his short story, "The Fall Guy" (1996:123), brings a 'life-like' quality to the text. His hand-drawn map at the beginning of his short story collection makes reference to landmarks like Cut-Neck Bobby's house and Bus Owner Moodley's house. This was Cato Manor as he knew it, as he mapped it through his knowledge of growing up here. Place becomes the focus of "human experience, memory, desire and identity. That is, places are discursive constructions which are the target of emotional identification and investment" (Barker 2000:29). Place as a concept is not always easy to define, as is evident by the above definitions. However, one can deduce that it is human experience and interaction with space that creates a 'place', an identifiable and lived in environment.

Historically, South Africa as a settler colony throws questions of naming and mapping of 'discovered' land into play. Ashcroft et al state:

To name a place is to announce discursive control over it by the very act of inscription, because through names, location becomes metonymic of those processes of travel, annexation and colonisation that affect the dominance of imperial powers over the non- European world. (1995:183)

Naming and mapping illustrate control and power over a place. Places like Cato Manor, reflect the colonial history of this country. The origin of the name comes from

the surname of a colonial sugar baron. Post-colonial theory reveals that naming and mapping are not impartial or objective activities. Sienaert and Stiebel argue that the “mapper brings the subjective gaze to bear upon the space and selects that which is important to be mapped according to previously subjective criteria” (1996:95). With regards to colonisation in South Africa, it was usually the white, male gaze which codified the Eurocentric worldview. The colonial landscape was not a neutral and empty landscape. In the South African context, the Group Areas Act in the 1950s illustrates how the apartheid government mapped areas according to race. Power was levied through spatial planning or mapping of areas. This is an essential point for this thesis, especially when one considers Cato Manor, District Six and other similar areas which were mapped during the colonial and apartheid era. This thesis will discuss in greater detail in Chapter Two how the colonial control and power over Cato Manor impacted on and shaped the writer, Ronnie Govender.

### **Place and Literature**

One of the fundamental concepts of this thesis is the interrelationship of literature and place. Place can shape the literary production as this thesis will illustrate. Similarly, literature constructs place and the reader’s perception of it. Lombardozi in her thesis affirms that:

fiction demarcates its own boundaries of operation and is always about place, people and belonging, as well as place and people and alienation, as place is constantly re-imagined by the writer through the characters. In as much as writing is an act of spatial expression, it follows that writing is also about the journeys undertaken by the writer in a landscape of the imagination through language and metaphor. (2007:19)

The writings of Govender bring to light his deep connection to the place Cato Manor. His literature charts the myriad of experiences living in a place like Cato Manor brought to him. He reveals glimmers of the ‘lived experiences’, shaped through social and political injustices of an apartheid government:

Everyday Cut-Neck-Bobby's father would load his baskets, hung at either end of a bamboo pole over his sturdy shoulders with the different types of vegetables from his garden and trudge over the hill to the tarred roads of Berea, where he would sell his wares to the white madams, most of whom had grown quite fond of their efficient and reliable vendor, *Sammy*, although they never really bothered to find out what his real name was [...]. (in Govender's short story "Brothers of the Spirit" 1996:37)

Writers define their spaces through their work as is evident in Govender's literature. Govender in his prologue to his short stories, *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*, states:

Listen, my friends, listen to the voices of Cato Manor, District Six and Sophiatown as we struggle to fashion a new life – a life free from the contradictions that prevent us from seeing God in Everyman. (1996:15)

One gets to 'listen to the voices' of the community through Govender. Cato Manor, as well as the other two townships mentioned in the above extract, share a struggle history based on apartheid's divisive legislations.

James Duncan argues that place can be viewed as a cultural construct and that the fictional portrayals of place:

are of necessity constructed within the limits of language and the intellectual framework of those describing it. Such a language is not a set of words, which have a one-to-one correspondence with reality "out there". It is based on discourses which are shared meanings which are socially constituted ....Descriptions can have meaning only in such a context-bound sense. (1990:12)

The fictional texts discussed in this thesis deal with a place which was affected by social, political and economic factors. These factors influence the construction of place and it is necessary to read the text within the framework of these contextual factors. Mamet in her thesis states that, "place can be considered as a text, a parchment on which new meanings are constantly being re-inscribed" (2007:12). Fictional texts thus provide a space for marginalised groups to inscribe their people's

history, to fill in the gaps of their country's prejudiced history. It is important for people to tell their own story, and not have their story told for them.

## **The Construction of Place**

Chris Barker defines place as a “focus of human experience, memory, desire and identity” (2000:293). Place thus can be considered a social construct. It is for these reasons that Cato Manor will be looked at as ‘place’ in this thesis instead of more abstract space. Ivan Vladislavic suggests in his essay “Street addresses, Johannesburg” that:

the complexities of cities, the flows of traffic across ever-changing grids, coupled with the peculiarities of physical addresses, occupations, interests and needs, produces for each one of us a particular pattern of familiar or habitual movement over the skin of the earth which, if we could see it from a vantage point in the sky, would appear as unique as a fingerprint. (1998:305)

People who live or traverse through the familiar streets gain an intimate knowledge of the area. This knowledge is not gained from a map, rather it is knowledge gained through the routine of living or using this space. Cato Manor, established in the early 1900s over the years became a vibrant and well-established community. The residents knew every nook and cranny of this place. De Certeau, like Vladislavic, posits similar views with regards to the residents' familiarity and knowledge of their dwelling place. For De Certeau, walking becomes a metaphor for reading. In his essay, “Walking in the City” (1993), de Certeau argues that spaces are given meaning by the people who traverse the paths of a city or place. No map which is created by the spatial planners will be able to furnish the detailed and intimate knowledge that residents who literally walk the area will have. The walkers at the street level will have the vantage point of tactical routes (short cuts etc.) which are usually out of the ambit of the map or the



Figure 3 Michel de Certeau

organisation of the grid layout of streets etc. De Certeau explores how space is used in everyday practices. He considers the city as a text upon which the walkers of the city continuously write. When one considers this point, then places like Cato Manor become a lived map of stories to be followed.

For de Certeau, the top-down control of those in power is easily undermined by those who walk. The spatial planners or cartographers map the lines of areas as dictated by those in control. However, as de Certeau illustrates in his essay “Walking in the City”, that intimate knowledge of the city lies with the residents:

The ordinary practitioners of the city live ‘down under’, below the thresholds at which visibility begins. [...] whose bodies follow the thicks and thins of an urban ‘text’ they write without being able to read it [...] make use of spaces that cannot be seen, their knowledge of them is as blind as that of lovers in each other’s arms. (1993:153)

It is essential to get down to the street level to experience the city, to read the hidden depths of the stories of the city. Walkers bring “invisible geographies into contact with the ordered realm of the rational” (Crang and Thrift 2003:150). It is these walkers who transform space into a meaningful place. When one considers the area of Cato Manor, it is a hilly suburb and this made it difficult for absolute control. Those in control could not have the omniscient power, simply because the streets of Cato Manor did not slot into a controllable grid-like structure. The infrastructure of Cato Manor was not good, there were few formal roads and this meant that often, policing had to be done on foot, thus the policing of the area was not always very successful.

### **The Notion of Home and Literature**

Rosemary Marangoly George posits that:

the (re)writing of home reveals the ideological struggles that are staged every day in the construction of subjects and their understanding of home-countries. The search for the location in which the self is “at home” is one of the primary projects of twentieth-century fiction in English. This project may get obscured or transcended

as the narrative unfolds, but it is never completely abandoned. It is in this context that I read all fiction in terms of homesickness. (1996:3)

Govender's writings validate George's view on homesickness. For Govender, Cato Manor is home and as this thesis explores his reconstructions of this place [Cato Manor] through selected texts, it becomes evident that this 'home' shaped him as a writer and continues to do so. The word 'home' intimates identity and a place of belonging. The expropriation of land of the residents of Cato Manor left an indelible mark on Govender's psyche and we see this in his writings. We see place as being governed by power. Govender can never go back 'home' because Cato Manor no longer exists as he knew it. It was undone by apartheid removals. It is through his writings that he is able to recreate the vivid details of a place or home that no longer exists. It is through the creative process of writing that Govender and many others mentally return to their 'home' as Govender states in the introduction to his text *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*, "I began writing these stories after my family moved from Cato Manor in the fifties, when the district became the first victim of National Party's notorious Group Areas Act" (1996:11).

The word 'home' strikes a chord of familiarity, of being rooted, of belonging. Edward Said argues that:

The readiest account of place might define it as a nation [...]. But this idea of place does not cover the nuances, principally of reassurance, fitness, belonging, association, and community, entailed in the phrase *at home* or *in place*. (in George 1996:15)

Though the human attachment to place is a complex phenomenon, one needs to be cognisant of the point that the need to belong is a basic human desire. Jomo Kenyatta writes about the effect of colonialism on Gikuyu culture; he states that "when the European comes to Gikuyu country and robs the people of their land, he is taking away not only their livelihood, but the material symbol that holds family and tribe together" (in George 1996:17). Similarly, one can analyse the troubled history of

South Africa in the same light. When the apartheid government enforced legislation like the Group Areas Act, it fostered fractured or dislocated communities. The foundation of people's lives both socially and economically, was destroyed. As George stated, "'home' becomes contested ground in times of political tumult" (1996:18). Entire communities were erased from the maps of the country and pencilled into locations where the government felt that they would not pose a threat to those in power. Affected residents were relocated to areas like Chatsworth, and places like Cato Manor became re-zoned as white areas.

At this point, I would like to revisit the concept of mapping discussed earlier. Graham Huggan, in his text *Decolonizing the Map* (1995) draws our attention to the point that in postcolonial literature, there is often an attentiveness paid to mapping which he considers vital as part of the postcolonial project of deconstructing and reconstructing the maps of European colonialism. Unlike colonial cartography, the mapping process represented in postcolonial literature is:

open and connectable in all its dimensions; it is detachable, reversible, susceptible to constant modification. It can be torn, reversed, adapted to any kind of mounting, reworked by an individual, group or social formation. (in Ashcroft et al 1995:409)

The space of the text gives writers the liberty to re-route and re-root themselves in the places from which the official maps have excluded them. This point is important as this thesis will show how Govender brings to life or recreates his lost 'home' of Cato Manor through his writings, as for example, in the short story "Heavyweights",

Cherry Lane was at the base of the triangle that bordered bus owner Moodley's opulent abode, joining Trimborne Road and Rathmines. A sandy footpath separated Moodley's large plot from the empty no man's land that sloped down to the valley.

(Govender 1996:52)

Govender maps Cato Manor as he remembers it. As de Certeau argues in his essay “Walking the City”, it is the residents rather than those in power who would have an intimate knowledge of the place they inhabit. No map would have demarcated a ‘sandy footpath’ or landmarked a bus owner’s property. Govender maps Cato Manor through his words, as well as the hand-drawn map of Cato Manor.

### **Diasporic Culture**

The experience of the diasporic South African Indian community is one of the focal points of this thesis. Cato Manor became home to some of those indentured labourers who decided to stay on in South Africa, rather than go back to their motherland, India.

Mishra classifies the Indian diasporas into two basic categories, the ‘old’ and the ‘new’. The ‘old’ refers to those who journeyed to the colonies during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, mostly as indentured labourers; and the ‘new’ refers to those who travelled to the metropolitan areas of countries such as the USA and Australia. Mishra referred to the ‘old’ Indian diasporas as “diasporas of exclusivism” (2006:422). This is because in as much as they entrenched their ‘roots’ in the colonies, they rebuilt or reconstructed ‘mini-Indias’ so that they could hold onto the identity of their motherland. As Salman Rushdie states:

exiles or immigrants or expatriates are haunted by some sense of loss, some urge to reclaim, to look back, even at the risk of being mutated into pillars of salt. But if we do look back, we must also do so in the knowledge – which gives rise to profound uncertainties – that our physical alienation from India almost inevitably means that we will not be capable of reclaiming precisely the thing that was lost; that we will, in short, create fictions, not actual cities or villages, but invisible ones, imaginary homelands, Indias of the mind. (2006:428)

With regards to the South Africa, the indentured labourers would definitely fall into the ‘old’ category. Cato Manor became an ‘India of the mind’. The community tried to hold on to cultural practices from their motherland for example religious rituals,

and where possible to hold onto the ‘purity’ of the caste system of India. As Govender in his short story “Poobathie” points out:

And, if your father’s name was not Pillay, Reddy, Singh, Maharaj or even Mohammed, you didn’t feature much in the consciousness of people, except perhaps when they strenuously avoided social contact with you. They wouldn’t eat at your place [...] would serve you food, or what was left over, in a separate plate and cup [...]. (Govender 1996:25)

It is evident that the residents of Cato Manor did try and hold on to the cultural practices of their motherland. This will be discussed further in Chapter Three of this thesis.

Indian diasporas often faced the challenges of racism in the colonies. They were made to feel inferior to those in power (white colonialists) which perpetuated the feeling of not belonging in these colonial spaces. These colonial spaces, according to Mary Louise Pratt, can be labelled as “social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination” (1992:4). This results in the identity of diasporic individuals as being that of a dual nature (belonging to their homeland and that of the country in which they put down their roots). In as much as some of the indentured labourers and passenger Indians put down their roots in South Africa, they still held on to cultural practices and rituals that they carried with them from their motherland. Govender captures this dual identity in his short story, “At the Edge”, in which he explores Garana’s journey from being dubious to believing in the power of his grandmother’s rituals and beliefs. This dual identity as it pertains to Govender’s writings will be explored in Chapter Three.

Avtar Brah, a theorist of diasporic cultures, emphasises the point that “embedded in the concept of diaspora is the notion of the border” (1996:198). He states that borders are:

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

The spatial planners of the discriminatory apartheid South African government ensured that there were borders to separate people of different race groups. Areas were designated according to race. Discriminatory legislation, for example the Group Areas Act, ensured that races did not interact socially. This resulted in the older Indian diaspora turning towards their lost identity, thus often creating, as Mishra stated a “fantasy of the homeland” (2006:423). India was the motherland for the indentured labourers from India. All things associated with the motherland were considered pure, hence the diasporic Indians wanted to preserve and continue with as many cultural rituals and traditions as possible. Brah analyses this in the context of the Indians not wanting to internalise the demeaning and racist labels like ‘coolie’ etc. Cultural practices and traditions were celebrated, their ‘Indianness’ was honoured through a variety of ways like food and vernacular languages. Vahed and Waetjen in their text *Gender, Modernity & Indian Delights* discuss the formation of a group of women from Durban in 1954 whose activities

engaged them deeply in the work of cultural production, contributing to the creolisation of Durban’s diverse Indian population and to its diasporic self-understanding. Over its fifty-year history, the Group has reflected changes in national and religious politics, local family structures and educational opportunities – and has also influenced these changes. (2010:2)

Cato Manor became a ‘mini-India’ created by the indentured labourers. This became a place where residents put down their roots to create a ‘home’ in a foreign land, whilst holding on to the cultural practices of their motherland. Chapter Two and Three of this thesis will explore the concept of Cato Manor being a ‘mini-India’.

Being far away from the motherland, and trying to hold on to cultural practices to maintain the link was difficult. For example, India was a country where the caste system was entrenched in the psyche of its citizens. Intermarriage across the castes was taboo, however, when the Indians settled in South Africa, it was difficult to maintain this separation. As mentioned earlier, residents in places like Cato Manor tried to hold on to their belief system and cultural practices, however, the socio-economic situation of the Indian communities in South Africa did not allow for such an insular existence. With time, intermarriages and association across the castes became acceptable. Residents carried a dual identity; preservation of their cultural heritage as well as an assimilation of a South African identity. Frenkel in her text *Reconsiderations: South African Indian-fiction and The Making of Race in Postcolonial Culture* (2010), explores the issue of a South African identity, of “what makes someone a South African Indian writer? What quantity of ‘Indianness’ is required?” (5). The legacy of apartheid impacted on the question of identity and belonging. The notion of a separate ‘Indian’ identity was a source of passionate disagreement to many. Govender, in an interview with Rajendra Chetty, commented on the question of being an ‘*Indian*’ writer, he stated:

Although at various times, I have been described as an Indian South African, a South African Indian, an Asiatic, a charou, a coolie; I know that I am a South African. So entrenched is the stereotype that the unwary can easily be trapped into the sense of displacement which hovers over migrant and expatriate communities. I know very little about Indian theatre. I am a South African playwright. I have never heard Athol Fugard being described as a European playwright, or Mbongeni Ngema as a Zulu playwright. I have no doubt about my South Africanness and I resent any suggestion that I’m not African or South African. (2001:250)

Govender is emphatic as regards to his identity. According to him, he is South African and he rejects the label of ‘Indian’ being attached or hyphenated to his identity. The apartheid legislation of South Africa generated fragmented societies. The Indian community was marginalised. They had contributed positively to the

economy of this country, yet they did not enjoy the same benefits as the white community. In as much as they retained their ‘Indianness’ with regards to their cultural and religious traditions, they also wanted to be recognised as citizens of the country they now considered ‘home’. Thus the Indian community bore a dual identity, one tying them to India and the other binding them to South Africa, their new home.

### **Memory and Literature**

I am a French in Germany and a German in France  
I am a Catholic in the Protestant world and a Protestant in the Catholic world  
I am a foreigner wherever I go  
I am so willing to hug everything  
But everything seems to be slipping through my fingers

(Chamisso cited in Chetty and Piciuccio, 2004:6)

This poem by Chamisso encapsulates the feelings of ambivalence in the South African indentured labourers who settled away from their motherland, India. Despite the fact that they tried to embrace South Africa as ‘home’, they still tried to hold on to all that was familiar, their cultural traditions and practices of their motherland. For this thesis, it is important to comprehend the strategies the Indian diasporic communities engaged in to hold on to acts of social remembering. The idea of ‘collective remembering’ as suggested by Halbwachs (1992), centred on the assertion that personal memories are fundamentally part of the collective group memories:

All memory is structured by group identities: that one remembers one’s childhood as part of a family, one’s neighbourhood as part of a local community [...] and so on [...] and that the memory of the individual exists only in so far as she or he is the probably unique product of a particular intersection of groups. (1992: x)

It can be reasoned that personal memory is essential to social memory and gives a group an identity; a sense of belonging in the past can consequently provide a sense of belonging in the present. I will explore and illustrate this sense of collective remembering through the works of Govender in Chapter Three. Through the creative

art of the writing of his short stories and novels, Govender is able to illustrate the essential point of the Indian South African's diaspora's feeling of belonging to South Africa's past and present.

Stuart Hall in his paper "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" (1990), discusses the 'hidden histories' of diasporic communities and he argues that it is these 'hidden histories' that served as the impetus for the emergence of "many of the social movements of our time – feminist, anti-colonial and anti-racist" (224). In South Africa, the erasure of communities or land through the hands of apartheid geographers was common practice to ensure an insular and protected existence of the white colonial communities. It was not only the physical expropriation of the land that was painful, it was as Hall states, the "inner expropriation of cultural identity [...] cripples and deforms. If its silences are not resisted, they produce [...] individuals without an anchor [...] rootless" (226). Residents of Cato Manor had their 'anchor' removed when Cato Manor was re-classified as a white area. Even though there were many people who protested against the expropriation of their land, it was a battle that they had no hope of winning.

The pertinent question to be asked is how does memory shape the fictional reconstruction of Cato Manor in the texts of Ronnie Govender for this thesis? It is important to take cognisance of how memories and landscape impact on each other. Lovell posits in her text, *Locality and Belonging* (1998), that collective memory is rooted in place which is vital for providing a sense of group belonging. Belonging, she suggests, "may [...] be seen as a way of remembering [...] instrumental in the construction of collective memory surrounding place" (1998:1). Memory, place and identity can be viewed as interrelated and interdependent.

Lovell also suggests that when we put down roots in a place and make it our 'home', attachment to that place becomes the norm. She states that when "we enter a landscape [we] turn it into a place which we are no longer able to abstract from

ourselves” (1998:8). The land becomes part of the fabric of our lives. Walter Benjamin asserts that memories gained through experiences can never be obliterated or erased:

[M]emories are lodged in specific places where people have been. These places bear the traces of past experiences. It is therefore possible that revisiting them may at some time evoke the past and in the same moment unlock past hopes and desires which previously seemed to have been overtaken [...] by the passage of time. (in Savage 2003:42)

It is this notion of memories being lodged in places that will be valuable when analysing the reconstruction of fiction in Cato Manor later on in this thesis. By supporting the idea that collective memory is underpinned by subjectivity, social groups continuously re-invent the past to suit the present. Middleton and Edwards suggest that “memory [...] does not act as a passive ‘storehouse’ of past experience, but changes what is remembered in ways that enhance and transform it according to present circumstances” (1990:6). Collective memory thus can be viewed as selective, distorted or sometimes even inaccurate. Duncan Brown, in his article on “Narrative, Memory and Mapping: Ronnie Govender’s *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*” (2005), discusses Govender’s blurring of dates and the writing of these short stories. The collection of short stories was published in 1996. According to Govender, he began writing the stories after his family moved from Cato Manor when it became the first victim of the Group Areas Act. The historical setting of the stories was from the 1940’s through to the 1950’s, however, as Brown points out,

the date of the writing or rewriting of some of the stories is clearly more recent, as indicated by the references to watching television (which was introduced to South Africa in the early 1970’s), TV games (early 1980’s) and the current rap, hit number, ‘Pump Up the Jam!’ (released by the band Technotronic in 1990). (2005:110)

What was most important to Govender was to give a voice to the people who lived in Cato Manor. In his interview with Pallavi Rastogi, he affirms his aim to “get the stories done [...] because Cato Manor was destroyed, wilfully destroyed by human

greed. And there were all these wonderful people, those wonderful memories. And I didn't want them to die" (2008:224). So even though he may have taken a few liberties with peripheral details like making reference to the television and the song "Pump Up the Jam" in his short story "The Cosmic Clash", a song which was released in 1990, all this indicates is that this particular story was written or edited between the years 1970 to the early 1990s. It does not in any way detract from what was important to Govender: to tell the stories of the once vibrant community of Cato Manor which was fragmented through the implementation of the Group Areas Act.

### **Nostalgia and Literature**

Don't ask for answers,  
ask for history: the pain  
of my woundings, the diaspora  
that runs through my life  
like an alphabet

(Crusz cited in Desai & Vahed, 2010:272)

The marginalisation of the non-white communities by the apartheid government meant that the Indians became victims of an oppressive government. The 1950's brought a tidal wave of change. The expropriation of their land meant that they lost their 'second' home. The landscape of places like Cato Manor was re-contoured by the many legislative and juridical constraints of the apartheid geographers of the day. A politicised landscape emerged. The impact of this loss was devastating to all those who experienced it. Communities yearned for all that they lost, for their collective memories. They longed for stability and continuity in their fragmented world. Boym in her text *The Future of Nostalgia* defines nostalgia as follows:

Nostalgia (from *nostros* – return home, and *algia* – longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed. Nostalgia is a sentiment of loss and displacement, but it is also a romance with one's own fantasy. (2001: xiii)

For Boym, what lies at the core of nostalgia is the deep sense of mourning and longing because of displacement. Two kinds of nostalgia will be discussed and later used in the analyses of the texts in this thesis. Firstly, nostalgia for a homeland which was experienced by the old Indian diaspora; this could be the result of homesickness as suggested by Shaw and Chase (1989). A sense of security is gained in trying to recreate as much as possible of the motherland cultural practices and traditions. Shaw and Chase affirm this point by asserting that “tradition [...] is the thread which binds our separate lives to the broad canvas of history [...] and] which cements the link between the individual and the collectivity” (1989:11). A concerted effort was made to ensure that cultural artefacts were brought to the new homes in the colonies. These artefacts served as a link to their motherland. Cato Manor as mentioned previously became a place where the indentured labourers, nostalgic for their motherland, tried to rebuild or reconstruct a ‘mini India’ so that they could hold on to the identity and traditions of their motherland. Nostalgia and the extent to which the characters in Govender’s selected works held on to their cultural traditions will be discussed in Chapter Three.

The second type of nostalgia is the nostalgia of the new Indian diaspora. This kind of nostalgia emerges from the dehumanising treatment of communities. According to Shaw and Chase, this nostalgia is an attempt to hold on to the supposed certainties of the past,

our consciousness is fragmented, there must have been a time when it was integrated; if society is now bureaucratized and impersonal, it must previously have been personal and particular. (8)

Cato Manor was home to Govender; however, this home no longer existed as he experienced it as a child. Therefore, he recreates Cato Manor as he knew it in his writing.

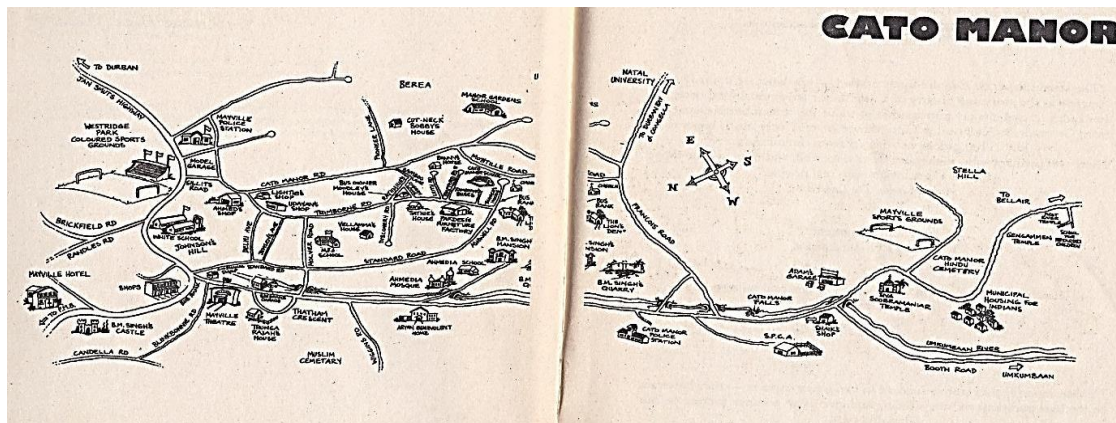


Figure 4 Govender's Hand Drawn Map of Cato Manor in his text, *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*

As mentioned earlier, his hand-drawn map of Cato Manor, the landmarks that he plots on his map for example, 'Cut-Neck Bobby's House' and 'Bus Owner Moodley's House', show that Govender locates his stories in the place that was familiar to him in the 40's and 50's. Govender published his text *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* in 1996, thirty eight years later. For approximately thirty years, Cato Manor remained desolate except for those who occupied this space informally.

Boym states,

At first glance, nostalgia is a longing for a place, but actually it is a yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood, the slower rhythms of our dreams. [...]. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into a private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition. (2001: xv)

The loss of a home is a loss of identity. Cato Manor residents had to forge new identities and create new homes. This loss was not one of choice, it was an imposed loss hence the intense yearning for their home, for all that was familiar. Chetty and Piciucco affirm that, "A major feature of diaspora writings is the concern with place, displacement, myths of identity and authenticity" (2004:7). This is evident in Govender's writings: for example, his short story, "Over My Dead Body", highlights

the tenacious spirit of one of the residents of Cato Manor, Thunga Padayachee, to hold on to his home and not allow the government to remove him from his home through the implementation of the Group Areas Act of 1950. It would be only through death that he would leave his home, which becomes the reality in the story. Govender's writing reveals a constant reflection or 're-visit' to Cato Manor, the place that he considers 'home'. Bunn affirms in his text that to write in South Africa is to "write against the grain of what is visibly before one: land loss, displacement of communities, disembodiment, removal" (1996:22).

Cato Manor, a land celebrated through literature, a vibrant multi-racial community, was snuffed out and rendered voiceless by the Group Areas Act in the early 1950's as mentioned earlier. In 1983, the ex-residents (Indian) of Cato Manor were given compensation for their lost homes; a housing development was promised. Approximately 800 houses were built as part of the formal housing development project amidst controversy. The houses were appropriated by the residents of the nearby overcrowded township. Govender wrote the plays *Offside* (1984) and *Inside* (1985) which highlighted the travesty of justice surrounding this development.

Democracy in the 1990's heralded change, borders were erased and people could now dwell in an area of personal choice. Cato Manor, however, remains an area that is fraught with difficulties and complications. Post-1994, the government launched a land restitution process. The purpose of this process is to rebuild areas that were appropriated by the apartheid government. However, the reality is that, in as much as there has been some development, it has been impossible to re-create the social fabric of a once thriving community. This thesis explores the historical context of Cato Manor and the fictional reconstruction of Cato Manor through the works of one of its sons, Ronnie Govender more fully in the next chapter.

## CHAPTER TWO

The history of every working class is tied up with the history of its location. Workers reconstitute the spaces they inhabit, they re-inscribe them with their actions, they reshape them with the rhythms of their everyday lives. (in Desai and Vahed, 2010:318)

One of the aims of this thesis is to examine how land shapes the writer and, more specifically, how Cato Manor influenced the works of one of its residents, Ronnie Govender. In this chapter I will be providing a broad historical context of Cato Manor, an area located approximately ten kilometres from the Durban city centre. I will also explore the biographical context of Govender's journey as a writer and playwright. This thesis will show how this highly contested land influenced and shaped Govender as a writer.

Govender is a descendant of the Indian indentured labourers who came to South Africa in the 1860s to work on the sugar cane plantations. His grandfather, Veerasamy Govender, came to South Africa as an indentured labourer. Cato Manor was Govender's place of birth. He was born in 1934 and he spent approximately 23 years of his life in this peri-urban township. Govender credits his grandmother and his mother for inspiring him to be the prolific storyteller that he is today. He affirms in an interview with Chetty that he grew up listening to "his mother and grandmother 'spinning' stories for him and his siblings. His interest in storytelling and theatre was certainly fuelled by the impression these childhood stories made on him" (2001:243).

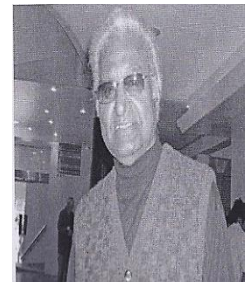


Figure 5 Ronnie Govender

Govender in an interview with Rastogi speaks about his attachment to Cato Manor.

You are born in a place, and you're raised in a place, and you have an attachment to that place, but in life generally people go on. One place is just like the other. But when something like this happens, it gives you a very special kind of linkage to that place. (in Rastogi 2008:225)

Cato Manor was 'home' to Govender. His attachment to this contested land is seen through his writings, which will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter. As discussed in Chapter One, the theorist Foucault posits that 'space' is linked to 'power', Cato Manor was a controlled space. Total power was located in the hands of the colonial and then apartheid government. Through legislations like the £3 tax, the 1943 Pegging Act and the Ghetto Act of 1946 one sees the South African government wielding power over people (e.g. Indians) and spaces (e.g. Cato Manor).

To understand the historical context of Cato Manor and Govender, it is important to briefly look at the journey of the indentured labourers who came to South Africa and settled in places like Cato Manor after their indenture was complete. As Rastogi in her text *Afrindian Fictions* states:

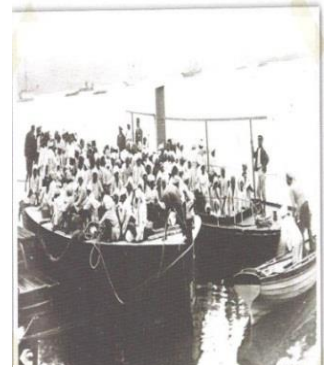
Any literary narrative of Indian identity, therefore, must be contextualised against subcontinental arrival in South Africa, their dispossession under colonialism and apartheid, and the political struggles they face in the democratic present. (2008:11)

Indians were brought to South Africa in 1860, primarily as labourers, as there was a need for reliable, cheap labour to cut sugar cane. Promises of good pay (a wage progression for the five year indenture period was negotiated), free health care, monthly food rations and a free passage back to India after ten years labour or a free land grant instead of the free return passage, seemed like a fair contract or 'girmit' (which was the coined phrase for the word 'agreement') to the Indians. For many, indenture was a means of escaping the poverty that was rife in India.

Walker there is no path  
You make the path by going,  
And on looking back,  
You see steps you will never retrace,  
Walker there is no path,  
Only trails in the ocean.

(Anotonio cited in Desai and Vahed, 2010:2)

The journey to South Africa was fraught with problems: there was overcrowding of the ships, the indentured labourers were subjected to physical labour on the ship, women were vulnerable to abuse and most importantly there was very little consideration or respect given to the cultural beliefs and religious differences of the Indians. Some Indians initially refused to eat the meals provided because the food was not halaal or vegetarian, however, during the course of the journey, survival became the priority and religious and cultural beliefs were compromised. Desai and Vahed discuss the response of a Pariah (low caste) to a Brahmin (the highest caste) who had taken offence to being physically bumped by him, “I have taken off my caste and left it with the Port Officer. I won’t put it on again till I come back” (2010: 23). I will discuss later in the chapter the impact that this conscious disregard for traditions like the caste system (which was an integral part of the Indian culture) for the sake of survival in their new country of work, had on the indentured labourers.



**Figure 6 First ship-load of indentured labourers in Durban**

In November 1860, 340 passengers who had been on board the *Truro* landed in Natal and five days later they were joined by the 342 passengers who were on board the *Belvedere*. Colonists were extremely happy with the stability that the indentured labourers brought to Natal. “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). They worked long hours and were subjected to floggings and reduction of wage or impositions of fines at the whim of their employers. As Ramsamy, indentured worker No. 102 461, and others complained, “We are like dogs without a mouth, we are afraid to ask our master for anything, for fear of being assaulted” (cited in Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000:11). To complain about their masters to a magistrate, the labourer would first need to get a pass from their owner; without this,

the labourer could be imprisoned. There was thus very little recourse offered to the labourers.

The hard work and the terrible conditions under which they worked in the fields did not deter the Indian labourers. They coped with both the challenges of having to work under the harsh terms of indenture as well as the blatant racism of the white colonists. Even though the majority suffered under the cruel hands of their ‘owners’, the tenacity of their spirit was evident. When they reached the end of their ‘girmit’ or their contract, many of them made the decision to stay on. The decision by some of the indentured labourers to return to India carried with it its own set of problems. As the words of the poem “Walker there is no path” quoted earlier suggest, this was a ‘one way journey’ for those who chose indenture: “You see steps you will never retrace” (2010:2). In the case of Govender’s grandfather, indenture was a way of escape and he could not return to India, as Govender states in his memoirs:



**Figure 7 Indentured labourers**

‘Now you listen here. When I came to this country, I took a good name. So did your father. Don’t disgrace the family’. [...] Sathie kept a straight face. Good name! There was a strong family rumour that the old codger was forced to flee India because of ‘girl trouble’. It turned out he had ‘interfered’ with some young lady and had to flee with the wrath of village she came from. (2008:126)

The myth of returning to the motherland was underscored by the responses from the villagers to those who had tried to go back home. Desai and Vahed discuss in their text *Inside Indian Indenture* the plight of those who returned to India: “many returning migrants had difficulty reintegrating into Indian society. They returned to Natal, not as free migrants, but as re-indentured” (2010:56). Many of the returning Indians were considered ‘untouchables’ or were ostracised by the communities that they had left behind simply because in South Africa they were forced through circumstance to interact with the different castes and they were unable to keep to the

‘purity’ of their religious and cultural traditions, thus many of them decided to re-indenture. By making the decision to re-indenture in this country, it meant that no matter how difficult their lives were, they had to put down roots in South Africa and create their new ‘home’ here.

The terms of indenture were plagued with callous disregard for the basic human rights of the majority of the Indian workforce. An example of the horrendous punishments that the indentured labourer had to endure at the hands of their owner was when Mr Armitage (a sugar farmer) cut off the lobe of the right ear of his worker. He was fined twenty pounds for this offence. The Magistrate stated:

As the Government allowed the cutting of sheep’s ears, he (the individual) could not do the same to a human being who was placed under his care and protection, and reprimanded him as a person not fit to have Indians in his charge.

(cited in Govender and Naidoo 2010:46)

As discussed earlier, there was very little recourse for the labourers and Barlow Govender affirms that, “[...] they probably didn’t have the strength to regret their coming. If they dwelt on their plight at all, then in typical tradition they must have resigned themselves to ‘karma’ and explained it all as the awful punishment they had brought upon themselves for deserting their families and their villages” (in Govender and Naidoo 2010:23). Dhupelia-Mesthrie recounts in her book, *From Cane Fields to Freedom: a chronicle of Indian South African Life*, the appalling conditions that Indian indentured labourers had to endure, “Floggings on the estates were common [...]. He uses whatever comes next to hand; stones, sticks, shambok. He treats a coolie like a bull buffalo” (2000:11). The suicide statistics rose dramatically as the indentured labours experienced what Dhupelia-Mesthrie termed “a new system of slavery” (10).

Girmitya, my maker  
Your journey  
Has broken my heart.

(Sudesh Mishra as cited in Desai & Vahed 2010:70)

The 'girmit' or agreement that the Indians had signed altered the course of their lives. It took physical strength to survive the crossing of the treacherous 'kala pani'; and as distressing as it must have been, it would have also taken immense strength of will to accept that they could never go back 'home'. In Chapter One, Vijay Mishra's view that diasporic communities entrench their roots in the colonies and reconstruct 'mini Indias' was discussed. The indentured labourers tried to hold on to or recreate their Indian identities in their adopted country. We see this to be true in South Africa, where the Indian indentured labourers put down their roots and tried to recreate 'mini-Indias' by retaining as many of their cultural traditions as possible. Dhupelia-Mesthrie also deliberates on the issue of 'identity' with regards to the Indian indentured labourers; she states that "the indentured Indians came from a variety of villages, spoke many languages and were from different castes in India. But from the minute the journey from India began, a new identity was starting to develop, one that would grow further on African soil" (2000:13). Govender in his memoirs discusses his grandfather (Veerasamy Govender's) journey as an indentured labourer, his decision to buy land in Cato Manor and the consequences of his decision with regards to their identity. He asserts that:

[...]The decision he made was a momentous one for his progeny for generations to come. Their citizenship was signed away at the stroke of a pen. From that moment they were not Indians anymore in the strictest sense of the word. So what were they? Could they truly lay claim to being South African? Could they call themselves Africans with conviction and justifiable pride? (2008:64)

The issue of identity of the indentured labourers will be discussed later in the chapter. Section 28 of Law 14 of 1859 sanctioned the conversion of the free return passage to India after ten years of indenture, for the equivalent value of Crown land. The

colonialists were surprised that many of Indian indentured labourers decided to stay on after their second term of indenture and claim their 'piece of land'. Of the 12 000 applicants only 53 Indians received these grants. The land grant was retracted in 1891. For many of the erstwhile 'coolies' who managed to secure their 'piece of land', they became market gardeners and hawkers. In 1875, there was an influx of passenger Indians who had paid their own way to come to South Africa. These passenger Indians saw a niche in the market, so they came to South Africa to start business ventures and provide for the specialised needs of the Indian communities. In 1893, Natal achieved self-government and the rights of the Indians were severely compromised. According to Vahed, this government "[...] increasingly came to view town planning, public health, trade arrangements and other public issues in terms of racial and ethnic distinctions" (1995:42). It became obvious that repatriation of the Indians was the solution for the white government. The white population felt threatened by what they termed "Asiatic Menace" (ibid). Laws such as the Dealers Licences Act (1897) were instituted to make life difficult for the Indian community that now had a population of approximately 46, 000 which exceeded the white population of approximately 45, 000 residents. This Bill effectively denied trading rights to Indians.

As described in Chapter One, the Indians that settled in South Africa (both the indentured and the passenger Indians) can be considered as the old Indian diasporas. They were never recognised as part of the national landscape and as a result they always experienced a sense of dispossession, of non-belonging. D.F. Malan (Minister of the Interior in 1925) stated that "The Indian, as a race in this country, is an alien element in the population" (in Dhupelia-Mesthrie 2000:15). July 1911 marked the date that the Viceroy, Lord Harding, passed the resolution that the indenture system was prohibited. In the face of such adversities, the Indians continued to stay on and put down their roots and create a 'home' in this turbulent land. As Govender stated,



indenture contracts or go back to their mother land; instead they acquired the land and put down roots and created their home here.

Ramsamy, a free Indian farmer at Cato Manor, explained why Indians took to farming: Speaking to himself he says: I have no capital, nor have I a trade, the hoe and I have been friends for the last five years, I have strength; if I put thrift on my side I will make one strong effort and see if I succeed. (cited in Desai & Vahed 2010:343)

From 1901, a £3 tax was instituted as a quid pro quo to all members of the family of the labourers who decided to exercise their right to settle in South Africa after their second five year indenture contract expired. Imprisonment was the sentence for non-payment. This was a strong arm tactic that the government used to limit the influx of the indentured Indian labourers becoming residents of this country. Not only did the Indians have to worry about making and sustaining a living in their adopted country, they also had to ensure that they were able to pay the exorbitant taxes. The stress on those who decided to stay on in South Africa was great. The Indians tilled the soil and sustained their families largely through their market gardens.

The Indian indentured labourers came from different parts of India; their vernacular language was varied (Tamil, Hindi and Urdhu). There were indications of people trying to preserve some of their caste differences and traditions. These differences will be explored later in this chapter as well as through the analysis of the selected texts in Chapter Three. A vibrant and culturally rich Indian community evolved in the Cato Manor Area. Govender's grandfather was one of the indentured labourers who chose to stay on in South Africa after the indenture contract was fulfilled. He purchased a piece of land in Cato Manor and he became a market gardener as well. Govender in an interview with Chetty, to mark his 75<sup>th</sup> birthday, ruminates about his grandfather:

My mind goes back to my childhood when I used to watch my grandfather, Veerasamy Govender, tend his beloved market-garden in Cato Manor. From the small dam he made in the river at the foot of the garden, in his sixties, he would lug two heavy metal

cans and water his meticulous rows of cabbage, beetroot and other vegetables which he would take by horse-cart, before sun-up, to sell at the morning market

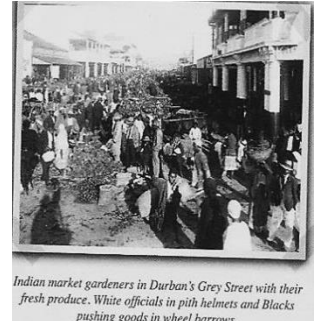
(Govender in Chetty 2009:14)

Through determination and hard work, the market gardens became lucrative. Cato Manor became the core source of fresh fruit and vegetable and they had the monopoly of supplying the markets in Durban as well providing fresh vegetables to the ships in the Durban harbour. As Edwards notes,

Recollections from both white and Indian residents during this time all give the images of lines of carefully tended vegetable patches, groves of sweet smelling avocado, mango and pawpaw plantations and the daily early morning of clatter of donkey carts carrying produce of the city market. It is impossible to find memories that do not evoke images of a nirvana of happiness, hard work and dreams of the future. (1994:416)

What the market gardeners lacked in resources, their sense of purpose and willpower helped them to establish a vibrant community driven by the common vision of success. Simple wood and iron homes were built. This humble community built schools for its children and places of worship like the Shree Gengaiammen Temple, which celebrated its centenary in 2009. They did this with little or no help from the government. The spirit of enterprise helped this community to strengthen their economic position. As Govender in the introduction to his short story collection, *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* affirms:

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. (1996:11)



**Figure 9 Market Gardeners**

As discussed in Chapter One, Cato Manor could be viewed in Mishra's terms as a 'mini-India'. The Indians tried to hold on to as much of their Indian identity as possible, hence the places of worship and the dutiful attention to religious worship and celebrations. Vernacular classes were a vital part of the younger children's education. Govender in his short story, "The Incomplete Being" refers to the character Mr Thaver (the Tamil school teacher) who lambasts Chellama for allowing her son Sathie to manipulate her into taking him out of the 'Tamil School':

I cannot stop you from doing this terrible thing to your son. Anyone who cannot speak his mother-tongue, who leaves his mother's milk for dog's milk, is an incomplete human being. (1996:89)

Holding onto one's mother-tongue was considered vitally important, it was the link to India and any person not learning the vernacular meant that one was cutting the 'umbilical cord' which connected the indentured labourers to India. Not being able to communicate in the vernacular also meant that the future generations' tie to India would be considerably weakened. This was one of the examples that validates Mishra's view that the Indian diasporic communities needed to hold on to their Indian identity and the insistence of vernacular classes is an illustration of creating a 'mini India' in South Africa.

The catastrophic history of Cato Manor under apartheid, spurred Govender to write his short stories; in an interview with Rastogi he affirms the importance of recording the past:

[...] because Cato Manor was destroyed, wilfully destroyed by human greed. And there were all these wonderful people, those wonderful memories. And I didn't want them to die. (2008:224)

Govender's nostalgic attachment to Cato Manor, his anger at the annihilation of a vibrant community and his deep sense of pride in the triumphs of this community compelled him to write about this community. As he states in an interview with

Chetty, “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). Nanda Soobben, a former resident of Cato Manor also shared similar views to those of Ronnie Govender. Soobben, an acclaimed artist, was motivated to put together an exhibition of paintings entitled ‘People Were Living There’ (1988). It was an exhibition based on Cato Manor. According to Soobben, even though the Group Areas Act ensured that people were removed from this area, Cato Manor belonged to the Indians. As Govender believed that he needed to tell the stories of the people of Cato Manor, so too did Soobben believe that the history of Cato Manor should not be forgotten; people did live there and that should be remembered and so he painted the pictures of the community of Cato Manor which reflect the buildings and houses recreated from old photographs and memory. The following images are copies of the paintings that formed a part of his exhibition in May 1988.



**Figure 10** Typical house in Cato Manor



**Figure 11** First house to have a telephone



**Figure 12** Typical improvements-not an uncommon sight to see a car parked in the yard



**Figure 13** Shops in Cato Manor

Despite the apartheid government fostering the policy of racial insulation, Cato Manor became a melting pot of cultures and races. To augment their income, many Indian landowners sub-let their land to the black and coloured communities who wanted to live in Cato Manor because of its close proximity to the city. The law dictated that the black community was not allowed to purchase land, thus renting land was the only viable option. The rapid industrial growth created a demand for labour hence there was an increase of black people moving into the area. There was also the need for domestic employment in the neighbouring white community. Clusters of wood and iron shacks emerged in uMkhumbane, an area named after the river which ran through Cato Manor. Even though there was a serious lack of infrastructure in respect of piped water, sewerage, roads and electricity, uMkhumbane became home to one of the largest informal settlements.

1932 marked the year that Cato Manor was incorporated into the Borough of Durban which meant that all informal settlements were illegal, but it suited those in power to ignore this violation of the law simply because there was a need for cheap labour and Cato Manor was a safe enough distance away from the white residential area, so the black community in Cato Manor was not considered a serious threat by the authorities. However, to protect the white community and control an influx of black people, the authorities instituted the Durban System which required the mandatory carrying of permits to be in town. The Pegging Act (1943) which stemmed from the complaints from white traders in respect of business competition from the Indian traders, restricted the trading and occupation of land by Indians in Transvaal and Natal, ensuring that Indians could not occupy or acquire property occupied or owned by a European before 23 March 1943. This Act also controlled the entry of the residents of Cato Manor into the neighbouring white suburbs. The Durban System as well as the Pegging Act are examples of Foucault's theory on space being linked to power. Cato Manor was a controlled space. The psyche of those in power was to ensure that the interests of the white community were protected, thus, they instituted legislation to

limit movement of the non-white communities and decentralise these communities. It can be reasoned that these legislations were implemented to remove the threat of multiracial communities joining forces to fight the common enemy (apartheid government).

Payment of rates and taxes was mandatory; however the municipality of Durban offered very few services to this township. Govender in an interview with Ncayiyana states, “I have many wonderful memories of Cato Manor despite the fact that, you know, most of the people were very poor [...] over 80% of the Indian community was living below the bread line” (2002:1). As discussed earlier in the chapter, despite the abject poverty, this community’s vision for success saw projects like the creation of their own bus services, building of a crematorium and other basic amenities which should have been provided by the Municipality. This community also founded the Aryan Benevolent Home (ABH) in 1921 to help take care of their orphans as well as the elderly. When the initial premises were forcefully taken away by the Group Areas Act, the ABH negotiated with the Durban City Council for the use of the Salvation Army buildings in Bellair Road. A considerable amount of money was spent on renovations, however, within a few months of occupation, the ABH had to be moved once again as the buildings had already been allocated to the SPCA. There was an outcry that the animals were given precedence over human beings. Soobben, a former resident of Cato Manor, was commissioned to paint a mural to commemorate the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration of the ABH. His mural reflects life in Cato Manor over the years as well as the challenges that this community organisation had to face.

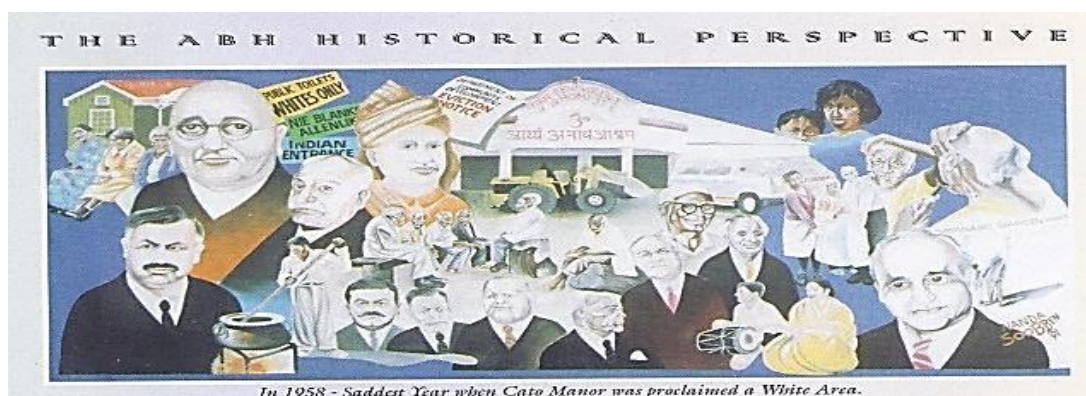


Figure 14 Nanda Soobben's mural reflecting the impact of the Group Areas Act on the ABH (1998:11)

Despite their socio-economic problems, Cato Manor was home to its residents including political activists and trade unionists like Billy Peters, R.D. Naidoo and Florence Mkhize. The Natal Indian Congress and the ANC were gaining support in areas like Cato Manor and this was problematic for the apartheid government. These organisations conscientised the community with regards to the atrocities to which black people were subjected in South Africa. The seeds of rebellion were planted through the Passive Resistance Campaign or plans of mass resistance. The government of the day feared a pact between the NIC and the ANC. They needed to use their power to separate these races. 1948 marked the year that D.F. Malan's National Party came into power. Protection of the white people became enshrined in the apartheid laws of the country.

Despite the tensions caused by the apartheid government, a unique and vibrant community of approximately 100 000 people co-existed in Cato Manor. The communities of Cato Manor generally lived in harmony, however, the exorbitant rentals and the deplorable living conditions became a point of contention between the black community and the Indian landlords. An incident which took place between an Indian stallholder and a black youngster in the city (where the stallholder allegedly caught the young man stealing and punished him) sparked off the 1949 riots. Violence erupted through the community of Cato Manor. Thousands were injured and an estimated 140 people across the different race groups lost their lives. The tension between the Indian and black community grew and the relations between these communities were severely strained. Govender in his short story "1949", alludes to the interference of the white community in these troubled times.

So why are you frightened?

Some white people are stirring up the trouble. Trucks from the big firms are taking some tsotsis to Cato Manor [...] where Indians live and are giving them petrol and paraffin. Some firms are closing early so that their workers can attack us.

(1996:109)

The catastrophic riots resulted in many Indian landowners fleeing their homes. Dumisane, who is the central character in Govender's play *1949*, is an example of the many black people who tried to save their Indian friends, much to their own detriment. The South African government conveniently ignored the devastating riots. As Govender in an interview affirmed that it was only when "[...] the Indian government threatened to send down a warship to intervene, that government sent the police out to act" (Ncayiyana 2002:2). The ANC and the NIC leaders took the initiative to talk to the communities in Cato Manor and this also helped in calming the volatile situation. These leaders also conscientised people about the hidden agendas of those in power.

Foucault's theory of space and power as discussed in Chapter One illustrates that power is generally inscribed in architectural structures and designs of urban spaces; however, as mentioned earlier, this was problematic with regards to Cato Manor and its hilly terrain. Surveillance of Cato Manor, by the authorities, was not an easy task. This was problematic to the authorities especially with Cato Manor being the political hotbed that it was - it was home to many political activists like George Sewpersadh, Jacob Zuma, R.D Naidu and Billy Peters. By careful orchestration of the law, Cato Manor was brought under 'control'. The Group Areas Act of 1950, the cornerstone of apartheid, enforced racial segregation. With the implementation of this Act in 1956, residents of established communities like Cato Manor lost their homes because areas like Cato Manor were rezoned as white areas. Over a period of 15 years, approximately 180 000 residents were forcefully removed from the area. Removals took place when alternate accommodation was provided. Indians were moved into areas like Chatsworth (which was established in 1964), Phoenix (established in 1976) and KwaMashu (established during years 1956-1958) for the black community and Wentworth (established in 1960) for the 'coloured' community. These removals were devastating to the residents. Govender in an interview relates his personal experiences of how the Group Areas Act impacted on him and his family:

I grew up here and when Cato Manor was destroyed I was then in my late teens. My parents were very devastated. You know my old man couldn't take it because they have put a lot [...] their homes or their communities and when this happened some committed suicide, if they did not commit suicide physically they committed suicide spiritually and mentally. (Ncayiyana 2002:3)

Residents of Cato Manor were dispossessed. Approximately 40 000 Indians were moved into little houses that were mass produced by the government. They had to leave behind their places of worship, schools and all that was familiar. This land (Cato Manor) was paid for by the residents, it was not a hand-out by the government. “The prices paid for expropriation of Indian-owned property bordered on legalised theft” (cited in Edwards, 1994:421). Residents were given no choice in this decision. Govender in his memoirs state: “Following the forced removals of 180 000 people [...] a shroud of dispiritedness descended on their victims” (2008:202). The far-reaching consequences of the Group Areas Act ensured that there could be no unified South African identity. It generated fractured societies. The history of Cato Manor reveals that entire communities were displaced at the will of a discriminatory government, which validates Foucault’s theory that space is inextricably linked with power. For Foucault, the one is understood in terms of the other, and it is important to take cognisance of “[T]actics and strategies deployed through implantations, distributions, demarcations, control of territories and organisations [...]” (1980:68). Correspondingly when one looks at multicultural Cato Manor, one sees a space that was exposed to the oppressive power of the apartheid government.

**Table 1. Classification of population and land distribution in Cato Manor, 1958**

| CLASSIFICATION      | PERSONS | FAMILIES | HECTARES OWNED | HECTARES OWNED AS % AREA |
|---------------------|---------|----------|----------------|--------------------------|
| Indian              | 30 974  | 5 692    | 882            | 48%                      |
| Coloured            | 2 237   | 524      |                |                          |
| African             | 60 000  | 10 000   | 38             | 2%                       |
| White               | 655     | 193      | 502            | 28%                      |
| Durban City Council |         |          |                | 22%                      |

(in Walker 2011:4)

Indians owned almost half the land of Cato Manor and the African community constituted two-thirds of the population. Africans were allowed to purchase land prior to the 1913 Land Act, hence the 2% ownership of land. As discussed in Chapter One, Darian-Smith et al speak about “[...] the eye-and the pen of the imperial beholder” (1996:2); to the ‘eye’ of the government these communities posed a threat; so by the ‘pen’ (legislations), the problem was solved. The Group Areas Act resulted in these communities being dispossessed of their homes simply because they were a threat to those in power.

Cato Manor shares a similar history to Sophiatown where the residents had also bought the land, put down their roots and created their homes. As Stein and Jacobson state in their book, *Sophiatown Speaks*,

Sophiatown symbolised a society that allowed a freedom of action, association and expression, where people lived together in harmony, undivided by race or colour. (1986:1)

The residents of Sophiatown, like the residents of Cato Manor, were affected by the Group Areas Act. The removals were scheduled for as early as 1953 but due to the protest actions, the forced removals took place in 1955. Residents of Sophiatown were moved into two-roomed ‘houses’ to areas like Meadowlands and other racially inscribed areas. Psychologically the process of being forced into moving was devastating.

Govender in his memoirs states: “During the years following the passing of the Group Areas Act, fiery speeches were made at protest meetings [...] but in their hearts the people knew that the abyss beckoned” (2008:88). Fighting the all-powerful government seemed hopeless to many of the residents. Whilst KwaMashu was being developed, Cato Manor became a transit camp for the residents. There were approximately 50 000 people living in the shanty town of Cato Manor.

Even though the Native Beer Act of 1908 ensured that the municipalities had the sole right to brew and sell beer through the beerhalls that they had established, to earn a living the African women illegally brewed beer and sold it to the male residents. The municipality found it difficult to curb the illegal brewing of beer. Pass and liquor raids became commonplace. The constant harassment by the police led to Cato Manor being an extremely volatile place. This relentless aggravation resulted in the Beerhall riots. In June 1959, the residents refused to allow for the removal of their illegal beer, the municipal workers thereafter went into Cato Manor and destroyed all the stills. The angry women, who brewed beer to make a living, forced their way into the Booth Road Beerhall. Florence Mkhize and Dorothy Nyembe were key figures at the forefront of these riots. The rioting spread very quickly to other Durban beerhalls. Their demands were simple, they needed to earn a living and the municipality should not be allowed to ‘steal’ their livelihoods. Municipal vehicles were set alight and municipal property was also destroyed. Cato Manor was literally in flames.



Figure 15 Beerhall Riots – Cato Manor in flames

Both the ANC and the NIC looked at the destruction of Cato Manor by the white government as being symptomatic of what was happening throughout the country. People like Chief Albert Luthuli garnered support from the residents for the ANC to fight the injustices of the apartheid government. Rapid attempts in 1959 to move the residents to KwaMashu were met with great resistance. Firstly, KwaMashu was not as convenient as Cato Manor in terms of proximity to work in Durban, and secondly, many of residents knew that they could not afford the rentals in KwaMashu. In the early 1960s Cato Manor was forcefully cleared of all residents. It was devastating to all residents who lost their homes through discriminatory legislation. Ronnie Govender in his text *In the Manure* recounts that:

[...] the hard-won sense of community that fortifies and nourishes was shattered.  
When the warmth of human communion goes, what else is there? In the desolation

that followed, Sathie felt a great urge to tell the stories of the Cato Manor he knew and had grown to love. (2008:89)

As this thesis will show, Govender does give a voice to the community of Cato Manor through his short stories, novels and plays. Cato Manor was proclaimed a white area, and there were plans for development of the area, however, none of the developments materialised nor did any white family occupy this land. Cato Manor remained physically dormant for almost three decades; but for the previous residents of this land, it was as the critic, Makhatini, in his paper affirmed,

[...] a nostalgic home in the minds of those who used to stay there, an area of currency for those who lost property there and conjuring images of childhood to those who grew up in Cato Manor. (1994:6)

In as much as the residents of Cato Manor had moved into the appropriate allocated areas, the majority longed to reclaim their homes, and in many cases, their livelihoods. Soobben, a former resident, in an interview reminisces that when he thinks about Cato Manor, he: “[...] immediately can ‘smell’ the plants, the trees. I remember the mango and other trees that grow in Cato Manor. It is a scent that is unique to Cato Manor” (Pillay 2012c). The nostalgia for his childhood home is clearly evident. The mango trees still grow in abundance in Cato Manor, however, it has been impossible to successfully recreate the vibrant lifestyle of the lost communities. Cato Manor was just one of the communities that was affected by the discriminatory master plan of the apartheid government.

Barlow Govender and Naidoo discuss the plight of the Indians in South Africa.

[...] A manifesto issued by the Nationalist Party, prior to them coming into power in 1948, deals with the issue of Indian people by declaring that, ‘the Party holds the view that Indians are a foreign and outlandish element which is inassimilable. They can never become part of the country and they must therefore be treated as an immigrant community.’ The Nationalists accept as a basis of their policy the repatriation of as many Indians as possible [...] ‘so long as there are Indians in country, a definite policy

of separation will be applied as far as possible between Europeans and Indians in every sphere, as well as between Indians and other indigenous non-European groups. (2010:86)

Indians were considered outsiders in South Africa and the government enshrined their prejudice and bigotry through the discriminatory laws of this country. Frene Ginwala in her text *Indian South Africans* also maintains that,

[C]olonial policy was designed to maintain Indians in a state of indenture for as long as possible and to reduce the number of Indians who remained in South Africa after indenture by penal taxation and repatriation. (1977:8)

Repatriation of the Indians was the easiest solution for the white government as mentioned earlier; however, the tenacious spirit of the Indians ensured that they fought for their rightful place in this country. 1961 marked the year when Indians were finally accepted as permanent residents in South Africa. This shift saw the Indians being co-opted into government structures, however, as Barlow Govender states, “ [T]he apartheid policy thereafter sought to strengthen Indian ethnic identity and dissuade alliances with other oppressed groups either on the basis of race or class” (2010:87). Govender voices his views on these separate structures for the different race groups through his alter ego Sathie, in his memoirs *In the Manure*:

Sathie’s mind went back to those blinkered days when the regime, with the tacit support of a largely supine media, tried to foist the sham Tri-cameral Parliament on Indians and Coloureds. [...]. During those years, Sathie had written a musical comedy, *Off-Side!*, which lampooned tricameral stooges. (2008:19)

As mentioned in the previous chapter, in 1983, parts of Cato Manor were reclassified as an Indian area and a housing development took place to compensate the Indians for the loss of their land through the Group Areas Act. There were many Indians on the City Council’s waiting list for homes. These miniscule houses bear little resemblance to the properties that were expropriated through the Group Areas Act. Amichand Rajbansi, who was at the forefront of the New National Party which formed part of the

Tri-cameral Parliament, claimed credit for getting the Indian community houses in Cato Manor, to make up for the homes they had lost through the Group Areas Act. The Indian community was not very pleased with this development; these little houses could not compensate for all that they lost. Soobben in a cartoon captures the essence of the way the community felt about the ‘houses’ that were built for them as well as what many of them thought about a leader whom they believed was motivated by self-interest and not their interest.



**Figure 16** Cartoon by Soobben satirising the Cato Manor housing for Indians

Unfortunately even these little homes did not go to the Indians. The community from the nearby Chesterville area ‘invaded’ the new houses and took ownership of them because they believed they were more deserving of these houses. Edwards confirms, “African residents from the overcrowded nearby Chesterville township and others from further afield took occupation of some four hundred houses which were completed and allocated but unoccupied in the House of Delegates’ Bonella scheme” (1994:424). Huge controversy surrounded this development and all further work stopped.

With the abolition of the Group Areas Act in 1986, a black community came back to Cato Manor and a shanty town started developing again. In 1993, the Cato Manor Development Association (CMDA) was formed and began plans to initiate a

sustainable development of the area. The mandate to the CMDA was to develop the area with sensitivity to the history and the people. Yet again controversy surrounded the development of Cato Manor. Ronnie Govender has vociferously attacked this organisation,

[...] for not having consulted with former residents, unlike what happened in District Six. No wonder it lags behind so badly in terms of tourism. There is hardly anything of note to remind one of the rich cultural history of a once vibrant community that did so much to help itself and make contributions to the city and the country. (Pillay 2011)

There was major controversy that surrounded the financial matters with regards to the CMDA. The CMDA received €50 million in investment: €21.5 million from the European Union and the rest from the state. In as much as schools and approximately 4000 houses have been built and 1 100 families have been re-housed, currently there are thousands of shacks that have come up and the shanty town of Cato Manor still exists. Indians have moved into the area of Bonella, however, it has been impossible to re-create the vibrant community that was synonymous with Cato Manor.

Govender's poem entitled "The Flesh Sags" briefly referred to in Chapter One, sums up the way many of the former residents feel about their dispossession and captures the longing for their lost homes.

#### CATO MANOR

[...] the games we played  
the friendships we forged [...]  
marbles jangling [...]

#### CATO MANOR

Spectators on frenzied toes  
voices hoarse with excitement  
as soccer rivals, Pirates and Westerners  
set alight the hallowed turf of Mayville Ground  
Goal! [...]

tired and weak [...]  
but you pick up the kavady [...]

#### CATO MANOR

silence now and bush  
no more Discovery Road  
no more Trimborne Road  
no more hopscotch  
no more ripe mangoes from Thumbba's yard  
Cato Manor, you have done your penance  
amid crumpled eviction notices (an extract from "The Flesh Sags" 1996:147)

### **Early life and career of Ronnie Govender**

His is a rich personal history. His youth, his family, his education – in and out of school – the community he grew up in, were all an excellent seeding ground for the fertile imagination and articulate exploration that was to follow once he started writing.

(Mannie Manim cited in Govender 2008:5)

After consultation with the Panjagam (Hindu astrological chart), Sathieseelan Gurulingam were the names chosen for Govender at birth. However, at the insistence of an uncle, Govender's birth was registered as Ronald Gurulingam Govender. Govender in the Preface of his novel *In the Manure* calls these names an "unfortunate colonial perversion" (2008:9). Govender would have preferred to be called Sathieseelan as the meaning of this name is 'man of truth' which he believes has far more substance and value than the colonial name 'Ronald'.

Whenever he writes about himself in his texts, he uses the name Sathie, as mentioned earlier in the chapter. Govender, his nine siblings and his extended family lived in 22 Discovery Road, Cato Manor. In an interview with Moodley, Govender fondly recounts his growing years 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 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 2002:2)

As a child, Cato Manor was the ideal playground, with its hills, valleys and lush vegetation. Govender's attachment to his place of birth is clearly captured in his poem "The Flesh Sags", quoted earlier, which forms the epilogue of his text *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* (1996:147). As discussed earlier in the chapter, this poem encapsulates his growing up years in Cato Manor; references to the mango trees, the marbles in the pocket, the soccer matches and the traditional religious worship at the Kavady festival gives us an insight to the kind of life that he, along with the other children of Cato Manor, enjoyed as they grew up.

For Govender, his time spent at the Cato Manor School (Primary School) held both "terror and delight" (Pillay 2011a) for him as a child. He hated the rigid, 'terror' instilling educators whose only method of teaching was by wielding the cane. However, there were educators like Mr Barnabas who impacted on him greatly and who Govender refers to as a visionary. As he states in his short story "At the Edge":

He loved English, the way Mr Barnabas, the school principal, taught the subject. Every Friday Mr Barnabas taught them English Literature in a period called Optional. The way Mr Barnabas, an Indian Methodist, put it the printed word jumped to life [...] These were the little windows he peeped into, now and the little windows that gave some glimpses of the wonders of life and of heart – warming human stories, stories that enlightened and inspired – welcome relief from the boredom of compulsion and conformity. (1996:86)

Mr Barnabus was instrumental in nurturing Govender's passion for reading and writing. He also showed his students a film at least once a month, usually a 'cowboy' film. Govender was fascinated by these films and their heroes; he often pondered on

why the heroes in the western films were so tough and strapping whilst the heroes in the Indian films were generally flabby and fair skinned. It seemed to Govender that the world was filled with the dichotomies of those who had everything and those who had nothing. He often wondered about the beautiful well-maintained Bulwer Park for the white children and the reason why no such park was made available for the children of Cato Manor and also why was it that Cato Manor School was so vastly different from neighbouring Marist Brothers College in terms of infrastructure? The disparities were far-reaching and often played in the mind of the young Govender. Mr Barnabas had a school magazine which published selected essays of students. Govender's essay was chosen for publication. Govender, excited with his moment of fame, ran home to tell his mother about his achievement and he was duly commended, however, his mother had a premonition that something bad was going to happen and she had cautioned him to be careful. Chellamma's premonition as usual was realised and precocious Govender fatally wounded his eye. Govender in his play *Thunsil, The Mischief Maker* relates the incident how Govender as a child damaged his right eye,

(Govender had carried dry ice home from school):

CHELLAMMA: My son, you heard what sami said. I too had a vision last night – blood, a boy's face. Be careful, I am going to the temple with the maather sungum to meditate, to ward off the evil. Be careful [...]

RECORDED VOICE (RONNIE'S ALTER-EGO): What's in that packet?

LITTLE-BOY: Dry-ice. I'm trying to make a bomb in this bottle.

VOICE: Why do you want to make a bomb?

LITTLE-BOY: They have nice class-rooms. They have a lab. They have rugby grounds, soccer grounds. We have nothing.

VOICE: That's no reason to hurt people.

LITTLE-Boy: I don't want to hurt anyone. I just want to damage their class-rooms  
to teach them a lesson. First I must see if it works.

*He steps to the fringe of the spotlight. There is an explosion. He re-enters the spot clutching his right  
eye awash with blood.* (2009:2)

As a child, Govender could already see the apartheid system at work. He completed his primary school education and went on to Sastri College, the only Indian high school for boys, to finish his secondary school education. It was in his Standard 7 year that he watched André Huguenot's performance in the play *Oedipus Rex*. This riveting performance awakened in him a love for the theatrical arts. He matriculated in 1953. This 'man of truth' as his name Sathieseelan suggests, had a strong sense of what is right and he would not compromise on his sense of justice. The injustices of the political arena of this country fuelled his desire to speak out and against any discrimination even if it meant "sometimes landing himself firmly in the manure in the process" (in Margaret von Klemperer 2008). His passion for justice, led him to enrol for a Law degree at the University Cape Town. Gonny, Govender's older brother who was a journalist, introduced him to the editor of the left-wing weekly *New Age* newspaper. He was employed as a part-time sports columnist. He needed this job to finance his studies; unfortunately by the end of the year, the newspaper was shut down because of its Communist leanings. As a result of this, Govender couldn't afford to pay his fees and his results were withheld. He made the decision to return to Durban. Back in Durban, Govender continued for a short period with his journalist career. He wrote a weekly boxing column for the *Graphic Newspaper*, a local Indian newspaper. Boxing was familiar territory to Govender as he relates in his memoirs,

Early in his youth, his close friend Bennie Bunsee had introduced Sathie to the keeping of scrapbooks with press cuttings of famous boxers and their fights. This past-time became a burning passion. (2008:105)

The field of journalism for an Indian in South Africa was a very limited one. It was not economically sustainable, hence Govender enrolled at the Springfield Indian Teaching College to become a teacher, not because he considered this a vocation, but rather because it was a 'safe job' where he would be guaranteed employment. Through his years at college, he continued with his part-time journalism for the *Graphic Newspaper*. His years at college were filled with experiences of Govender's forthright and rebellious nature getting him into trouble or, as he puts it in his memoirs, he could not help but "sail very close to the wind" (2008:118). He graduated as a primary school teacher in 1955. His first teaching post was in Mandeni on the North Coast. Thereafter he was transferred to a state-aided school in the Friends of the Sick Association (FOSA) settlement in Newlands West and later to the M.E.S. School which was built by the Cato Manor Community. His often blunt and candid nature resulted in conflict between the autocratic management styles of the head of the school. He looked at the school Principals as being mere puppets of a discriminatory government. Whilst teaching, he also did freelance work as a journalist for *The Leader* which was another local Indian owned newspaper. Govender's teaching career spanned eleven years. His approach to teaching was non-conformist and that, as usual, got him into trouble. Govender brought to his learners his love for sport and the theatre.

What troubled Govender through these years was the lack of theatre for the black community. The only theatre productions that were available in the 1950s were Eurocentric in which non-whites were only given minor roles. As Govender states in his text, *In the Manure*,

The state did everything it could to ensure that the theatre remained the innocuous playground of the idle rich. Even so, servile blacks could not enter the posh theatres of the various Performing Arts Councils in the Cape, Transvaal, Natal and the Free State. [...]. Whites could not appear with blacks on the same stage. (2008:147)

Govender also saw the same scenario on the sports-field, where talented non-white sportsmen were never given any opportunity to rise to the ranks of the professional sportsmen. This irked Govender and he was one of the pioneers who encouraged the sports and cultural boycott. Govender was a member of South African Council On Sport (SACOS), promoting non-racial sport and he was also a member of the Congress of South African Writers (COSAW), which tried to redress the imbalance of apartheid education.

Govender's interaction with Krishna Shah, the Indian director, who was successful on Broadway, kindled his love for writing plays. It was in Shah's classes that Govender recognised that his passion lay in theatre. It was during his time with Shah that Govender wrote his play *Beyond Calvary*. This play was performed as part of a show called "Trio against Trains". The venue was the Central Methodist Church Hall which was situated between Alice Street and the railway lines in Durban. It received a standing ovation. According to Govender, in as much as the press was present at the play, the play only received only a two line mention in one newspaper - *The Natal Mercury* (Pillay 2012d). This was to be the order of the day in terms of publicity. He was an Indian playwright exploring issues that were considered too sensitive or too political; so much of his work went ignored by the press. In 1961 Govender formed the Shah Theatre Academy and this nurtured his love for community theatre. He trained and mentored many local actors like the late Kessie Govender, Pat Pillai and Jailoshni Naidoo. Govender's teaching career filled him with frustration. He was constantly monitored by the Education Department officials for his political activism. The subject matter and themes he explored were considered 'anti-government' hence the harassment by the principals and the department officials. In 1966, Govender resigned from teaching and took up a post with South African Breweries as a Sales Manager. Financially, it was a more rewarding job and he worked for this company for eighteen years. What distressed the Marxist leaning Govender was that he was working as a sales manager promoting a capitalist company like SAB.

In 1982, Govender resigned from SAB and thereafter bought the Aquarius nightclub in Reservoir Hills which he turned into a theatre and restaurant. This venue became freely available to the local community groups; however, this business venture was not financially viable and Govender had to close the doors to his theatre in 1987. Govender spent a year as a Director in Residence at the Asoka Theatre at the University of Durban-Westville (1988). Govender was then appointed as a Marketing Manager to the Baxter Theatre in Cape Town (1991). He thereafter spent six years as a Director of the Playhouse Company and its Artistic Director of Drama (1993-1998). After his stint at the Playhouse, Govender, by then 64 years old, finally chose to dedicate his attention to fulfilling his dream of writing full-time.

This prolific writer has written more than 16 plays and two novels. He is a recipient of many prestigious literary awards. Govender received the Vita Award for Life Long Contribution to Theatre. In summary, his writing awards can be listed as follows:

- 1997 – His play *At the Edge* won the Commonwealth Writer’s Prize
- 2000 – He received a medal from the English Academy of South Africa for his contribution to literature
- 2005 – He was shortlisted for the European Union Prize
- 2006 – His novel *Song of the Atman* was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Prize
- 2007 – He received the Literary Lifetime Achievement Award from the Department of Arts and Culture  
*Song of the Atman* short listed for the Jacana Prize
- 2008 – He was awarded the Order of Ikhamanga (silver) “for his contribution of justice through the medium of theatre”
- 2009 – The eThekweni Municipality and KwaZulu-Natal Premier’s office bestowed on him the honour of “Living Legend”

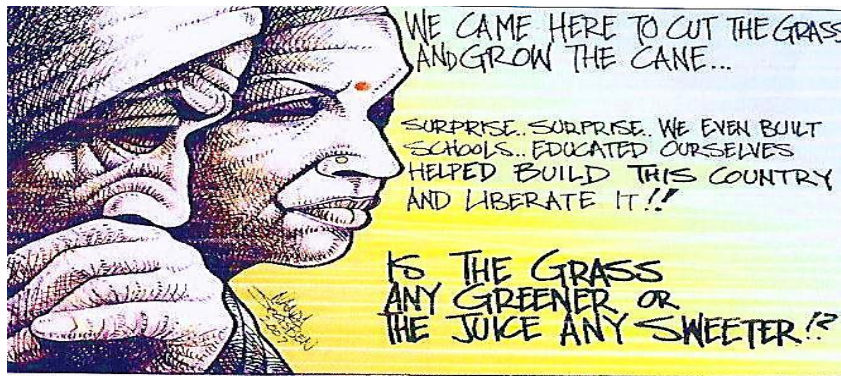
Govender is thus a respected South African playwright and novelist. At 79 years of age, Govender is actively involved in writing and directing plays. He has recently directed a play based on the life of the late Dr Goonum, the well-known activist, who fought against the Group Areas Act and other discriminatory legislation. Govender in an interview with Chetty states:

[W]riting is informed by realities, by the environment, by interaction [...]. Arthur Miller's *All My Sons* and *The Crucible*, and Shakespeare's *Richard III* have all been borne out of political issues but are timeless in their universal appeal. (Chetty 2002:345)

Fundamentally, Govender's writings have been informed by his experiences of living in Cato Manor and seeing his childhood home, and all that was familiar to him being taken away. This made him want to give a voice to the community that was snuffed out by the Group Areas Act. In terms of identity, Govender does not identify himself as an Indian writer. He is emphatic about his identity, he states:

I patiently explained that I was a South African writer and not an Indian writer. Of course, I have located my writing in places, like Cato Manor and naturally, the people there – in terms of the government's laws at that time – were of Indian descent, but they were no less South African. (343)

Govender does not agree with the hyphenated 'Indian-South African' identity. He was born in South Africa, he finds it strange that playwrights like Fugard are never referred to as a White South African playwright or Mbongeni Ngema is not known as a Zulu playwright. Govender believes that from the moment his grandfather Veerasamy Govender signed his indenture contract, he had signed his family's Indian citizenship away. They were South Africans, they put down their roots in this country and they contributed to the success of this country as Soobben's cartoon reflects:



**Figure 17 Contributions: Indian indenture to S.A. citizens**

In as much as there are people who are proud to have the hyphenated identity of Indian-South African, there are many people who have fought tirelessly against an unjust system which exploited people based on their ethnicity and race. There were many who sacrificed their lives for the struggle for recognition of being an equal citizen in this country. Govender has indignantly stated:

Look, you and I are genetic accidents. We didn't ask to be born what we are, not that I'm ashamed of what I am. This is my land. I was born here. That makes me an African.

(2008:64)

For Govender, there is no confusion in respect of his identity. He is a South African. His poem, *Who Am I?* reflects his identity,

WHO AM I?

Who am I?  
 I have been called  
 An Indian,  
 South African Indian,  
 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  
Surging with the spirit  
Of the Umgeni as it flows from the Drakensberg  
Through the Valley of a Thousand Hills  
Of the timeless Karoo clothed in a  
Myriad fynbos blooms  
I am of Africa  
Africa pulsing with the spirit  
Of Lumumba and Luthuli  
Of Rick Turner, of Lenny Naidoo,  
Of Valliammah, Braam Fischer, Timol and Haffeejee  
Of Victoria and Griffiths Mxenge  
Whose assassins lurk in the shadows  
Their voices still spreading the venom of race hate  
Of internecine strife  
And who seek to deny me  
What is mine, given me  
By Thumbi Naidoo, Dadoo,  
Naicker, Luthuli and Mandela  
Given me through the loins of  
Baker's vanman Dorasamy  
Through the womb of house-wife  
Chellamma  
On 16<sup>th</sup> May 1934  
In a humble abode in Cato Manor  
They will not displace me  
For I know who I am

Govender in his book *In the Manure* stated that “Indians as well as Africans are held hostage by the forces of history” (2008:64). Democracy heralded positive changes in South Africa. The journey of the indentured Indian in South Africa may have been fraught with problems and tragic events due to a discriminatory government; however, this journey has ended in democracy with a constitution that protects the right of every citizen of this country irrespective of race, colour or creed.

Govender, a prolific South African writer, has contributed to this country by being involved in the struggle for freedom as well as for giving a voice to a community which could have been forgotten. It is writers like Govender and Don Mattera, a Sophiatown writer and poet, who give a voice and bring to life the vibrant communities of Cato Manor and Sophiatown, ensuring that these communities will never be forgotten.

Govender acknowledges that the events in Cato Manor have impacted on his life greatly. The next chapter will show how Govender reconstructs Cato Manor in his fiction, particularly in his collection of short stories, *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*, as well as in his novel, *Song of the Atman*.

### CHAPTER THREE

In this chapter I will be analysing selected stories from Govender's short story collection, *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* as well as his novel *Song of the Atman* to show how land, in particular, Cato Manor, has been fictionally reconstructed by Govender in his texts.

Cato Manor was home to Govender and, as discussed in Chapter One, it was a place of identity and belonging for him. Due to legislation like the Group Areas Act, which declared Cato Manor a white area, Govender could never go back 'home'; but it is through his writing that he recreates Cato Manor as he knew it. As mentioned in Chapter One, Govender began writing his short stories after the implementation of the Group Areas Act; he affirms this in the introduction of his collection of short stories, *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* (1996), "I began writing these stories after my family moved from Cato Manor in the fifties, when the district became the first victim of the National Party's notorious Group Areas Act" (1996:11). The selected short stories reflect Govender's celebration of life in Cato Manor. Being born in Cato Manor, one sees Govender's intimate or first-hand knowledge of this community. As Duncan Brown states,

Govender sets an unofficial cartography of knowing, belonging and growing, a stature in ordinary character, an oral-influenced mobility of storytelling, a carnivalesque chorus of voices, the ingenuity of tactic, as well as the desolation of suffering and destruction which was to follow the bulldozing of Cato Manor and the forced removal of its residents.

(2005:108)

Govender's hand-drawn map of Cato Manor in the text (1996:4-5) further supports his personal knowledge of this area. The landmarks, which he refers to in his map and in the stories, reflects as Brown states, the "unofficial cartography" of Cato Manor (2005:108). Brown compares the map to a story and says that it has the "same status" (113). He explains that it is a 'map' to all the stories in the collection.

While 'accurate' in terms of street names and geographical location, its markers and icons are distinct from those of official cartography: it is a mapping of character, theme and use (Cut-Neck Bobby's House, Ahmed's Shop, Vellama's House, Adam's Garage[...], Bus owner Moodley's House); of inclusion and exclusion (White School, Municipal Housing for Indians, Muslim cemetery). (ibid)

Mapping, as discussed in Chapter One, is an indicator of power. One sees this very clearly in the South African context where areas were mapped according to racial grouping. The bulldozing and destruction of Cato Manor is indicative of mapping by those in power. The apartheid government's erasure of a space that housed Indian, Coloured and African people showed their disrespect and indifference to these race groups. It seemed as if Cato Manor was unimportant; however Govender provides the reader with intimate details and history of the lives of people who lived in this place and felt differently about the importance of their erasure.

I will briefly examine the form of the short story that Govender uses to illustrate the 'lived experiences' of the community of Cato Manor. Singh, in her thesis, states that the short story form was the "most resilient form [...] fulfilled both the aesthetic and political needs of the writer in the face of economic constraints, limited publishing opportunities and censorship" (2009:21). We see this to be true of Govender; he provides a window into the lives and the journey of the vibrant community of Cato Manor which was wilfully destroyed by the apartheid government. The brevity required in the short story writing is ideal for writers like Govender who wanted to capture and record the lives of a community that was in danger of being erased from history. Dana Gioia in her article on "The Form of the Short Story", discusses Edgar Allan Poe's view that the short story's greatest advantage was its ideal length which produces "an intense and enduring impression" (2001:1). For Govender, as discussed in Chapter Two, it was important to get the stories written; he needed to give a voice to the people that were 'voiceless' under the apartheid regime and even though the collection of short stories was published in the 90s, these stories are still relevant and reflective today of the lives of those who lived in Cato Manor. We see Poe's view of

short stories to be true of Govender's works, as his short stories encapsulate the intense history of the community of Cato Manor and it is through these short stories that this community's history lives on.

Govender in his memoirs states:

The intent of the short stories was to capture the spirit of Cato Manor through its people, the poor, the rich, the lowly and the mighty, their joys and sorrows, their dreams, their successes and their failures. [...]. He was much too occupied to attempt publication and he shelved them. (2008:202)

Whilst his short stories remained unpublished, Govender transformed some of them into the play format. His plays were produced and performed as early as 1987. Through the local productions of his plays, Govender's works reached widespread audiences, thus Govender's plays which dealt with the 'lived experiences' of Cato Manor reached audiences before his short stories did.

According to Wicomb, the short story can be looked at as "the poor relation to that prosperous, potbellied and commodious form, the novel" (2001:157), yet it has been proven that it is the short story that is most resilient and adaptable to change and it can, as Wicomb suggests, be the foundation of a novel. Govender has done this; he has skilfully transformed his short stories into stage plays (*At the Edge; 1949*) and one of his stage plays into a novel as seen in *The Lahnee's Pleasure* (2008a). His use of dialogue in the short story assists the transition from short story to the play genre. The play, like the short story, can be of brief duration; however, the short story presents the writer with the opportunity to explore his thoughts on a page, which is an advantage for reflection. Govender in an interview spoke of the difference between writing his plays and short stories:

The challenge in writing plays is brevity. The more economical the language, the more powerful the play. One has to be very disciplined in the use of words to catch a whole world within an hour and a half. This discipline, I think, has helped me with

the short story genre because here too you cannot have the luxury of verbosity.

(in Chetty 2002:339)

As discussed in Chapters One and Two, Govender wanted to tell the stories of the people of Cato Manor so that they could be remembered, that the world would know that a mix of people did live in Cato Manor. Govender's collection of short stories, *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* (1996), tells the stories of the 'lived experiences' of the community of Cato Manor. As discussed in Chapter Two, Govender's grandfather bought land in Cato Manor after his period of indenture. Govender grew up in Cato Manor as part of the vibrant community. Poverty was rife in this multi-cultural, multi-racial community. Religious and cultural practices were the cornerstone of Indian life that gave and sustained this community's faith and hope. There were many that lived in abject poverty or barely sustained a living. Medical intervention for illnesses was a luxury that the majority could not afford, hence, the reliance on religious rituals to 'cure' illnesses. Govender's short stories highlight the solid spiritual base of this community. His short stories also underscore the issues of race, racial tension and the consequences of an apartheid government on communities like Cato Manor.

As discussed in Chapter Two it was important to Govender to encapsulate in his writing, the lives, the memories and the spirit of a close-knit community which was deliberately destroyed by an unscrupulous apartheid government:

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. (Govender 2008:89)

Govender was encouraged by Tersia Hibbard, an Afrikaner who listened to his interview on SABC on her car radio, to publish his short stories on Cato Manor. *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* was published by Hibbard Publishers. She later went on to enter this book for the Commonwealth Writers' Prize and this collection of short stories won the award for the Best First Book in Africa in 1997, then was selected as a KZN matric set-work in 1999.

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, through an analysis of selected short stories from Govender's collection *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* and his novel *The Song of the Atman*, this thesis will show how land, in particular, Cato Manor is fictionally reconstructed in his texts. There are fourteen short stories in the collection *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*. In as much as each story depicts some part of the vibrant life of the Indian community in Cato Manor, for the purposes of this thesis, due to length constraints, I will analyse five short stories that focus particularly on issues related to Cato Manor that shaped Govender into the writer that he is. I will concentrate on the short stories in this collection that highlight the issues of nostalgia, memory, the abuse of power and the dispossession of the Indian community living in Cato Manor.

### **3.1 *At the Edge and other Cato Manor Stories* (1996)**

To begin with, I will look briefly at the two short stories, "Lala Phansi" (17-23) and "The Incomplete Human Being" (79-89), as they touch on important issues in respect of the abuse of power and the loss of ones 'cultural identity', though not directly on Cato Manor and identity.

In "Lala Phansi", the central character is Sonny-Boy Budram, an educator placed under arrest for not paying a parking ticket. He was placed in a holding cell with "a motley assortment of criminals, all of whom looked at him menacingly as he entered" (20). Lala Phansi, after whom the story is named, is a strong, black man who worked

as a 'bouncer' at the shebeen which Sonny-Boy frequented. He was feared because of his physical structure, "Lala Phansi was built like a tank" (18). Lala Phansi was also arrested the same night and he protects Sonny-Boy from other criminals who were also in the holding cell. The triviality of the crime and the punishment which was meted out for the crime makes one question those in power. Govender through this short story highlights the point that Indians were at the mercy of those in power. Those who had the power wielded it unfairly against those who were voiceless.

The second short story that I will briefly mention is "The Incomplete Human Being" (1996:79) as it reflects an important aspect of Govender's life. The central character in this story is Sathie (as explained in Chapter Two, this is Govender's alter ego). Chellamma (his mother), having lost a child prior to and after Sathie's birth, is over-protective of him. Sathie hated having to attend vernacular classes after school. He would have preferred having the free time to play or read his comics. As discussed in Chapters One and Two, Mishra theorised, the indentured labourers had created 'mini Indias' in their adopted lands, holding on to the vernacular language was considered extremely important; it was a link to the land that they had left behind. In the community of Cato Manor, parents insisted that their children learn the vernacular language. Sathie, however, was quite manipulative in getting himself out of these classes. He played on the sympathy and fears of his mother, especially since she had experienced the trauma of losing her two children. She gives in to Sathie because of his 'ill-health'. Govender was victorious as a child, however, to date he regrets his impetuous nature which resulted in him not learning his 'mother-tongue' Tamil. Govender makes reference to the same incident in his memoirs *In the Manure*: "the conflict in his mind remains unresolved, especially when he watches his grandchildren growing into their South Africanness [...] a cultural amputation [...] were you not a culturally alienated being when you couldn't speak the language of your ancestry?" (2008:62)

### 3.1.1 “Poobathie”

In contrast to both “Lala Phansi”, which touched on the abuse of power, and the loss of one’s cultural identity in the story “An Incomplete Human Being”, the short story “Poobathie” more particularly highlights the lifestyle and the issues that the Indian community experienced in Cato Manor. In Chapters One and Two of this thesis, the caste system of the Indian community was discussed. As stated in those chapters, the caste system was entrenched in the psyche of the Indian people and even though the purity of the caste system in respect of certain castes isolating themselves from others in South Africa was not possible, there were people who did try to hold on to some of these cultural practices. Govender in this short story focuses on the social issues that plagued the community that he grew up in. This community was burdened with layers of discrimination; they bore the brunt of apartheid as well as the system of social stratification through the caste system. The caste system within the Indian community is a discriminatory system based on the family into which you were born. Your surname is indicative of the caste that you belong to. As discussed in Chapter Two, mixing of the castes was traditionally not encouraged. Govender in his memoir discusses the history of the caste system in India,

And in that past lie the blockages. Hindu scriptures were manipulated by a political act through the laws of the Manu dynasty after the Aryan colonisation of the Dravidians, more than 6000 years ago, to sanctify the caste system. The pain and suffering wrought through the millennia by this cruel system is incalculable. It has resulted in generations of bigots and generalisations of untold suffering. In recent times, a group of Brahmin students immolated themselves in protest against affirmative action in which Dalits (‘unscheduled’ or lower castes) were allowed into universities in India.

(2008:22-23)

In the early 1950s, India implemented legislation to protect the ‘untouchables’ or the low caste people, however, this was not a concern for the discriminatory apartheid South African Government as they too subjected the people of South Africa to unjust discriminatory laws of apartheid.

One of the central characters in “Poobathie” is Vellamma, a strong woman who typifies the staunch religious matriarch. This short story is named after the protagonist, Poobathie, who is the daughter of a family which converts to Christianity. Her father (Harry) and siblings changed their names to Western names when they were baptised; however, Poobathie refused to convert to Christianity. Govender explores the contentious issues of the caste system in the Cato Manor community. In as much as “it wasn’t as bad as it was in India” (1996:25), one was always at a disadvantage if one is not from the ‘high caste’ family. Poobathie had to deal with two issues; firstly, the issue of her dark complexion and secondly, the issue of her caste. As the narrator states, “She was almost as black as the ace of spades [...]. Yet there was another reason why you might not have noticed her at all. Her father’s name was Harry” (ibid). Poobathie comes from a ‘low caste’ family, but unlike in India, in South Africa people had the option of escaping the caste system by converting to Christianity. “You also had the chance in this country to convert to Christianity and change your name, and as the preacher, a well-dressed man said, in that high pitched voice which sounded almost like a white man’s, ‘You are all, everyone one of you, my beloved brothers and sisters, made in the image of God’” (ibid). Everyone in her family, except her, converted to Christianity. Converting to Christianity made people believe that since they were no longer governed by the caste rules of the Hindu religion, they were now equal to everyone else and they no longer had to suffer the indignities of belonging to a low caste. Poobathie refused to either convert or change her name.

Poobathie was subjected to abuse because of her decision to remain a Hindu:

The preacher didn’t help matters either, ‘Child, you shall be cast into the fires of hell if you do not accept the word of God. [...]. Hindus pray to stone gods!’ [...].

Her father was more direct; he gave her an immediate taste of hell. He took off his belt and lashed at her legs which the terrified girl tried vainly to ward off by doing a weird dance. (1996:26)

Poobathie was steadfast in her belief; her haven was the temple in Discovery Road that she had attended secretly since she was nine years old. The temple belonged to the old widow Vellamma. The temple was behind the “neat wood and iron bungalow” (26) of Vellamma’s house. Poobathie and Vellamma’s orphaned granddaughter, Selvarani were friends. Over the years, Vellamma had taught both the girls all the Hindu religious rituals and told them fascinating stories about the goddess Mariammen. Vellamma’s staunch belief in her religion is indicative of Mishra’s point as discussed in the previous two chapters, that mini-Indias were created in the foreign lands by the indentured labourers. There was a need to hold on to their motherland in respect of cultural beliefs and practices.

Poobathie was happiest when she helped Selvarani and her granny on Fridays. They had to get up early, have a ‘head bath’, wash the brass lamps and brass trays on which flowers and fruit were offered to the gods and goddesses [...] and the little brass bell which the old lady rang as she chanted the names of the saints and the gods who were hardly differentiated [...]. She even had pictures of Jesus Christ and Mother Mary in that pretty little temple [...]. They would do the thing she loved the most – taking sugar to every nook and cranny where there were ants. The old lady would say, ‘Who knows, we might have been ants in a previous birth, or we could be ants in a future birth if we don’t behave.’ (1996:27)

Poobathie’s parents forbade her from going to Vellamma’s house. But this did not deter her. Vellamma’s temple was a symbol of the acceptance of unity; the fact that she had Christian icons in her temple showed the tolerance and respect that Vellamma had for religion in general. It was here that Poobathie gained acceptance for who she was.

Govender in his book *In the Manure* (2008) chronicles life experiences that have shaped him to be the person that he is; he recounts an incident where his grandmother and his orphaned cousin Mama-Girl “would have their bath in order to be ready for the special morning prayers to Suriyan, or the Sun-god, which had to be done exactly

at sunrise. They would then place sugar at all the ant holes and ant heaps” (26). It is clear that the character of Vellamma is based on his grandmother (Amurtham) and the rituals that she practised. Stories in this collection clearly reflect his personal life and experiences growing up in Cato Manor.

As discussed in Chapter One, de Certeau’s posits that it is the resident of the city or in this case a township who will know all the nooks and crannies of the place that they live. No map will reflect places like “the field opposite bus-owner Moodley’s house”:

Once, while playing rounders – a game like baseball except that the open palm substituted for a bat – Poobathie missed an easy catch. Her captain, Selvarani, shouted loudly, “Useless! Useless! That’s why God made you so black! Poobathie ran and ran. She ran till her breath was out of her body, until she fell down on the long grass in the field opposite bus-owner Moodley’s house. Sobs racked her body.

(1996:28)

Poobathie takes refuge in this over-grown field, confidently knowing that this will be a place where no-one will be able to find her. Govender illustrates that he is able to map Cato Manor through his stories in an intimate manner simply because Cato Manor was home to him, as it is to Poobathie.

However, Govender knows that Cato Manor was not always a refuge for women in particular. Poobathie couldn’t go to high school because of a lack of funds, she looked for a job. This decision did not sit well with her father who believed that females should not be working; he looked at it as an indictment on him as the provider. However, her mother’s logic prevailed: by Poobathie working, her brothers would be able to be educated. Harry (her father) accepted this as he believed that the boys should be educated. His views showed his disregard for women. Govender in an interview with Rastogi speaks about the sexism in the Indian culture,

You must understand one thing about so-called Indian culture [...] just look at the kind of sexism that exists. There's no denying that there's heavy sexism, again, entrenched through mythology [...]. But how women themselves have coped with this kind of heavy repression and not only just survived, I think, but have triumphed [...]. (2008:228)

Poobathie becomes a victim of sexual harassment to a philandering boss. With the help of Vellamma, and her steadfast belief in God, her dignity is saved. Taking the advice of Vellamma, Poobathie opens her own little business sewing for the community and eventually this little 'home industry' which operated from Vellamma's house, developed into a prosperous business which required bigger premises and more employees, including her childhood friend Selvarani (Vellamma's granddaughter). We see Poobathie triumphant, despite her circumstances. She initially finds work as a domestic helper; but her affable nature and intelligence sees her progressing from a domestic worker to a machinist in a factory, and thereafter to a successful businesswoman owning her own factory.

Selvarani, Vellamma's granddaughter falls in love with Poobathie's brother. This was unacceptable to Vellamma and she blamed Poobathie for their relationship. Vellamma's reaction is understandable within the context of the Indian caste system.

Why did God choose to treat people differently? Why were there high castes and low castes? She didn't ask the question because in her heart she knew that it was not God who separated people into high and low castes. She was old enough and wise enough to know that people will do anything, even twist the word of God for their own benefit. [...] it was too late to change the views of the old lady. (1996:33)

Govender, in "Poobathie", then brings to the fore the issues of the caste system and sexism in this story. He brings to life the cultural practices of the Cato Manor community through his characters in this story. He also touches on the issue of colour and how people are judged by their skin colour. Poobathie's insecurities in respect of her dark complexion are based on the notion that light complexioned skin equates to beauty. This belief was predominant in South Africa because the apartheid system

differentiated among people along racial lines; so, simply, the white people were considered superior by law. This story brings to the fore the stratification of the caste system and skin colour within the Indian community. Govender had first-hand experience with these issues because he grew up in Cato Manor. These are the lived experiences that shaped him as the writer that he is. Govender does not, therefore, allow his nostalgia for his life at Cato Manor to ‘colour his vision’. Govender does not pass judgement on discriminatory practices within the Indian community of Cato Manor, instead he presents to the reader life as it was in Cato Manor, and thus one gets a more complete picture of the community of Cato Manor.

### 3.1.2 “Brothers of the Spirit”

This story focuses on two brothers, Premlall or Cut-Neck-Bobby as he was known, and Bullwa. It highlights the social conditions of the residents of Cato Manor. Rice was a luxury that few could afford; instead most people had to eat mealie-rice. Mealie-rice had to be prepared very carefully for it to be enjoyed, it required skill to make this meal palatable, “If you weren’t careful, the broken mealie grains would end up as a mushy porridge” (1996:35). Govender brings to the fore the way of life in Cato Manor, the hard-working women who would grind their own spices and prepare substantial tasty meals that lingered on in the memory of people of Cato Manor.

And don’t talk about the dhall and the dry-fish chutney. My mother, your great naany, used to grind the spices with her own hands. Cut the chillies from the garden and dry them. Then the mealie-rice steaming one side, the *dhall* going *koosh* on the stove, and my mother putting fresh *dhania* on top of the *dhall* and then cooking the dry-fish on the *kadaai* on the open fire, we’ll be just waiting to eat [...]. Mealie-rice was so good in those days. (1996:36)

Govender makes specific reference to nostalgia in this story,

It wasn’t just the mealie-rice or the dry-fish chutney or the hand-ground spices that were at the nub of his nostalgia. There were a host of haunting memories of a lifetime

spent at the hearth of his *atman*: the soil he'd never imagined he'd one day be torn away from, the rich, red soil of Cato Manor. (ibid)

As stated in Chapter One, it is people's interaction and experiences with a space that creates a place that is called 'home'. The emotional attachment and longing for their home is evident in this story through Premall's character. It is clear to see that being dispossessed of their homes and their land was something that many people never came to terms with. Govender refers to the *atman* which is a person's soul. Cato Manor was not just a place that they physically inhabited, it was also a spiritual home to the residents, a 'place' as discussed in Chapter One and Two, where they put down their roots and created a home to which they felt they belonged. It was profoundly alienating for them to be dispossessed from all that was familiar.

Cut-Neck-Bobby did not experience abject poverty like other residents did, and his parents always ensured that they had the basic necessities. As Govender tongue-in-cheek states, "Nostalgia, however, is the hand-maiden of delusion. The good remains, the bad recedes and so it was with the mealie-rice. If Cut-Neck-Bobby had to choose now, he wouldn't touch the stuff except when the cane was down...menu" (ibid). Despite hardships, which Govender does not hide, the strength of Cato Manor was in its strong sense of community. Cato Manor was no utopia, poverty was rife and life was not easy; however, it was home to its residents and, as Govender alludes to in the above quotation, one tends to look back at the life in Cato Manor with the proverbial 'rose coloured spectacles' simply because Cato Manor was the home of which they were dispossessed. As discussed in Chapter One, Boym's view of nostalgia being a "yearning for a different time – the time of our childhood [...]" (2001: xv), is clear in that Govender through his creation of characters like Cut-Neck-Bobby, shows how he longs for the life that he had in Cato Manor, despite its hardships.

Ramnath was Cut-Neck-Bobby's father. As discussed in Chapters One and Two, the majority of the Indians who stayed on in South Africa became market gardeners.

Ramnath was a market-gardener and he managed to send all eleven of his children to school. Ramnath instilled in his children the importance of education and the sacred belief of “Matha, Pitha, Guru, Deivam – first your parents, next your teacher and then God” (1996:37).

Ramnath sold his vegetables to the residents of Berea, the white area. “[...] he would sell his wares to the white madams, most of whom had grown quite fond of their efficient and reliable vendor, *Sammy* [...]” (ibid). In as much as Ramnath was a regular trustworthy vendor in their area, the white madams did not bother to find out his name. The name *Sammy* was a name that was given to all Indian males by many white people; the excuse being that it was difficult to pronounce the Indian names. One’s name is in an indication of identity; however, the reality of the situation was that disrespect was the norm for the apartheid government of South Africa. In business, Indians were victims of the apartheid government.

What they know about food. What they know about anything? That’s why they frightened for us; they don’t want to give us a chance. If I only get one shop there by Fenniscowles Road if they only give me a chance, I’ll show them [...]. (1996:37)

As is evident from Ramnath’s speech above, Indians were not allowed to open shops in areas designated to white people. Fenniscowles Road was in the Berea area which was allocated to the white community. Even though it would have been lucrative for Ramnath to open a shop in this area, it would not have been possible. As discussed in Chapter One, the Indian diasporas were often confronted with the challenges of racism.

Hello Madam, hello Madam. How’s Madam’s corns today? No, the ones on your toes. Still painin’? Oh shame. Madam must put manja. My house anything happens we put manja, where doctor and all that! Can’t afford it. (ibid)

As discussed in Chapter Two, the majority of the Indians who lived in Cato Manor lived in poverty. Consultation with medical doctors was a luxury that very few could

enjoy. The Indian community would rely on the traditional home remedies such as the one Ramnath in the above excerpt mentions: turmeric powder with its antiseptic attributes was the cure for many ailments.

Being a market-gardener was not an easy job. It was a physically taxing job as is evident in this short story,

Everyday Cut-Neck-Bobby's father would load his baskets, hung at either end of a bamboo pole over his sturdy shoulders with the different types of vegetables from his garden and trudge over the hill to the tarred roads of Berea, where he would sell his wares to the white madams. (1996:37)

Brown states that in this short story "Brothers of Spirit", Govender addresses the "questions of poverty, class prejudice, gender relations and sexual morality" (2005:120). This point is evident in the following extract:

When you saw me using lot oil? Next door, Salatchi's husband make sure they got enough groceries. I must shout every day. Muthu's working for the factory. You think he's better than me because I work in the garden ... I never say he's better than you, but he gives Salatchi everything and ... and ... he don't go to Mehmoon's house... Why you don't smile at me then ... why you only smile at that Mehmoon. You not her husband ... You angry you got no groceries. What Mehmoon got to do with that? Salatchi got everything. See my hands, see my hands. I work for myself? Who I work for? Who I work for? Salatchi don't shout at her husband. Some people got respect for their husband... (1996:38-39)

This extract brings to the fore the strain that many people like Ramnath experienced in Cato Manor. Financial tension impacted on relationships. Living off the land was not the easiest of occupations; a steady income was never a guarantee. Ramnath's wife's

insecurity is evident with her reference to Mehmooon's house. Govender describes their home in detail:

They lived, with their families, in a wood-and iron house that was plonked in a gash in the rich, red sands of the hill in Cato Manor Road which separated the Indian area from the white suburb of Berea. (ibid)

As discussed in Chapter One, Walter Benjamin (in Savage 2003) affirms that the memories of a place where one puts down roots can never be erased. Govender's description of Bullwa's and Cut-Neck-Bobby's house is very vivid. The description illustrates Govender's intimate knowledge of the place. The words, "rich, red sands" intimates his affection and nostalgia for a place that was once 'home' to him despite the poverty experienced there.

Friday evenings were always eventful in Cato Manor. After a hard week at work, the menfolk would often unwind with alcohol.

Another hardship in those days, or at any rate, it was a hardship as far as Cut-Neck-Bobby and Bullwa were concerned, was that Indians didn't have the liquor franchise. As a result, on Friday night after work, both brothers would buy their sweetmeats from Kapitans and take the bus to Mayville Hill, one mile away from where they lived. They would make straight for the Mayville Hotel which had an Indian bar on one side. It was a grimy afterthought of a pub with enamel tables and long, wooden benches. (1996:40)

This extract highlights the discriminatory system of government in South Africa, perpetuated in Cato Manor. Indians could not own a liquor franchise; therefore they could not open liquor stores and bars. As the extract reveals, should one want to consume alcohol, one would, like the characters Bullwa and Cut-Neck-Bobby, need to go to the Mayville Hotel which was a distance from the central residential area of Cato Manor. As highlighted in Chapters One and Two, Indians were not given the same consideration as the whites. The 'Indian' bar seemed like an "afterthought". Indians had to make do with the dingy facilities that were provided for them.

Govender mentions the iconic Kapitans Vegetarian Take-Away shop and later restaurant in Grey Street which had first opened its doors in Durban in 1887. As discussed in Chapter One, there is an interrelationship between place and literature. Stores like Kapitans may not have been situated in Cato Manor, but it was a place which was accessible to the residents. It was a place where people could purchase authentic Indian vegetarian sweetmeats and snacks. The Mayville Hotel is also a place that would be meaningful to the residents as it was the only 'hotel' that served alcohol to Indians. Visiting Kapitans and the Mayville Hotel were experiences that were commonplace to the Cato Manor residents and it is logical that such localities form part of Govender's literature.

Cut-Neck-Bobby's normal reticent character transforms into a genial music loving raconteur when he is inebriated. Bullwa, normally an introverted character, becomes very aggressive and vocal when he consumes alcohol:

The brothers wanted a part of the action, they desperately wanted to be part of the jol. They were so thick-skinned that they didn't notice that their presence always dampened things a bit with the more timid chaps who were just that little bit reluctant to let themselves go. But after a few drinks, everything went into the melting pot and things really got swinging. Friday night! What would life be without it? (1996:41)

A squabble leads Cut-Neck-Bobby to breaking a paraffin bottle on Bullwa's head. Cut-Neck-Bobby's action immediately sobered him whilst Bullwa was placed on his bed to sleep off the alcohol. Cut-Neck-Bobby's quick thinking helped him out of a potentially serious situation.

The family and neighbours stood around him in deep reverence while he rubbed ash on their foreheads as they knelt before him. [...]  
Sir, you can't arrest him now. [...]. Sir, he got God on him [...].  
The white cop stepped back judiciously as Cut-Neck-Bobby advanced on him.  
Narain shouted, 'Put out your hand, Sir, God will give you some ashes.'  
The white cop nervously put out his hand.

Cut-Neck-Bobby ignored the hand and gestured to him to kneel. The white cop hesitated. Cut-Neck-Bobby lunged forward grunting loudly and the white cop knelt. Cut-Neck-Bobby then rubbed ash on the cop's forehead and then placed some ash on his palm. Both cops then stood in awe as Cut-Neck-Bobby continued with his ministrations.

(1996:43-44)

The title "Brothers of the Spirit" could refer to their state of inebriation - alcohol being often referred to as 'spirits'- and it also refers to the cultural belief system of the Indian community. Indians believe in 'spirits' or 'trances' as they are called. It is believed that God uses the body as a medium to bless and cure people of their ailments. Poverty was also one of the reasons why one would turn to spiritualists to heal the sick. This extract highlights the Indian community's reliance on spiritualism. Govender, through the character of Cut-Neck-Bobby, revels in the resourcefulness of the people like Cut-Neck-Bobby who lived in Cato Manor. Cut-Neck-Bobby was able to get a white person (policeman) to kneel in front of him. This would have been considered an impossible task especially given the South African political climate at the time. The sight of a white policeman kneeling in front of an Indian would have been hilarious (and shocking) for the onlookers. The policeman would have been a two-pronged threat; he was white as well as a law enforcement officer who was called out to investigate a violent quarrel. Cut-Neck-Bobby hid behind the mysticism of a 'trance' or a 'spiritualist' and in this way was able to save himself from being arrested.

In this short story Govender highlights incidents where the Indian community was able to poke fun at, and get their own way, against the white community. Ramnath's insulting utterances under his breath about the white women, who buy his vegetables, as well as his son Cut-Neck-Bobby's comeuppance to the white policeman, are examples which bring to light that the Indians did not passively accept the oppression.

### 1.3 “At the Edge”

As discussed earlier in the thesis, Govender wrote these short stories in the 1950s and 1960s. These stories are based on his life experiences in Cato Manor. The history of Cato Manor as discussed in Chapter Two was filled with political turmoil, particularly in the 1950s. Literally, Cato Manor was ‘at the edge’ of Durban. Due to the apartheid legislations, control of Cato Manor was in the ‘hands’ of a discriminatory government and this township was to be ‘edged’ out of the control of the rightful owners. Duncan Brown affirms that, “the backdrop of these tales is Cato Manor during the forties, fifties and sixties - at the edge of apartheid upheavals in South Africa” (2005:112).

The title story is based on the narrator witnessing an exorcism by his grandmother. Govender in an interview with Rastogi described the significance of the title “At the Edge”:

[...] I witnessed this incident of exorcism on my grandmother and the tremendous spiritual kind of power [...]. I witnessed this you see. And for me, that was, for me, [who had been] rebelling against all the myths and ritual and things like this as a young man; suddenly I had been brought up to the edge of [...] prevailing realities. And you suddenly 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 2008:22)

Govender like the narrator, Garana, witnessed an exorcism which made them both accept that there are situations where there aren’t always logical explanations for certain occurrences. As the extract reveals, Govender was a sceptic until he witnessed the exorcism. He was brought to the edge of a reality which defied the logic of his mind. He refers to this incident of the exorcism as a possible metaphor for the destruction of Cato Manor. As discussed in Chapter Two, the destruction of Cato Manor was devastating to the residents. People reacted in different ways to the forced removals from the homes. Some accepted it as fate, whilst others raged against the

dispossession imposed on them. Many residents were brought to the edge of their sanity because of the legislation effected by the apartheid government. Being brought to edge made people realise the callousness of the apartheid government and many residents of Cato Manor, like the freedom fighter George Sewpersadh and trade unionist R.D. Naidu, committed their lives to fighting against the injustices of the South African apartheid government as a result.

As discussed earlier in this thesis, in the early 1930s, approximately 80 per cent of the people in Cato Manor lived below the breadline. Prayer and rituals were the norm that people of Cato Manor turned to in their times of need. Garana, the narrator, though a child, is cynical of the belief that God can solve all problems, simply because of his exposure to unemployment and poverty which includes the reality of his father losing his job. “The woman needs to see a doctor, he thought, but when you are poor what can you do? Prayer didn’t help. It hadn’t when his father lost his job” (1996:61). His grandmother, Vellamma, however, had come to realise that she could either rage at the Gods for her troubles, or she could find solace in them. Vellamma, a child brought to South Africa, experienced the might of the apartheid law at a very young age. Her family had to move from the fishing village of Fynnlands which was situated alongside the Durban Bay. At puberty her marriage was arranged to the “strong and adventurous Karuppanna, her elder by far” (1996:60), an indentured labourer who stayed on in South Africa as a market gardener. Her life was not an easy one; the displacement from her childhood home, the loss of her two sons and, later, the death of her husband, all devastated her. It seemed that she was constantly ‘thrust to the edge’. It was in prayer that she gained her moment of clarity.

*Woolagelam woonen thothet Kareeavan*

And she was at the edge.

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

The song that brings her to the 'edge' is a hymn that is sung in praise of Lord Shiva who is the Lord of Creation and Destroyer of Evil. The words of the song translate to "You who are beyond understanding and beyond praise" (1996:59). The Hindu belief is that one should accept one's circumstances as part of the karmic law. Vellamma could have gone into depression, blaming God for her circumstances or she could realise that whatever has happened to her is part of her karma and she needs to get on with her life as best as she could. Vellamma's 'edge' was the epiphany that crying and cursing God will not help her, instead it was in God that she will be able to gain her greatest solace.

This story shows how many in the community of Cato Manor turned to Vellamma in times of trouble. Her temple became the place of 'miracles' for many. Garana, her grandson was a studious child who was also a sceptic in terms of the power of prayer. However, on witnessing the exorcism of Mrs Munien, Garana became a believer in the might of prayer. Govender in his memoirs recounts an incident in Cape Town, where his mother Chellamma had gone into a trance. Govender's stage show *The Swami* was being hosted in Cape Town at that time. Govender had stayed at his mother's house whilst the rest of the cast stayed with his sister at her house. Unknown to Govender, one of the cast members was unwell and was taken to a doctor. Govender, as discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, used the name Sathie as his alter ego in this novel, which was an abbreviation of the name Sathieseelan, the name chosen for him at birth. Sathie (Govender) was awakened by his mother that night:

At about two in the morning Sathie was awakened by a familiar piercing scream which he had not heard since his childhood. Chellamma had gone into a trance. She said there was a crisis and that she should be taken immediately to Gonum's house. As they climbed into the car she came out of her trance [...]. The moment she stepped into Gonum's house the trance state resumed. Holding the ceremonial brass tray on which there was ash and burning camphor, a swaying Chellamma ministered to Alli. She blew some ash into his face. Within minutes he was back to normal and wanted

to know what was going on. [...]. To this day Alli, a devout Muslim, talks about that incident with wonder. (2008:165)

Govender through his personal experiences saw the power of prayer. The community of Cato Manor was sustained through their belief in God. Govender explores through his characters, the power of prayer that was a cohesive force for a community like Cato Manor which had to cope with the constant challenges of poverty as well as bear the brunt of life under the rule of an apartheid government. People would be constantly 'at the edge' if they didn't believe Govender's maxim that God exists within every person. The character, Vellamma in the short story "Poobathie" states to the protagonist "[...] you have a lot of God in you" (1996:28), it is this statement that sustained the character, Poobathie through her difficulties. The residents of Cato Manor needed to believe that God had good enough reasons for allowing them to live through their troubled times. Govender in an interview with Chetty states that the title story "At the Edge" has given him the greatest enjoyment. He states:

"At the Edge", for many reasons, is a work that I've felt very deeply about. Perhaps, because this work is so close to the hearth where I was reared. I was born in Cato Manor and spent my youth there. Its destruction was traumatic and I think my outrage actually served to intensify my already strong sense of belonging to the district. (in Chetty 2002:340)

Govender changed this short story into a play format in the early 1980s for performance. Plays reach a far wider audience than a written story, and seeing the play brought to life the 'voices' of Cato Manor. It had enjoyed immense success internationally in the late 90s in places like Toronto, Glasgow and India (2008:223). When asked in an interview by Rajendra Chetty about his use of the South African Indian working class patois, Govender stated:

The challenge is to contextualise this adaptation of language in such a way that in speaking from the heart its innate dignity and power transcends the barriers which, ironically, English as a tool of imperialism, had itself created. (in Chetty 2002:338-339)

For Govender, one of the most profound moments for him was watching a Scottish woman being so touched by the scene of exorcism in this play that she wept. As Govender stated, “there was an immediate communication across time, location and language” (339). The audience becomes part of the drama as it unfolds. Govender successfully ensured in this case that the ‘voices’ of Cato Manor were heard, not just by South Africans, but also by a global audience.

### 3.1.4 “1949”

The ‘Durban riots’ of 1949 had a huge impact on settlement patterns and inter-ethnic relationships, re-configuring the social landscape of Cato Manor just as the advent of the apartheid era posed new threats to Durban’s black communities.

Previously an area where Africans and Indians had co-existed in relative, if not unproblematic, harmony, Cato Manor was convulsed by two days of anti-Indian violence which led many Indian families to flee the area altogether. It also sharpened ethnic polarisation around the future development of the area. (Walker 2011: 3)

As discussed in Chapters One and Two, the history of Cato Manor brings to the fore the vibrant communities of Cato Manor living in relatively harmonious co-existence. Dumi in this story states: “We are Christians. These people are our friends. Only a few are rich. The rest are poor, like us. This is wrong” (1996:110). Dumi pleads with the angry group not to do anything rash as attacking the Indian community. Dumi, a fellow resident of Cato Manor tries to logically reason with his co-workers, but to no avail. As discussed in Chapter Two of this thesis, the Indian landowners leased tracts of land to the black community as there was legislation prohibiting the black community from owning property. The protagonist of this story, Dumisane lived in:

a two-roomed outhouse which he rented from Mr Maniram. 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. The alternative was to live in Umkumbaan, the sprawling shanty town, where there was no water and no toilets.

Yet you paid six pounds a month to Mr Mohamed whose family also owned a shop  
in Booth Road. (1996:103).

Poverty was rife in this vibrant multi-cultural and multi-racial community. Rastogi in her essay “From South Asia to South Africa: Locating Other Post-colonial Diasporas” explores how “Indians use the apparatus of fiction to constitute their political presence in South Africa” (2005:537). Govender in “1949” engages with the impact of the horrendous 1949 riots. He presents to the reader an account of the incident that acted as the catalyst for the devastating riots.

It made sense later when he saw his friend Poobal, who also worked as a petrol attendant in Bellair Road for the Seebrans. Poobal was in a car packed with solemn people. He looked agitated, Sawubona, Poobal: unjani?  
Poobal nodded in greeting. Funny, he was always talkative. He spoke Zulu fluently and they were always poking fun at each other, ‘In’ indaba Poobal?  
Poobal told him that there was a lot of fighting in the Indian Market in Victoria Street. An Indian stallholder had caught an African boy stealing and had punished him. Africans attacked the stallholder and were soon attacking all Indians in their way. (1996:109)

A seemingly simple act of thievery sparked the horrific 1949 riots which changed the lives of many residents of Cato Manor. As the excerpt brings to light, the Indian residents had to flee from their homes for safety. In his book, *In the Manure*, Govender affirms the lack of police intervention, “In areas such as Cato Manor, while police looked on, docile communities were subjected to wanton killing, rape, arson and looting” (2008:46). Govender experienced the harrowing 1949 riots first hand. As he mentions in his memoirs, his family, like that of the character of Poobal, left Cato Manor during the riots and sought refuge with family members in Pietermaritzburg. Govender uses this short story to bring to the fore a poignant narrative of a shared history torn asunder by racial conflict.

The story “1949” opens with the protagonist Dumisane not noticing the unusually high sales of paraffin at Model Garage where he worked. Dumi shared a cordial relationship with his fellow residents of Cato Manor. His interactions with Maniram, his landlord, as well as Mr G.V. Naidoo, the bookkeeper, as well as his friend, Poobal, shows that racial tension was not an everyday occurrence in Cato Manor. Every morning as he is on his way to work, Mr G.V. Naidoo always had a chat with him:

Woonjani, we Dumi?

Kona!

I see your shoes is shining special!

*But my shoes are always shining*, thought Dumi. This man just felt he had to say something [...]. Hau, this man should be an imbongi, a praise-singer, he is never short of words, but he is good for a laugh [...]. (1996:104)

Govender brings to light the disparities between the various racial communities. The Indian community is presented as more advantaged than the black community. Govender, through the description of land as Dumi journeys to work, is able to portray to the reader the varying layers of lifestyle in Cato Manor:

To live in Umkumbaan, the sprawling shanty town, where there was no water and no toilets [...] he walked [...] past the smart house belonging to the garrulous bookkeeper, Mr G.V. Naidoo [...]. He walked past the Jew’s shop which was where the white area started at the top of Cato Manor Road, the long road on the border which dissected the Indian area of Cato Manor from the area of the Berea. Onwards to Concord Road which was a short, neat road flanked by staid brick-and-tile houses [...]. (1996:104)

The contrast between the living conditions of the racial groupings is very clear. The demarcation between the white and non-white area is evident. The next extract also brings to the fore the privileged lifestyle that the whites lived in South Africa. Dumi’s boss’s family home in Kloof is a striking contrast to an area like Cato Manor which housed a multiracial community of Indian, blacks and coloureds:

Dumi recalled the splendour of the Osborne family mansion on their sprawling Kloof estate [...]. The neighbours were invited, so they didn't mind the noise. In any event, the nearest house was about a quarter of a mile down the road, separated by huge trees and parkland. (106)

Many whites, as reflected in the above excerpt, lived privileged and insular lifestyles whilst the Indians, who had been in South Africa for approximately ninety years, were consistently treated by the government as menial indentured labourers and were accorded very little in respect of amenities and general service delivery. They were not acknowledged for their contribution to the country's economy nor were they recognised as bona fide citizens of the country. Through the character of Dumi, Govender brings to the fore the racist tendencies that people in general had toward the black community:

Can't you people keep your voices down? You're speaking to someone right next to you, not on the other side of Booth Road, for chrissake! [...].  
There were times he would forget where he was now and when he remembered he would hasten to lower his voice in mid-sentence, 'hau, Mazibuko, what did you bring ...' and he would drop his voice '...for lunch today.' (1996:104-105)

This excerpt exposes that what is considered acceptable to one culture is not necessarily acceptable to another. Should Dumi be exposed to such harshness because he speaks loudly? Surely not, it is about being respectful of each other, however; in South Africa, the white community did not feel it necessary to accord respect to a non-white.

Amazing! Where did you learn to sing like that? Can you imagine a bowser boy singing like that? Can you?  
Pity, if he were white he would have been singing at a beach front hotel or on the radio. For chrissake, don't get carried away; you know what will happen to the toilets, my deah! (107)

This satirically loaded extract is intended to expose the racism that existed at the time. Rastogi in her interview with Govender mentions her thoughts in respect of the progression of the stories in this collection of short stories. She states that, “I noticed that [...] stories seem to get more political, obviously political, as they moved along” (2008:226). Govender in this short story engages with the racism largely of the discriminatory white community, who, in addition to racism towards black Africans, also disliked the encroachment of certain wealthy Indians in the area that was zoned for the white community,

Looking at the Mahomedys move in, right next to the garage, Osborne was livid, ‘Why in God’s name, don’t these people go and live with the rest in their own areas? Why do they insist on living with us?’

And it was the only time Dumi heard him swearing, ‘Bloody bastards! Give them an inch and they take a yard. They should send them all back to India. They breed like damn flies!’

(1996:108)

As discussed in Chapter Two there was an influx of passenger Indians to South Africa in the 1870s. They saw South Africa as a land of business potential. Rastogi in her essay “From South Asia to South Africa: Locating Other Post-colonial Diasporas” affirms that:

most of the passenger Indians to South Africa were Muslim who migrated to South Africa to establish what they thought would be profitable business enterprises; this community flourished commercially. The white settlers, apprehensive of Indian financial prosperity as well as their relocation into white areas, consequently promulgated divisive laws disempowering Indians. (2005:538)

The excerpt above elucidates the reasons for the trepidation felt by characters like Osborne, who feared and disliked the emerging businessmen in the Indian community. The Mahomedys are an example of the Muslim passenger Indians who became rich and successful and who encroached on territories that the white people believed belonged to them. This fear from people like Osborne in the shorty story, “1949”

underpins the callous encouragement by some of the white community to support the rift that was building between the Indian and black African communities. This point is illustrated by Osborne's reaction to the petty thieving incident that had occurred:

At about half past three, Osborne called his staff together. Dumi listened in stunned silence. The Indians deserve what they are getting. They make a lot of money from you people and they have no respect for you. Some of the workers agreed volubly. This is your country. We white people have come to improve it for you. We have built roads [...] They have houses. You haven't. You can tell your friends they can have all the paraffin they want, free of charge! (1996:110).

The Indian community was attacked indiscriminately. The anger of the black community was fuelled by the likes of the character Osborne. Osborne justifies the presence of the white man in South Africa thus vindicating the absolute control that the white man had in South Africa at the time. Dumi was shocked that Osborne would feed the anger that was growing in momentum. Dumi realised that he could not stop this carnage; he does, however, try to protect his landlord, Mr Maniram and his family:

You are alone, you cannot fight so many. You must hide in my house. That's the only way [...]. Listen, my brother. I don't like the amaKulas myself. Please don't go in and frighten my children. [...]. Suddenly a young man broke from the crowd and dashed into the house. Within seconds he was shouting, He's lying. They're hiding under the beds! 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 through Dumi's chest. There was no pity, no reason in the hearts of these malleable souls, held captive by minds more savage in their cunning – the cunning on which empires have been built. (111)

Govender in his text *In the Manure* discusses the 1949 riots, where “several Africans sacrificed their lives to protect their Indian friends. One such act of heroism forms the basis of Sathie's short story ‘1949’” (2008:46). Thus Dumi's character was based on

those Africans who lost their lives because they shielded their Indian friends in Cato Manor during the riots. Govender captures the viciousness of the 1949 riots in the above extract. The frenzy and lack of mercy by the mob rendered them without a 'soul'. Govender looks at this mob as instruments of the 'empire'. By reference to 'empire' Govender is alluding to the colonialists who forcefully conquered, took control and colonised countries all over the world, including South Africa. Govender in his text *In the Manure* states that: "later a commission of enquiry found that the violence had been stoked by a third force" (2008:47).

Govender creates the character Osborne to reveal this 'third force'. As discussed in Chapter Two, the police only intervened when the Indian government threatened to send a warship to South Africa. A harmonious multi-racial community was destroyed through the 1949 riots which produced fractured and scarred communities.

### 3.1.5 "Over My Dead Body"

Govender, in his memoirs, *In the Manure* states,

At a time when jobs were hard to come by, Sooboo had been rather creative in augmenting his living as an insurance and estate agent and, perhaps, dipping into the coffers of the Sports Grounds Association. He was a different man that day. His usual charming manner was replaced by an unusual hardness as he vowed, 'They'll bulldoze my house over my dead body'. There was something in the way he said it that showed that he meant every word.[...] Sathie was surprised by this unmistakable steeliness in him – the stuff of heroism. (Sooboo's unlikely stance is the basis for the short story, *Over My Dead Body*.) (2008:88-89)

As Govender states in the above extract, the protagonist Thunga, as well as the storyline, was based on an actual incident that he had witnessed in Cato Manor.

How can we trust these people who have callously enslaved the vast majority in the country? Brothers and sisters, I urge you to say NO with a resounding voice, so resounding that it will be heard in the corridors of power. I urge you to stand up and

fight for your rights with all the God-given dignity and courage you can muster.

Through this Group Areas Act they will be able to take your home away from you [...].

(1996:135)

The short story “Over My Dead Body” opens with a fiery speech from a resident of Cato Manor, Ismail Khan. The above extract is from Khan’s speech. It resonates with the angry emotions of the residents from Cato Manor which have been provoked by the promulgation of the Group Areas Act. This legislation impacted directly on the Indian residents of Cato Manor. As discussed in Chapters One and Two, the Indian indentured labourers who had decided to stay on in South Africa bought tracts of land from George Cato and put down their roots and created homes in Cato Manor. Despite the many struggles that the residents had faced, Cato Manor represented a place of belonging. The Group Areas Act (an example of Foucault’s ‘tool of power’) which was legislated in the early 1950s resulted in displaced and dispossessed societies.

Thunga, the protagonist of this short story states: “They’ll take away my home ... over my dead body. This is my home and I built it. God knows how I struggled. Over my dead body!” (1996:135) The protagonist, Thunga, like most residents, felt very strongly about this proposed destruction to their homes. He equates the value of his home to that of his life. He is prepared to protect his home with his life. To contextualise Thunga’s feelings; as discussed in Chapters One and Two, the indentured labourers were forced to put down roots in a foreign country, especially as many of them could not follow in South Africa the customs and traditions as outlined by the caste system of their motherland, India. It was an impossibility to go back to India, thus South Africa became ‘home’ to them. Despite the harsh consequences of apartheid, the Indian people worked very hard to create a home in Cato Manor. Losing the rewards of their years of hard work, their homes, to the apartheid government was unacceptable for some. Others accepted it as *fait accompli* and moved into the designated areas like Chatsworth that the government had allocated to

the Indian people; however, there were people like the character Thunga who refused to move from their homes. As discussed at the beginning of this short story, Thunga's character was based on Sooboo, a person whom Govender knew from Cato Manor.

Thunga was described by the narrator as "a bush lawyer" (1996:135). Due to financial reasons he was unable to become an official lawyer, however, his intellectual prowess is seen when he solves Gurriah's case. Reference to Gurriah's troubles in this story, brings to the fore the principles under which the Indians lived. Gurriah was arrested for soliciting a white girl for sex.

Nothing, but you know in our community when you are a teacher ... it's not nice. [...].  
I saw this good-time girl standing there ... so I put one ten pound note in my top pocket with a little bit sticking out, like that, and I walked past the girl ...  
Ten pounds for a good-time girl!  
Well, she was a *white* good-time girl ... anyway, I winked at her and she followed me to the car. Uncle, just as she was about to get in, a plain-clothes policeman arrested me. Why did he arrest you? You weren't doing anything ... hey you weren't doing it in the car, were you?  
No, Sathiema, Uncle ... I never did nothing. I said, *Sir, I'm only giving her a lift* ... but you know what happened, Uncle? She turned State witness [...]. I was framed. They didn't even give my money back. [...]. Oh uncle, *perriya thoondir*, Please, Uncle! My family's good name will go to the dogs – my father's name, my mother's name, they so well known in the district, Uncle please Uncle! I'll lose my job ... (1996:137-138)

Gurriah's problems were two-pronged: one he was in trouble with the law for soliciting a woman for sex and what has exacerbated his problem was that it was 'white' prostitute. He would have had to face the unforgiving might of apartheid law for soliciting a white woman; secondly, taking or preserving one's 'good name' is an important pillar of respect in the Indian community. The Indian community was noted for their conservative outlook on life. Pre-marital sex was frowned upon or discouraged. Thunga, through his quick wit and intelligence, was able to solve Gurriah's problem by convincing the state witness to leave town. Soliciting a

prostitute was against the law; however, the situation was much worse for people like Gurriah, simply because of the issue of race. The might of the law was usually harsher when the ‘crime’ crossed the racial lines. Gurriah’s fear of besmirching his parent’s ‘name’ was a fear that was shared by most Indians.

Reference to the Minister of Parliament, Abe Bailey’s racist statement that he was prepared to shoot “every damn coolie on sight” (1996:136), highlights the bigotry of those in power in South Africa at the time. Govender in this story highlights all the accomplishments of the Indian community in Cato Manor. As discussed in Chapter Two, the Indian community built their own schools, places of worship as well as had their own transport system; the narrator of this story affirms that:

Over the years they built their own schools – Cato Manor Schools, A.Y.S., Manor Gardens, M.E.S., Stella Hill. They had built temples, mosques and churches. They had even built their own crematorium and provided their own bus service. They were a settled community. (1996:136)

This settled community was destroyed at the hands of an apartheid government who wished to protect white supremacy. There are many references in this story which illustrate the racist attitudes of the whites:

Take the case of the Ramkissoons, for example. It was their plight that landed Thunga in Mr Johnstone’s office at the City Treasurer’s Department, pleading on their behalf. Mr Johnstone thought he knew Thunga’s type well. The oily smile, the fawning tone [...] you just had to hand it to these coolies. They just refused to lie down quietly and die, or better still, go back to India. [...]. Oh for God’s sake, Mr Padayachee! They didn’t even have the damn courtesy to reply to the letters. Do you know how much it cost department in letters to you people? That is an unnecessary waste of money, tax payers’ money – your money – may I add. Thunga thought, our money, only in these circumstances, now when it comes to providing good roads and proper street lighting as they did in the White areas. (1996:141)

Mr Johnstone's attitude typifies the attitude of those in power. Repatriation would have been an ideal way of ridding this country of a group of people, who came here as cheap labour, but who managed to successfully integrate themselves and who now posed a threat to the very government that brought them here. They had educated themselves and managed in some instances to create successful businesses, and were now a thriving community. There was a fear that the Indians were impinging on what was considered 'white territory' as referenced in the short story "1949", where the wealthy Mahommedys managed to move into the outskirts of a white area.

Thunga's cynical thought about the waste of the Indian tax payers' money is understandable. As discussed in Chapter Two, Cato Manor received very few services from the municipality; therefore it is ironic that Mr Johnstone speaks about a 'waste' of their tax money. How could there be a waste when very little was given to them in respect of services that was standard to white areas? Thunga had managed to stop the sale in execution of the Ramkissoon's house. Thunga, however, was unable to stop the devastation of Cato Manor. He was shocked when he read the newspaper notice:

The impossible had happened. In the name of community development, in the name of group rights and group protection, in the name of western civilization, Cato Manor was declared a white group area. All the families that had lived there for generations now had to move out of their own homes, away from their own piece of land. (1996:142)

An entire community was dispossessed at the stroke of a pen. This legislation affected not only the communities of Cato Manor and District 6. It affected all areas in South Africa where people of different races stayed alongside each other. Entire communities were displaced by the Group Areas Act. Thunga becomes the voice of the people of Cato Manor. He addresses meetings; his powerful rhetoric touches the community:

We have built our home, our schools [...]. It is wrong for the government, in which we have no say, to take from us what is legally ours. This is legalised robbery. Will you allow a stranger to come into your house and take over, to throw you out? Let us not

be afraid. God is on our side, for our side is the side of truth. Stand up for your rights. Let us be united in our resistance. They can act against one or two, but they cannot act against an entire district. (ibid)

Boym in *The Future of Nostalgia*, states “[...] nostalgia is about the relationship between individual biography and the biography of groups or nations, between personal and collective memory” (2001: xvii). Govender, through his characterisation of Thunga, reveals to us his nostalgia for the place that was home to him; his longing for his home that was forcefully taken away by the law. Govender in his introduction to this collection of short stories refers to the freedom fighters like George Sewpersadh and Sister Poomanie; Thunga’s character would be based on these freedom fighters and it is through Govender’s writings that we can perceive the impact that the Group Areas Act had on the collective memory of Cato Manor. The banning of freedom fighters as mentioned in this short story is an act of rendering an entire community voiceless.

Eventually over one hundred and eighty thousand people were forced out of their homes. Only a brave handful remained. Thunga was one of those [...]. (1996:143)

This Act resulted in communities being dispossessed and fragmented. Thunga refused to move; he died at his home. Govender through this story highlights the devastating dislocation of an entire community. Thunga’s tenacity is indicative of the tenacity of those who fought against the apartheid government. Unfortunately, they were unable to halt the processes of the Group Areas Act in Cato Manor.

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It seems that, even today, Cato Manor is destined to be an area that is fraught with problems. As discussed in Chapter Two, Cato Manor lay desolate for many years, and then in the 1980s, the housing project that was allocated to the Indians was invaded. The promise by the Cato Manor Development Association (CMDA) to develop the

area by being mindful and sensitive to its history has never been realised. An area that was once home to a vibrant and flourishing community now stands as an undeveloped area which houses a low-socio economic community of predominantly poor black African families. Cato Manor has become an area fraught with petty thieving, house-breaking and crime in general. Former residents (Indian families) successfully claimed restitution (in the form of either money or land) for the loss of their property through the Group Areas Act; however, the recompense could never fill the void or successfully re-create all that they had lost. Govender, however, through his fictional reconstruction of this once lively township, keeps alive and celebrates the memory and life of Cato Manor as he experienced it in this short story collection.

### 3.2 *Song of the Atman*

My focus will now turn to the *Song of the Atman*, a valuable text for the purposes of this thesis; given that Cato Manor is one of the important settings of this novel.

Govender in the Author's note of this text states that:

This is as close to a biography as the structure of a novel will allow. [...]  
Most events in the book are true to the last detail, although the names of some real people (such as Guru) and the details of certain real incidents have been changed. (2006:325)

Guru is one of the central characters in this story. One can deduce that the character Guru is based on a blend between his older brother Gonny and himself; firstly, Gurulingum is Govender's second name and secondly, the history that Govender provides for Guru is the same that he writes about himself in his memoir for example, studying Law at UCT, except for the reference in *Song of the Atman* to Gurunathan starting a newspaper, "At Sastri College, he'd caused a stir by bringing out a student newspaper, the *Nuntius*" (2006:225). This history relates directly to Gonny, whose history Govender in his memoir confirms: "While at Sastri College, on his own

initiative, [h]e (Gonny) brought out a student newsheet called *Nuntius*” (2008:93). Thus one can see that Govender draws from his own history as well as that of his brother Gonny’s to create the character Gurunathan. Guru means ‘teacher’ and in this text, Gurunathan, the nephew of Chin Govender, is the person who ‘teaches’ Chin or makes Chin face the reality and impact of the decision of not acknowledging his illegitimate son Devs.

Chin (Govender’s uncle) is the central character in this novel and Govender in the author’s note states that:

Chin’s history is typical of the life stories of descendants of the indentured labourers whom the British Government brought from India to work on the sugar plantations of Natal under slave-labour conditions. Many lives were destroyed, but there were those who made better lives for themselves, largely through their own efforts. (2006:326)

Govender captures the history of Cato Manor through the character of Chin and his family who were first generation descendants of the indentured labourers who had settled there. *Song of the Atman* is set in four different places in South Africa and Govender uses the flashback technique in this novel. The preface of the text opens with Chin’s letter to his illegitimate son Devs who is a freedom fighter serving time in Robben Island. Chapter One focuses on Chin’s history, with Cato Manor as the setting and thereafter the setting changes through the novel as the central character Chin relocates to different parts of South Africa (East London, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town).

To summarise, the novel *Song of the Atman*, opens with the success story of Baijnath who had finished his Standard Four education, which was the highest grade offered at the school that the community of Cato Manor built. Seventeen year old Chin manages to get a job with Baijnath. Chin’s father was an indentured labourer who had bought land in Cato Manor. Govender brings the history of Cato Manor to life, through the

lives of the central characters. Chin's parents in this novel is Karupanna and Amurtham; these characters are also based on Govender's grandparents,

Karupanna had taken a break to wipe the sweat off his brow after some backbreaking hoeing when the Irishman shouted at him, "You're not on holiday, coolie!" Karupanna shot back, "My name is Karupanna Govender, not coolie." [...] George Cato, former barrow boy from Covent Gardens, sugar baron and first mayor of Durban, sent for the coolie. (2006:28-29)

Karupanna came to South Africa as an indentured labourer and he worked for George Cato as the above extract illustrates. Karupanna and Amurtham became market-gardeners. Karupanna also worked as a court interpreter to supplement his income to support his family after his indenture. With Karupanna's passing, the responsibility of the family fell on Jack's (Chin's older brother) shoulders. Jack's boss, Wallie Davis, saw the potential of him becoming a boxing champion. Under his tutelage, Jack became a champion boxer, however, financially Jack did not benefit from the sport of Boxing. With Jack being the only source of income for the family, it was a relief when Chin secured a job. Chin's contribution to the family coffers was vital and it was due to him opening his salary packet and taking some money to buy lunch that led to the altercation which made Chin leave his family home and Cato Manor.

Chin journeys to East London and works as a waiter at a local hotel. Circumstances (his liaison with Mary, his married coloured landlady who later wanted to press rape charges against him) meant that he had to relocate once again. He then moves to Port Elizabeth taking up a patron's offer of a job should he need one. Even though he was hundreds of miles away from Cato Manor and his life there, his family and traditions were always at the back of his mind, for example, "He did not eat beef or pork in deference to Amurtham's (his mother's) beliefs" (2006:98). With this move he comes into contact with the Reddy family who took him in and embraced him as a son. Chin's lifestyle in Cato Manor and values instilled in him by his mother were

engrained in his mind. Chin's journey to success was driven by his need to prove to his brother Jack that he could be successful without his help.

You had to be very careful with how you spent your money, or you could end up like some families in Cato Manor, destitute and in pitiful need of charity, easy victims of disease [...]. He shook of the swarming feelings of self-pity and anger and brusquely wiped his moist eyes, angry with himself at his momentary weakness. No, he was going to do it. Damn it, he was going to make it even if it killed him. (2006:110)

Govender, whose mother Chellamma was very influential in his life, brings to life once again her history and Cato Manor's history through his writings. Chellamma's devastation at not being able to continue with her education is brought to the fore in this novel. According to Indian tradition, females need to be prepared for marriage - education was secondary - and the point that the Govender family, like others, followed this tradition illustrates Mishra's theory of the indentured communities holding on to their motherland traditions. Chellamma's coming of age celebration is detailed in Chapter Four of the novel. This celebration is to inform the neighbourhood that there was a young lady who was now of a 'marriageable age', "there had to be a special ceremony to indicate that she was now of marriageable age. A *manjal neer* was performed" (2006:59).

Chellamma marries Dorasamy Govender. Chellamma's father-in-law (Veerasley) was also an indentured labourer who 'bought' land from George Cato:

Veerasley, like the others, had had no choice but to commit himself to a lifelong mortgage bond when he 'signed' the papers with a cross. Indeed, they were effectively working for Cato, who took a sizable portion of the money they made from their fresh produce. The virus of slavery had taken on another, more civilised guise. (2006:154)

Chin's drive for success sees him, with the help of Mrs Reddy, purchase a hotel in Cowley Street in District 6, which he named "Govender's Modern Hotel". Chin had all the trappings of a successful businessman - a hotel and a car (a late-model six-

cylinder Hudson Terraplane). Chin's journey is dotted with bad choices in respect of relationships. First there was Mary (the coloured landlady); Greta (white hotelier) and then Grace (the daughter of his deceased friend Michael Mbele, who was also an employee of Greta's and who was killed because of his left-wing political activities). Chin does not acknowledge his son with Grace. It is Mrs Reddy who consults the Panjagam and names the child Deventhiran (the mightiest of the deities) as she suspects Chin to be the child's father. Mrs Reddy convinces Chin to find a suitable girl for marriage, hence his return to Cato Manor. The setting of the text moves back to Cato Manor, the 'successful' Chin is welcomed into the folds of the family. Chin makes peace with his family and marries Rani's sister, Mogie.

Govender, through Chin's character, reveals his nostalgia for Cato Manor,

There was a big guava tree at the side of the lavatory. Chin used to make slings from forked guava branches. Ah, this would have made a perfect sling! He saw himself as a child with the sling in his hands, remembering that sense of power. [...] The flowers were giving way to embryonic fruit. He reached out to touch them, then instinctively withdrew his hand. His mother had said to him as a child, 'Plants also sleep. Don't disturb them.' (2006:234-235)

Chin's walk through the familiar roads and sites of Cato Manor highlights his 'homesickness'. The above extract reveals Chin's longing for a time when life was uncomplicated. The setting of the novel shifts after Chin's wedding and District Six becomes the locus for the rest of the novel.

Guru, (Chin's nephew) worked as a journalist for the *Leader*. Through this candid young journalist, Govender touches on important political events like the Doctors' Pact which "united the Natal and Transvaal Indian Congresses with the African National Congress in their fight with the African National Congress" (2006:270) as well as the 1949 riots which devastated and dislocated the communities of Cato Manor. Guru's visit to his uncle Chin, his decision to study Law at the University of Cape Town and his part time job at the *New Age* (a left-wing) newspaper, as well as

his dislike for the apartheid government ideologies brought him into close contact with his cousin Devs Mbele. Their friendship was strengthened by their similar political views.

Guru's confrontation with Chin over not acknowledging Devs as his biological son brings the novel to a climax. The news of Devs being sentenced to imprisonment on Robben Island, and thereafter Guru, being killed by soldiers forces Chin to reflect. He loses interest in his material possessions. Govender, through the character of Chin, shows the parallel history of District Six in Cape Town which was also affected by the implementation of the Group Areas Act, thus forcing Govender's Hotel to close. Chin ends up in a council house in Rylands, an area demarcated for the Indian community. Chin's greatest regret is denying his son, his song of the Atman (soul), the song of unconditional love, that every parent passes onto their child.

For anyone who is familiar with Govender's works, repetition of characters, incidents and setting, in particular the use of Cato Manor is the norm. This supports the claim of this thesis that Cato Manor is a 'heartland' for Govender. This space is the locus for his nostalgia.

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A detailed analysis of Govender's selected texts in this thesis attests to Mishra's theory of 'mini Indias' being created by the Indian Diasporas, as well as Svetlana Boym's positing of nostalgia as being an 'obsession', almost a 'sickness' as being true of Govender. As discussed in Chapter One, Marangoly George - like Boym - viewed nostalgia as 'homesickness'. Boym in her text *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), when discussing nostalgia in respect of soldiers and displaced people of the seventeenth century, described nostalgia as "the longing for their native land [which] became their single-minded obsession" (2001:3); she further described it as an illness or 'homesickness'. Through an analysis of Govender's writings, one is able to see the 'single-minded obsession' or homesickness that he experiences for a place that he

considered home. Through circumstances beyond their control, Cato Manor, which was home to many Indians, was forcefully taken away from them. It stands to reason that this intensified Govender's longing for a home that no longer existed, thus we find that Cato Manor, as Govender knew it, became the central setting for most of his writings. As stated mentioned earlier in the thesis, Govender gives a voice to the residents of Cato Manor, a place where its residents were dispossessed of their land and homes.

As seen from the analysis of the short stories in *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* and the novel, *Song of the Atman*, Govender reconstructs Cato Manor and, in keeping with De Certeau's theory, the reader is constantly metaphorically 'walking' through Cato Manor as Govender fictionally reconstructs this space. It is through this repetition that one sees that Govender is, as Boym suggests, 'homesick' or nostalgic for his life at Cato Manor.

References to religious songs in his writings are evidence that Govender was part of a diasporic community that was steeped in the cultural practices and beliefs of its motherland, India. Govender in his writings included Carnatic (Indian Classical) music, or verses from prayer songs. This is evident in his short story "At the Edge" which starts with the prayer (song) *Woolegelam woonen thotet kaari avan*, which is a song in praise of Lord Shiva - "You who are beyond understanding and beyond praise" (1996:59). The Indian community, particularly those of the Hindu faith, looked at karma as being the logical retribution for one's circumstances. They believed that God ensured that one was in the perfect situation which would help one in respect of higher spiritual evolvment, thus it was not about complacence about one's circumstances (being happy in poverty), rather it was the total trust in God's will (there is a reason for the poverty according to karmic law) that sustained the community of Cato Manor through all its trials and tribulations. Govender, in his writings, reflects absolute belief in God through references to his grandmother's and his mother's piety, as well as to his references to devotional songs and translations

provided in his texts; for example, Govender ends the preface of the text, *The Song of the Atman* with an excerpt from a religious song, Yepadi paadenaro Adiyaaar Sivene, apadi pade naan, which means, “How shall I sing thy praises, teach me, my supreme master [...] Almighty Siva, that’s the way I want to sing” (2006:15).

For the purposes of proving this thesis’s point that Govender fictionally reconstructs Cato Manor in the selected works, I have listed examples of repetition of characters, incidents and description of Cato Manor as the setting that runs through these texts. The following are examples of a community holding on to the Indian identity. These examples from his novel *Song of the Atman* as well as his collection of short stories, *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*, allude to and prove the extent of Govender’s nostalgia and single-minded obsession for his home and life whether religious, familial or cultural, in Cato Manor.

- In his memoir, *In the Manure*, he makes reference to his play *The Swami* where the swami was a victim of cruel slander by unscrupulous people; this play ends with the devastated swami singing to the Holy Mother: Arravelli, Surravelli, Alangaravelli, Neeye Thaye, which translates to “Thou art the queen of love and of anger Oh Mother” (2008:164), Govender repeats these lyrics in his text, *Song of the Atman* when he describes Chin’s mother, the pious Amurtham (2006:27).
- Govender makes reference to the caste system in his short stories e.g. “Poobathie” (1996:25), in his novel *Song of the Atman* (2006:50; 62) as well as in his text *In the Manure* (2008:20-21).
- Govender in his text *Song of the Atman* (2007:28) as well as in the title story “At the Edge” (1996:59-60) recounts the history of his grandmother’s journey to South Africa and her subsequent marriage to Karupanna Govender. Even though he changes the name of his grandmother in the short story “At the

Edge”, a clear account of her history is in both the texts. As discussed in Chapter Two, in his memoirs Govender credits his mother’s and grandmother’s ability of storytelling as his inspiration for writing or storytelling. The maternal influence is a common thread through many of Govender’s stories e.g.:

- in the short stories, “Poobathie” and “At the Edge”, his grandmother is the central character; “
  - in his story “The Incomplete Human Being”, his mother Chellamma is the central character;
  - in his novel, *Song of the Atman* his grandmother (Amurtham) and mother (Chellamma) are central characters and
  - in his memoirs, *In the Manure* he credits his grandmother and mother as his inspiration to write.
- 
- Govender’s grandmother Amurtham’s piety impacted on him greatly. He recounts the rituals observed by his grandmother and his orphaned cousin Mama-Girl; they would be up before sunrise on a Friday and perform various rituals, including placing sugar at all the ant holes and ant heaps. Amurtham’s logic was that it was important to care for creatures which couldn’t talk. This ritual with Mama-Girl is mentioned in the short story “Poobathie”, except Govender in this short story changed his grandmother’s name to Vellamma and Mama-Girl to Selvarani – it is, however, clear that Govender was writing about his grandmother and his cousin as the very same incident and details are mentioned in both *Song of the Atman* (2006:137) and in *In the Manure* (2008:26), though in these two novels he uses their correct names.
  
  - Govender’s mother Chellamma was clearly important to him. He documents her history - a vibrant and intelligent young girl who had to leave school early because teenage girls need to be prepared for marriage. Sexism is inherent in

the Indian community; decisions such as the highly intelligent Chellamma being forced to leave school validate this. Chellamma's contemporary was Dr Goonum, who was considered a radical because she completed her education and went overseas to qualify as a doctor. Unfortunately Chellamma was not afforded such opportunities. Chellamma was also said to have 'psychic' abilities. This history is reflected in both *Song of the Atman* (2006:37; 46-47; 59-62) as well as in *In the Manure* (2008:47; 72-78; 164-165).

- Centrally, the setting of Cato Manor is repeated. The following are a few examples to show how Govender's childhood home is fictionally reconstructed through his short stories as well as his novel *Song of the Atman*:
  - "The corrugated-iron walls and roof were painted green, and the neat little cottage blended in with the mango, avocado and jackfruit trees alongside and behind it ... A flamboyant tree spread its branches over the house. Amurtham's little temple stood beneath the spreading bows of a syringa tree. (*Song of the Atman* 2006:65-66)
  - "...continued to live in the neat wood and iron bungalow her late husband had left her She kept a temple at the back of the house ... under the syringa tree (in the short story "Saris, Bangles and Bees" 1996:69)
  - "It had been a solidly built structure nestling amongst avocado, mango and flamboyant trees, a pretty garden ... (in the short story "Scampy", 1996:75)

The above few examples prove that Govender's nostalgia for his lost home can be compared to Boym's view that nostalgia can be looked at as post-traumatic stress. Cato Manor becomes the proverbial clay in Govender's hands, which he moulds and re-moulds every time he writes these stories considered in this thesis. Govender continues re-building his lost home through his fictional reconstruction of Cato Manor in much of his writing.

## CONCLUSION

This thesis has explored how Ronnie Govender fictionally reconstructs Cato Manor through his texts, *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* and *Song of the Atman*. The preceding chapters have highlighted how Cato Manor, a space became ‘place’ and a ‘home’ for the residents. Foucault’s theories of space being the tool of those in power is clearly seen in the context of the Cato Manor township being a ‘casualty’ of the apartheid government’s Group Areas Act. When areas did not fit into the typical grid-like structures for surveillance purposes, like Cato Manor, legislations like the Group areas Act were put into place, to relocate the multi-racial residents so that they were no longer a threat to the discriminatory government. Govender’s short stories were written in the aftermath of the implementation of the Group Areas Act. This thesis has shown Govender’s nostalgia for his ‘lost home’ – Cato Manor. Lovell (1998) suggests that the land one occupies becomes an extension of oneself, which we have seen is true of Govender. Through his graphic descriptions of Cato Manor in the selected short stories as well as in his novel *Song of the Atman*, one realises that Cato Manor may have been erased from the maps of the country but Govender’s memories cannot be as easily erased. The apartheid hegemony impacted greatly on the residents of Cato Manor, including Govender and his family. His fictional repetitive reconstructions of Cato Manor, his lost home, in the selected texts, support this point.

Govender states in the prologue to his collection of short stories, *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* that we must “listen to the voices of Cato Manor, District Six and Sophiatown” (1996:15). Govender is comparing the shared histories of these places, homes being lost, communities being dislocated and dispossessed because of the apartheid legislation. Richard Rive, as the narrator in his collection of short stories *Buckingham Palace District Six*, states:

District Six has a soul. Its centre held together till it was torn apart. Stained and tarnished as it was, it had a soul that held together. The new matchbox conglomerates

on the desolate Cape Flats have no soul. The houses were soulless units piled together to form a disparate community that lacked cohesion. (1986:127)

District Six, like Cato Manor was demolished through the Group Areas Act except, in both cases, for places of worship like the Shree Gengaiammen Temple in Cato Manor. This struggle history profoundly impacted on writers like Govender and Rive and they give a voice to these communities through their writing. District Six is one of settings of Govender's novel *Song of the Atman*. Govender, deeply affected by the consequences of the Group Areas Act, refers to the implementation of this Act in both Cato Manor as well as in District Six in this novel; "Cato Manor had been declared a white group area ...180 000 people had been forced out" (2006:297), as well "The Media announced in banner headlines: 'District Six Declared a White Group Area'" (2006:318). The protagonist Chin, devastated with the death of his nephew and the imprisonment of his son, loses also his hotel because of the Group Areas Act. He moves to a Council house in the area allocated to the Indians – Rylands.

Ronnie Govender does not like to be narrowly classified as a 'political writer': "I look at life in all its myriads and try and record it, these are the open windows for my writing. Politics will always inform my writing but I will not necessarily be hemmed in by politics" (Pillay 2013g).

We see this to be true in some of Govender's works; for example his plays, *Swami* and *The Great R31 million Robbery* are not based on politics per se but rather on events that inspired him to write. The play "Swami" was based on a priest who was falsely accused of fraud and philandering with women and the play, *The Great R31 million Robbery*, was based on the irony of the police being the criminals. However, in some of Govender's latest works in progress, the apartheid past, Cato Manor (and Durban more broadly) continue to play a central role. Govender recently worked on a play based on the late Dr Goonum, a former resident of Cato Manor. This play was performed at the Playhouse Theatre in Durban in 2013. As mentioned in Chapter Three, Dr Goonum was a contemporary of Govender's mother, Chellamma. The

difference between these two women was that Dr Goonum's parents allowed her to further her studies, despite the Indian traditional belief that the only roles that a woman had in society was that of being a wife and a mother. Dr Goonum was a respected stalwart in the fight for democracy in South Africa. Through his play, Govender celebrates her life as a former resident of Cato Manor who fought against apartheid, as well as brings to the fore the sexism which according to Govender, is inherent in Indian culture.

Despite the dark subject matter of some of his work, one of the key aspects of Govender's writings is his use of humour. Govender often uses black humour and satire in his writing to bring to life a community which was a victim of the apartheid government. When questioned by Rastogi about his use of humour and satire in his writings, Govender stated:

I come from a background that celebrated life [...]. I look at my uncles and they were boxing, great boxing champions, and they were fishermen and things like that. And the women in our family are strong women [...] coping with all [...] the poverty around us [...]. But they never lost the sense of themselves, their sense of humour. I was reared in that kind of thing. And it struck me quite consciously later [...] you look back at many of the things you've done in the past, and what you will have considered embarrassing, to the point of excruciatingly painful or even something that that you were very upset with, you can look back at it from a distance and see the humour in it. At the end of the day [...] things pass. (in Rastogi, 2008:228)

The use of humour does not detract from the seriousness of the message, which is also evident in his play *To Market, to Market to Stuff the Fat Pig* (2009), which satirises the conflict experienced by the stallholders of the iconic Indian Market with the eThekweni Municipality.

In terms of Govender's present work and links to Cato Manor, he has just completed the draft of his second collection of short stories under the working title "Truths and

Half-Truths”. Some of the stories are set in Cato Manor. He has completed a one woman play entitled *Like That*, a comedy, based on a ghost story set in the suburb La Mercy in Durban. He is also working on another novel, together with writing a monthly column for the *Post* Newspaper. With reference to his column in the Newspaper, Govender, in an email correspondence, stated: “Although the paper is a tabloid, it has a mass readership. My objective is to provoke discussion with such a readership on important issues facing a worryingly insular community (Pillay 2013h).

An example of such provocation is the article, “Why didn’t Rama also walk through the fire?” (May 2013). In this article, Govender once more handles the issues of sexism in the Indian community. Govender looks at India and the outrage at the recent rape and murder of a young student and sees great irony in this outrage by a community known for its complacency on matters of sexism. Govender through reference to scriptures like the *Ramayana*, where Sita had to walk through fire to prove her chastity, brings into question, the sexism that is evident to him in the Indian community.

Govender believes that South Africa is a creative hotbed for a writer especially when one looks at the ever-present greed, struggle for power and dispossessed communities as they find their space in the democracy to “fashion a new life” (1996:15). Chetty affirms this point in his book, *The Vintage Book of South African Indian Writing* (2010), he states:

The post-1994 realities of internal political dynamics and reconciliation permeate the oeuvre of Ronnie Govender. The social phenomena of violence, racism, poverty, ethnicity and illiteracy are beginning to be construed as significant in stories that explore people living with the world that apartheid created. Govender’s stories portray the particularities of Indian life, the Hindu temple rituals and festivals, the Muslim shopkeepers’ rapport with the Zulu customers, the young Indian female factory worker, the boorish white policeman, the violence flamed by racism and the joy and optimism of racial harmony. (2010: iv)

Govender, in an interview with Rastogi, discusses his expectations of his audiences and readership: “I would want them to be able to celebrate with me the people that I write about and experience their joys, their sorrows,[...] the viewpoints of these very many people that I write about or create” (2008:233). Govender continues to use the South African Indian patois. In an interview with Chetty, he stated, “In the metaphor of the patois there are charming turns of phrase which reflect warm familiarity and intimacy” (2002:338). Govender through his writing opens the proverbial window for the reader to see and experience the life of the once vibrant community of Cato Manor.

As discussed earlier, Govender’s traumatic first-hand experiences of the 1949 riots as well as the implementation of apartheid legislations like the Group Areas Act by the government, affected him greatly. Govender’s reconstruction of Cato Manor through his writing reveals his yearning for his lost ‘home’.

Govender’s choices in respect of his integrity and political affiliations have impacted on those closest to him. His daughter, Pregaluxmi, also known as Pregs, is an activist, trade unionist and was an ANC Member of Parliament (1994-2002). She has written a memoir entitled *A story of insubordination* (see excerpt in Chetty, 2010:228-236). She discusses how her father’s choices impacted on the family. She reflects on her father “who had little respect for any of apartheid’s laws” (228) and who ensured that she went to school at four years old. She quotes an example when she was nine years old, of wanting to go to a segregated ice show, just to fit in with a group of friends. Govender, her father, refused and explained that “to accept going to a segregated show was to accept being seen as inferior” (in Chetty 2010:230). Pregs goes on to confirm her father’s refusal to allow his plays to be performed at segregated venues. Through Pregaluxmi’s memoir, we see Govender’s political leanings and their influence on his children. Both of his children, Daya and Pregaluxmi, became actively involved in the political struggle against apartheid. Pregs currently serves on the Human Rights Commission of South Africa.

This thesis has argued that Govender's writings are shaped by the traumatic history of a contested space, Cato Manor, which was home to him. This thesis attempted to prove that, through Govender's fictional reconstructions of Cato Manor in many of his works, this land has shaped him as a writer even as he has reconstructed it. Even though the content of some of his current work is not necessarily focused exclusively on Cato Manor, one needs to take cognisance of the point that his career as a writer, began by wanting to record the voices of the 'lost' Cato Manor community. As he stated in an interview with Chetty, "The playwright creates from his being, he creates within a certain reality [...]. Realism demanded an honest look at life" (in Chetty 2002:341). Govender further states that "the message is in my writing, although I would prefer to think that my work, far from being didactic is celebratory" (345). An analysis of the selected texts *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* and *Song of the Atman*, illustrates the point that not only does Govender give a voice to the voiceless community of Cato Manor through his writing, but he also celebrates the vibrant cultural traditions and belief systems that exist in the South African Indian community.

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