

# Last stop “Little Gujarat”: Tracking South African Indian Writers on the Grey Street Writers’ Trail in Durban

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## **Abstract**

Grey Street in Durban is tied to the history of the Indian population in South Africa and their construction of a ‘home away from home’. Recently renamed Dr Yusuf Dadoo Street after the prominent anti-apartheid activist, “Grey Street” as it is still known by the locals, is where Indian immigrants to Natal inevitably made their way from the late nineteenth century onwards. Inevitably, too, South African Indian writers descended from these first immigrants have written about the Grey Street area in their works, describing the close community ties that developed amid the Indian-styled buildings their forefathers erected. Writers such as Dr Goonam (*Coolie Doctor*), Phyllis Naidoo (*Footprints in Grey Street*), Aziz Hassim (*The Lotus People*), and Imraan Coovadia (*The Wedding*) have reconstructed a complex and contradictory past era – nostalgic, passing, difficult – centred in Grey Street’s busy streets, alleys and markets. Post apartheid this area is not as homogeneous as it once was, but survives as the old business and residential centre for the Indian community in Durban, and indisputably as its cultural heart.

The Grey Street Writers’ trail, developed by the KwaZulu-Natal Literary Tourism project, retraces old identities and current pathways through this district looking at places through the writers’ eyes. This paper traces these writerly tracks in Grey Street as assembled in the trail and assesses the fictional reconstruction and shifting identities of this area, once a hotbed of political dissent, especially during apartheid. By way of context, a brief discussion of the phenomenon of the literary trail is offered.

This article has as its focus the Grey Street Writers’ trail which leads wanderers on a guided tour through an area of Durban rich in political history, Indian architecture, religion and culture and thus, inevitably, also

# Grey Street Writers

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rich in writers who have used this place as a setting for their works which make comment on these matters. By way of introduction, the paper begins with a short description of the project which developed this trail, and of the phenomenon of literary trails in general, and then proceeds to focus on the Grey Street area trail itself, the writers it includes and their construction of the 'Grey Street world' in their works. Issues of nostalgia, translocation and transnationalism find their place in this paper at this point as both early and contemporary writers of the trail give fictional expression to how they imagine their forefathers and their descendants found their way to this patch within the urban sprawl of Durban.

Given this year's celebration of the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival in 1860 of indentured Indians in the Natal colony, a focus on Grey Street – where a number of Indian families eventually made their home – is appropriate. In recent years, a number of works by South African Indian writers, tied to the theme of indenture, have been published. In 2009 alone, Aziz Hassim's second novel *Revenge of Kali* appeared, together with Fiona Khan's *Reeds of Wrath* and Rubendra Govender's *Sugar Cane Boy*. Imraan Coovadia's *The Wedding*, published a few years ago in 2001, by contrast, deals with 'passenger' Indian immigrants to South Africa, part of the same wave of migration but significantly 'free', merchants, not labourers. This historical background will be expanded upon below when discussing Grey Street's historical development. Suffice it to say at this point that 2010 will surely see an increased focus on Indian settlement in South Africa, on questions of Indian diaspora and identity; a self-reflexive process which will no doubt foreground place and memory, prompting fresh writing by descendants of the first wave of Indian diaspora to our shores. Hofmeyr and Govinden point out, however, that contemporary South African Indian writers, rather than 'write back' to the 'mother country' as diasporas are assumed to want to do (see Chetty and Piciucco 2004), want to explore questions of identity within the country:

If there is any "writing back" it is arguably to past colonial/apartheid historical domination within the country, exploring ways of inhabiting the "new South Africa".... We need to remember that there is a difference between the old Indian diaspora that, as Vijay Mishra points out, arises out of the experience of indenture, and the new Indian diaspora where later generations – usually children and grandchildren of indentured labourers – return to their ancestral homeland as modern-day tourists or travelers. (2008:9)

The Grey Street trail to which I now turn provides an unusual lens through which to focus on some of these questions.

### **KZN Literary Tourism**

“Little Gujarat”, mentioned in the title of the article, is the name of a vegetarian restaurant in Prince Edward Street, Durban, and is the last stop for literary tourists on the Grey Street Writers’ trail. Its name recalls the province in India from which many ‘passenger’ Indians embarked in the nineteenth century for an anticipated better life in South Africa. The eatery is small as the qualifying term “little” suggests, but its clientele extensive, a composite of the many castes, languages and races that this part of the city now houses.

The three-hour walking tour of a small, densely populated area of Durban, originally settled by Indians from the subcontinent but now more racially mixed, is one of five literary trails developed by KZN Literary Tourism. In a nutshell, this research project, which has been in existence for eight years, started off with the aim of gathering information on writers linked in one way or another to this province of KwaZulu-Natal.<sup>1</sup> A website, which now hosts 60 author profiles, was established,<sup>2</sup> short documentaries on selected writers were commissioned, bursaries supported a number of students, and workshops held where issues concerning literary tourism were discussed. Funding for the first five years of the project came from the National Research Foundation and thereafter from a succession of sources, notably the various area branches of the local municipality. In the past few years, the project’s energies have been channelled into maintaining the website and into developing literary trails, of which the Grey Street Writers’ trail is one. Support from various sectors of the heritage tourism industry has been forthcoming though the project’s interest is not in running the tours per se – the Municipality and tour guides handle this aspect when required – but rather in researching writerly links in areas where such linkages exist or can be brought together.

Other literary trails devised by KZN Literary Tourism include early ones on ‘stand alone’ writers such as Alan Paton and Henry Rider Haggard, chosen because of the tourist potential linked to both these two writers given their international reputation and close links with particular KwaZulu-Natal places. Paton is one of South Africa’s best known writers following his success with *Cry, the Beloved Country*, while Rider Haggard’s popularity in his day as a bestselling writer of exotic African romances has continued

into the present – *King Solomon's Mines* (1885) has never been out of print. His links to the Anglo-Zulu battlefields of Isandlwana and Rorke's Drift – which feature in his novels *The Witch's Head*; *Black Heart and White Heart*; and *Finished* – both already important sites for heritage tourism in KZN, allow for 'spillover' tourism. A few disconnected efforts by tour operators to capitalise on both 'Paton' and 'Haggard' links also means there are already some existing sites which could be authentically linked together.

From stand-alone writers the focus then shifted to trails in community areas where a cluster of writers could be featured. The Grey Street Writers trail was the first of these featuring writers Dr Goonam (*Coolie Doctor*), Phyllis Naidoo (*Footprints in Grey Street*, and others), Aziz Hassim (*The Lotus People* and now *Revenge of Kali*), and Imraan Coovadia (*The Wedding*). The Grey Street area, once home to Indian traders and their families, already has a tourist presence in terms of various cultural tours which visit the markets and mosque. Thereafter, in partnership with the eThekweni Municipality, in 2008 the Cato Manor Writers' trail was developed. This takes visitors to Hindu temples, market gardens, shebeens and informal traders all of which make up this urban settlement, deeply divided by race riots in the 50s and 60s. Featured writers include Lewis Nkosi (*Mating Birds* 1986), Ronnie Govender (*At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* 1996) and Gladman Ngubo (*Yekaniini Ukuzenza* 1997), all of whom have lived in or written about the Cato Manor area. A new addition to this trail has been the training of community guides in an effort to work towards the goal of responsible tourism which benefits the community.

Most recently in 2009, the INK Writers' trail (Inanda, Ntuzuma, Kwa Mashu) was developed, again in partnership with eThekweni Area Based Management structures, with expanded community-guide training requested. This particularly rich heritage trail features Mandla Langa (*The Lost Colours of the Chameleon* 2008), Angelina Sithebe (*Holy Hill* 2004), Manilal and Sita Gandhi, together with Mewa Ramgobin (*Waiting to Live* 1986) all linked to the Phoenix Settlement started by Mahatma Gandhi, John Dube (*U-Jeje, Insila ka Shaka* 1930), Ellen Kuzwayo (*Call Me Woman* 1985), plus others.

Part of the purpose of the area-based trails for this project, then, has been to widen the brief of the literary trail from a focus on stand-alone writers to look, rather, at a cluster of writers linked primarily by *place*. And in the South African context, this is inevitably linked to politics. Thus, in a sense, the Grey Street Writers' trail becomes a project of memory, of reclamation, because though the place "Grey Street" has changed post-1994, it has had a particular

resonance for its Indian inhabitants going back to the days of the indentured labourers and the ‘passenger’ classes who arrived on South Africa’s shores from the Indian subcontinent. The importance of memory as linked to place in South Africa is stressed by Govinden, who says, “South Africa at the present moment is living through a time of memory...place is, inevitably, memory [...and] memory in South Africa is apartheid” (2008:1). In fact, however, in the Grey Street writers’ work to be discussed, memory as related to Grey Street predates apartheid, going back to the 1870s, as will be shown in a section to follow.

### **Literary trails**

What is the attraction of literary trails? Perhaps a short word is necessary here before proceeding to a consideration of how various local Indian writers have constructed “Grey Street” in their works, both during and post-apartheid. As I have discussed elsewhere (see Stiebel 2007), literary tours can be understood very broadly as journeys inspired by books, by an interest in seeing where a writer lived, worked or died, by a desire to stand where s/he stood and (perhaps) be moved by the same surroundings. This impulse moves great numbers of literary fans in the UK and USA predominantly to visit a range of domestic sites (eg Shakespeare’s birthplace at Stratford-on-Avon), and landscapes both rural (eg Wordsworth’s Lake District), and urban (eg Henry James’s Washington Square).

In South Africa this is a relatively new phenomenon but not unknown (eg JRR Tolkien’s birthplace in Bloemfontein; the Olive Schreiner Museum in Cradock, John Dube’s house in Inanda and the Phoenix Settlement, Durban, home to the Gandhi family of politicians and writers). In India the same is probably true – scattered sites linked to writers are visited by faithful followers on a kind of literary pilgrimage; an example of which is Rabindranath Tagore’s house in Calcutta, which is open to the public.

A literary trail in essence links such sites together and is inevitably a construct: in effect, a strung-together narrative linking places sequentially in an environment which may in fact have had a far less seamless coexistence with the writer. Robinson and Andersen (2003:9) note the desire in trails for a sequence which makes ‘sense’:

[T]he tourist trail gives order (often an artificial order) to a sequence of locations, which are selected for inclusion in the trail because together they will make sense, form a whole.

This is true of the kind of trail which links a number of writers in one area,

such as does the Grey Street trail. Literary trails of 'worlds' like this depend on the kind of writer (or group of writers) linked not only to one specific spot but whose writing has conjured up for readers an area, a world, a coherent space. Such a region is frequently viewed with nostalgia: the adult remembering favourite childhood books or recalling the pleasure derived from a book with characters and a landscape that 'spoke' in some way to that person. Readers moved in this way by their reading may want to visit the landscape they have read about in the book – an undeveloped but potential African example might be to visit the part of Botswana that is the domain of Mma Ramotswa, lady detective in Alexander McCall Smith's popular series; or when it comes to a group of writers, one established example of such an area is Bloomsbury in London, home to the 'Bloomsbury set' of Virginia Woolf, Lytton Strachey and Vanessa Bell.

For some readers, and more significantly in the case of some of the Grey Street writers featured, memory and nostalgia, as mentioned above, are significant factors in the literary trail. Svetlana Boym reminds us that nostalgia "(from *nostos* – return home, and *algia* – longing) is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed" (2001: xiii). In the case of Grey Street, the former definition is more accurate – some of the writers featured express nostalgia for a place that no longer exists *in the way it once did*. Their work talks of an earlier period in Grey Street's history, a more collective, intimate time than the present day:

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. In a broader sense, nostalgia is rebellion against the modern idea of time, the time of history and progress. The nostalgic desires to obliterate history and turn it into private or collective mythology, to revisit time like space, refusing to surrender to the irreversibility of time that plagues the human condition. (xv)

The summary of Grey Street's history which now follows helps one understand firstly, the sense of solidarity and collectivity that arose through colonial, and thereafter apartheid, racial herding; and then secondly, the subsequent dissolution of that 'tightness' post-apartheid and hence the nostalgia expressed by some for that period of time, linked to a particular place, which has now gone.

### **Grey Street historical background**

The Grey Street complex is a distinctly bounded space which runs from the race course in the west to the Emmanuel Cathedral precinct in the east, from

Soldiers' Way in the north, to Currie's Fountain and the Botanic Gardens in the south [see map]. Originally a white residential area in the days of empire, the street names bear witness to the far distant but omnipresent Queen Victoria:

Queen Street [was] named after Queen Victoria; Victoria Street named after her daughter; Prince Edward Street named after her eldest son; Leopold Street named after her eighth child; Alice Street named after her second daughter [...] and Albert Street named after her husband. (Badsha 2001:14)

Grey Street, the central business and trading street which bisects the area, was named after Earl Grey, the Secretary of State for the Colonies.

Immediately after the development of the Grey Street Writers' trail, as part of a post-apartheid (and postcolonial) street renaming project, Grey Street has been renamed Dr Yusuf Dadoo Street. Dadoo (1909-1983) was a Natal Indian Congress (NIC) activist, and while his struggle credentials are impeccable and his name revered, locals have by and large retained "Grey Street" as the name of choice, despite its colonial origins which have, quite possibly, been forgotten in any event. Mamet records various "Grey Street" writers' responses to this renaming: Aziz Hassim states "it will always be 'Grey Street' for me"; while Mariam Akabor, a young writer in her 20s, exclaims "When I heard about the renaming of Grey Street I was horrified and sad. I couldn't believe that a street as significant in South African history like Grey Street was being renamed. I felt it was totally unnecessary. You can't erase a part of our history in that way. To this day, I still refer to it as 'Grey Street'" (see Mamet 2007:77). Though the boundaries of this paper do not permit extensive discussion of this point, these comments bear witness to the power of names and naming practices as they relate to constructions of identity. As Carter points out, through the "act of place-naming, space is transformed into a place, that is, a space with a history" (1987: 377). Thus, "Grey Street" as a place name with its 100-year history which spans colonialism and apartheid is 'owned' by the people who have used this name; they have made it their own regardless of its origins – for authorities to replace this name with another, even though more appropriate to contemporary history, is doomed in the short term. "Grey Street" as a place name is heavily weighted with lived history and memory, and is likely therefore to remain the popular name for some time.

Whatever the name, the area which came to be known as "Grey Street" but which included many more streets, alleys and passages than its singular title



suggests, became 'home' from 1871 to both passenger Indians and formerly indentured labourers, once their time on the farms was up. The latter group of indentured labourers mostly from south and south-eastern India, arrived in Natal from 1860 and many stayed on rather than return to India; the second wave of Indian immigrants from Gujarat in the west of India recognised that there was a ready-made market in Natal for servicing the needs of those Indian workers already in the colony. These Indian settlers chose "Grey Street" as whites moved from the marshy low-lying land to the better drained higher Berea parts overlooking the city. The increasing numbers of Indian traders and residents – which by 1894 outstripped the white population – in Durban led the colonial government to fear what was termed the "Asiatic Menace" (see Vahed 1995). Consequently, numerous Acts such as the Dealers' Licenses Act (1897) were brought in to restrict Indian trade and residence to the Grey Street area exclusively, which thereafter was identified as an "Indian" area. Rastogi points out how 'Indian identity' in South Africa was a complex construct:

The distinction between indentured Indian and passenger Indian ... has important repercussions on the so-called collective consciousness of the South African Indian community. South African Indian identities are always configured by the multiple, often discrete experiences of indenture, migration for commercial purposes, language, religion, gender, and class politics. Location matters too ... the Indian identity asserted in Durban, where a third of the population is of subcontinental origin, is very different from the way Indianness is articulated in cities such as Cape Town and Johannesburg. (2005:538)

Nevertheless, despite these differences, from the officials' point of view 'Indians' were a group who could be lumped together as a racial entity for convenience's sake. For their own sake too, at different times – whether colonial or apartheid times – this could act to the advantage of South African Indians. By restricting the Indian community of Grey Street to a specific bounded space in the city, in effect what emerged was an homogeneous tight-knit Indian neighbourhood. Meer ascribes this initially forced, and then possibly internalised, homogeneity to the idea of *kutum*, an "intimate collective *conscience* which socializes and controls... binds and integrates members into a closely watched system of social interaction" (1969:66); and Hofmeyr observes that such need for Indians 'pulling together' in South Africa afforded Gandhi, resident in the greater Durban area for formative years, an example of the "potential capaciousness of the category 'India' which could in the words of one report in *Modern Review* comprise 'Hindus,

Mahomedans, Parsees, Sikhs and Christians [who] are all fighting India's battle'" (2007:74). Vikram, a character in Imraan Coovadia's *The Wedding*, a novel which is featured on the Grey Street Writers' trail, summarises this perceived need to put differences aside in this new country in order to present a united front:

'So please Ismet, one word of advice I can give for you. In this country, you must not come with stories if you are this Bombay-Indian or that one Tamil, one what-what Gujarati-Indian...No, my friend, what is essential we must stand together united as one.' (2001:150)

Vikram further opines, "If we stick together as Indians then the sky is the limit'" (188). Govinden points out that such 'ethnocentricity' is inevitable in a potentially hostile, or at least diverse, environment. She notes: "There is a slow emergence of ethnocentricity as they [the immigrant Indians in *The Wedding* ] settle in the new land. Whether through the need for identity in the face of perceived difference, whether through the exigencies of survival, an incipient identity based on cultural and racial background is creeping on them" (in Chetty and Piciucco 2004:165). The perceived necessity for solidarity against the more powerful whites could also lead to a rejection of identity 'downwards' in the highly stratified colonial, and then apartheid, society of Natal. Nelson notes in this regard: "In the process of embougeoisement in the colonial/metropolitan cultures, the Indian communities have often internalized racist hierarchical divisions imposed by colonialism" (1993: xvi).

Racial categorisation over decades continued to provide such homogenising (or alienating) glue in the Grey Street area. Others, however, resisted such racial 'herding': Nichol Square in the middle of the precinct was renamed Red Square in the 1940s alluding to the fiery anti-apartheid meetings held there. Mass rallies to resist various laws, including the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Bill (1946) found a physical home in this 'Indian' heartland. Attempts to encourage a multiracial identity in Grey Street received a setback, however, with the 1949 riots and the Group Areas Act of 1950 which designated Grey Street as an Indian *business* area only, forcing residents to move residence to other 'Indian' suburbs. In an effort to declare solidarity with black Africans some Indians joined the Black Consciousness movement with meetings held in the Grey Street complex and elsewhere. Local knowledge was useful, as through an intimate knowledge of the maze-like place with its short cuts and hidden spaces, Grey Street's Indian dwellers could make use of the area in ways that eluded the apartheid

government's panoptic surveillance. Phyllis Naidoo, a struggle stalwart, in her memoir *Footprints in Grey Street*, another featured trail text, gives voice to the labyrinth-like qualities of Grey Street that those on the run used to their advantage: "some people lived in this area, some visited, some passed through, some in the underground hid here ... Grey Street carried our most visual protests; closed shops during *hartal* (strikes/protest) spoke volumes for their contribution to the Struggle" (2002:13).

Post-1994, Grey Street is now home to a variety of race groups and nationalities though it retains its 'Indian' look through surviving architecture, old family businesses and notably the Juma mosque, the largest mosque in the southern hemisphere. Paradoxically, freedom of residence and trade has led to such change in Grey Street that many of its writers lament the 'good bad old days', characterised as they were by cultural and social cohesion in the face of racist laws. This is evident in the nostalgia for a past Grey Street in the writings of, especially, the younger writers who might have experienced the tail end of 'Indian' Grey Street, or heard their parents and grandparents lament its passing.

The early 'homogenisation' referred to above is evident in how Grey Street as a tourist destination is marketed today by the provincial tourism authorities. Excursions to the 'exotic' Indian markets are popular as are shopping expeditions to sari shops. By way of contrast, the Grey Street Writers' trail foregrounds change and diversity among both the writers it features and the stops suggested.

### **Constructions of Grey Street and the Grey Street Writers' Trail**

Let us now turn to the trail itself and, at the same time, refer to how Grey Street is constructed by the various selected writers. The trail pamphlet follows the same design format as the other four developed by KZN Literary Tourism: in appearance, the desired look is that of a book dustjacket with 'typewriter' lettering, running red dots like ellipses, further reading suggested on the back, a map of the stops, and contact details supplied plus sponsors' logos. The cover photograph of a Grey Street scene in the 1960s in sepia captures a bygone moment and signals both that this trail is a heritage project, and also that it is *this* version of Grey Street to which nearly all the selected writers nostalgically or otherwise return in their writing. The trail pamphlet is divided into three sections in common with all the other trails developed – short biographies of selected writers, a brief history of the area, and then places to visit on the walking tour.

The writers selected include representatives of the older generation (Phyllis Naidoo, Dr Goonam, Fatima Meer), then a slightly younger grouping (Aziz Hassim, Ravi Govender), and two young writers (Mariam Akabor, Imraan Coovadia). The older three – Naidoo, Goonam, Meer – were all political activists. Phyllis Naidoo was a member of the Natal Indian Congress and the South African Communist Party. She writes mainly political non-fiction concerned with the recording of the history of the struggle against apartheid. Though now in her eighties, she still writes but is probably best remembered for her book *Footprints in Grey Street*, which contains a series of vignettes of the people she knew from her early days in Grey Street. Dr Goonam “was born in May Street, in Durban, in 1906 on the southern part of the East African coast. That made me African, but not quite, for my father had immigrated from South India and my mother from Mauritius. I would be identified as a South African Indian or Indian South African” (1991: 11). This is how she begins her autobiography *Coolie Doctor*, which tells her life story, including when she, together with Doctors Dadoo and Naicker, led the 1946 Indian Passive Resistance Campaign against the discriminatory Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Bill earlier mentioned. Trained in obstetrics and gynaecology in Scotland, Goonam’s book-title derives from a comment made by a white child during a house visit: “oh mummy, the coolie doctor is here.” Fatima Meer, noted sociologist and anti-apartheid campaigner, shared her year of birth with Phyllis Naidoo. She was born in Grey Street and became a prolific writer of mostly non-fiction dealing with socio-economic issues, history and biography.<sup>3</sup>

More than a decade younger than this group of militant women activists and writers, Aziz Hassim spent his formative years growing up in Queen Street, a major road leading off Grey Street. He recalls hearing the political speeches made by Drs Goonam and Dadoo, and Fatima Meer, in Red Square as a youngster. An accountant by trade, now retired, he came to writing fiction late, publishing *The Lotus People* in 2001 and *Revenge of Kali* in 2009. Both texts deal with generations of immigrant Indians to South Africa with the former text most deeply embedded in a Grey Street of the past. Ravi Govender, a talk show host on Lotus FM, is younger than Hassim – his book *Down Memory Lane* comprises a light collection of his newspaper columns from the *Post* newspaper. They largely nostalgically recall the ‘good old days’ of a Grey Street from the past. Here is a representative extract, taken from a chapter entitled “Reflections of a Wonderful City”:

Durban is a colourful metropolis with a cornucopia of different cultures

and nationalities and I had the privilege of growing up during the halcyon days of this beautiful city.... If we call Grey Street the heart of the CBD, then the [Ajmeri] Arcade was certainly the aorta. Always busy, the hustle and bustle down the main passage of the Arcade gave it a distinct atmosphere.

Taken out of its geographical context, one could easily transport it to the populous Marrakech or the *suqs* of Cairo, and it would not look out of place. Shops selling anything you would ever need lined both sides of the arcade, with the wares spilling out of doors.

...

A block or two from where I grew up in Victoria Street was the Indian Market which burned down in the 70s but was beautifully rebuilt to what it is now. Next to the then market was what was called a *Machenie*. It was a Zulu-beer drinking hall and it is heartwarming to recall the peaceful co-existence between African and Indian people of the day. (2006:39-40)

Imraan Coovadia, still in his 30s, and Mariam Akabor, in her 20s, represent the younger generation. Surprisingly given their youth, both also write nostalgically of a past Grey Street, one of social cohesiveness and 'family' – Coovadia's award-winning novel *The Wedding* is set in Grey Street and recalls the arrival of a 'passenger' couple and their efforts to settle; while Akabor's *Flat 9* is written partly out of stories handed down the generations and also partly from her experience of living in Grey Street in a dilapidated block of flats, evidence that old "Grey Street" still exists in small pockets of the area.

Not all the above-mentioned writers have personal experience of living in Grey Street: Coovadia recalls that it is not the plot in his novel that reflects his family history so much as the dialogue and speech patterns he recalls: "As Coovadia observes, 'It was going back to something I was familiar with as a child' [Interview, 2002]. It is in the texture and timbre of the writing, rather than the plot, that there are autobiographical overtones" (Govinden in Chetty and Picciucco 2004: 159). Coovadia's strength, as is Hassim's, is his ability to remember and capture the speech patterns of his childhood. His heroine, Khateja, in the following extract is heard in full cry at the news that she and her husband will be seeking their fortune in a place called South Africa:

'South Africa, South Africa! What is this south South Africa? What are you thinking, where is your brain, man? What is this South Africa thing you've gone and got into it? Where is it being anyway, just out of interest?'

‘Below the Sahara desert. You know’

Khateja shrieked, ‘I know, I know, ha! What facts is it I am supposed to know? You are the one having these wild ideas and then I must know. Oh hell, do not be bothering, what do I care. I know only one thing: other women have husbands who do not intend to rush off to Africa out of the blue! Hyderabad is not enough to swallow? What have I done so wrong on this earth that I must be rewarded like this? I must have the worst luck in the wide world, even including this South Africa place, that is my theory. Who knows, maybe this place does not even exist and it is a brain figment.’ On reflection, ‘Only it can’t be a what fragment of your brain since it is 100 percent, oh clear that your brain has gone off on holiday. Maybe that is where your brain is, why you want to be going there. Ha! Off to South Africa to Get Mr Ismet’s Lost Brain Back. Ha!’ (2001:121)

These then are the writers selected after consultation with various people: of course there could be others. Unsurprisingly, given the turbulent times Grey Street has seen, all the writers selected produced works with political overtones evident to a greater or lesser degree – as Hassim remembers things:

[L]ife in the Casbah was about politics too. Children were weaned on it, as children elsewhere were weaned on mother’s milk. It was the logical outcome of the policies of repression, the common denominator around which their lives revolved. Spectators watched sport and simultaneously talked politics, diners enjoyed their meals and discussed the latest developments, young couples impressed each other with their awareness and the depth of their knowledge, and street sweepers picked up pamphlets and declared the merits of protest as a force for peaceful change. There was no other area of under one square mile that could equal it for the intensity of its emotions and its pursuit of justice. (2003:109)

Though the writers are presented sequentially above in terms of their age and generational fit, important differences exist in the way these writers construct Grey Street in their work. The most obvious difference perhaps is in the lack of nostalgia expressed by the older three anti-apartheid women writers – none writes fiction, all express abhorrence of the racist laws of the time and write about Grey Street as primarily a setting which they were forced to occupy by the state, albeit that they developed deep affection for the people it housed. Their accounts of their lives there recall political meetings, important events, a world of struggle for change. Here is Fatima Meer reporting in her work *Passive Resistance* on the response of women to an attack by white youth on an Indian crowd gathered in Red Squar:

We are in it now and we shall face it to the bitter end.... We have heard of what has happened, but this makes us all the more determined to carry on and we shall carry on. If sacrifice we must, then sacrifice we shall...

Here is Dr Goonam (1991:17) on her family home in Leopold Street:

Our home was on the Indian roster of important events. So we held receptions at our home when Sarojini Naidoo came to Durban, and when Dr Abdurrahman left for India with his delegation to seek assistance against the anti-Indian Class Areas Bill.

Here is Phyllis Naidoo (2002:13) on her rejection of an 'exotic' Grey Street:

I have given the history of Grey Street a miss. I shall omit its landmarks, its beauty, its filth, its magnificent gardens, its monuments both historical and otherwise, its wonderful residents both the housed and the squatters, the joys of Ajmeri and Madressa Arcades, Manjera's, the trees and flowers and so much more. No, these do not feature here ... the end result is this collection of short stories of my comrades.

Aziz Hassim's work forms a bridge from these writers' 'no-nonsense' accounts of Grey Street to a construction of place far more suffused with the nostalgia which is also evident in the younger writers' work. Besides Govender's 'memory lane' pieces, the second set of writers all have chosen fiction – novels and short stories – as their genre and this time Grey Street is centre stage as a place, primarily remembered with great nostalgia and affection for the sense of community it once contained. All three write what could be described as 'historical fiction', for, according to Hassim, although their characters are fictional, they are "based on real life families of the time" living in a clearly recognisable place (see Basckin and Molver 2003, filmed interview). In Coovadia's and Hassim's novels featured on the trail, the transnational crossing from India to South Africa begins their narrative. *The Lotus People* begins with Yahya Ali Suleiman, a Pathan who crosses the *kala pani* a poor man but whose descendants manage to build up wealth through trade in the Grey Street complex. Ismet and Khateja in *The Wedding* make the same crossing, retaining their links with their homeland for a considerable time. Their discovery, however, that in the Grey Street area a mini-India or "diaspora of exclusivism" (Mishra 1996:422) exists helps them settle:

On the corner of Grey and Bond Streets, by the back of the fish market, he [Ismet] saw a man selling *goolab janus* on a gray blanket, single or six to a thin tin box that came with. He crossed over in a celebratory mood and bought one and devoured it in three fast bites from between two

fingers... Oh, it was a miracle that you could live here as you would in India.... (Coovadia 2001: 176,189)

The 'mini-India' of old Grey Street, though nowadays more multiracial, dilapidated and less cohesive, provides the focus for the contemporary writers featured on the trail. Here is Hassim on the Casbah:

In the late forties Grey Street, and the roads bisecting it, were a miniature replica of a major city in India. Rows of neat double-storied buildings consisting of stores on the ground floor and residential flats above, stretched from one end of the road to the other.... The Casbah, as it was often referred to, was inhabited almost exclusively by Indians, with a fair sprinkling of coloureds. It was owned and developed in its entirety, and from its inception almost a hundred years before, by Indians who had automatically settled within its confines before spreading out into the suburbs. It was a vibrant and energetic community that was representative of the second and third generations of the early settlers. (2002: 168-9)

and Akabor on the sedimented layers of generational living in Grey Street:

Uncle Imoo's café was situated at the corner of Grey and Lorne Street. His grandfather was the initial owner of the then tearoom a century ago. The Corner Café Shop was home to the many factory workers in the area; the housewives, especially the lazy ones who didn't feel like cooking; the school children who didn't like what their mothers packed them for lunch, as well as passers-by. (2006: 14)

In essence, what is in operation here is what Middleton and Edwards call collective remembering; in their view "collective remembering is essential to the identity and integrity of a community" (1990: 10). Boym, who differentiates between restorative (focus on *nostos*, return home) and reflective (focus on *algia*, the longing and loss) kinds of nostalgia, would term this reflective nostalgia. In Akabor there is a recognition that the time of Uncle Imoo's café is over, never to return, but in the detail with which she recalls the café lies the remembering, the reflective nostalgia:

'Remember the ole days? When Ma used to send us to Victoria Street market early in the morning to buy the freshest vegetables and fruit?'

'How Ossie always used to eat something on the way home! Especially the fruit!'

Everybody laughed.

'And how we used to watch movies in Shah Jehan every week? Do you kow how your father used to like Dimple Kapadia? Everyone knew he watched Bobby more than ten times at the movies!' (2006: 103)



Such collective remembering by the contemporary writers mentioned above is important for establishing a sense of history and, above all, a sense of belonging to a place, even one now changed. Such belonging comes hard won after years of marginalisation by the apartheid government. Mamet observes how “through fiction, Coovadia records and re-centres the collective memories of the old Indian diasporas, establishing counter-memories” (2008: 87) that resist earlier attempts at erasure. Even when Hassim in *The Lotus People* laments the changes in the area, that very act is an act of remembering and thus recovery: “The street’s changing... Look around you. There was a time you could spot half a dozen scotens with one sweep of your eyes. Not anymore. And the cinemas – the Vic, the Royal, the Avalon – all no more than a memory. What happened to Dhanjees Fruiterers, Victoria Furniture Mart, Kapitans, that noisy Royal Tinsmith Company ... hell, buddy, I could go on forever” (2002: 511).

The Grey Street Writers’ trail is a heritage project that remembers the past but also confronts the present, literally. Stops include Red Square; the Congress Hall bought by Gandhi and where the NIC held its meetings; the Madressa Arcade built in 1927 still lined with little shops whose wares spill onto the pavement; and the Emmanuel Cathedral, together with Red Square also a landmark of anti-apartheid struggle under the leadership of the late Archbishop Denis Hurley. The various markets of the area are a central focus: the Victoria Street Market is a re-creation of the original one destroyed by fire, whilst across the road is the fish market. Nearby is the Jumma Mosque, described in *The Lotus People* as

the magnificent and architecturally famous Jumma Mosque, with its minarets and many domes ... it was a landmark for both the local residents and the out of town visitors. Adjoining the mosque, fronting on to Cathedral Road and directly opposite the historic Emmanuel Cathedral were a row of cottages that had been consolidated into a large unit that served as a *madressah* for Muslim children. (168)

Such specific and intimate place-naming links to de Certeau’s famous essay “Walking in the City” (1984) where he describes how it is not necessarily the city planners but the *walkers* of a city that “give their shape to spaces. They weave places together”. So do all the writers of Grey Street – they describe in walker’s detail their lives in Grey Street, crisscrossing roads, taking short cuts through alleys, weaving domestic patterns of familiarity. From Dr Goonam who remembers how “[t]o reach our schools, Tamil and English, we had to cross Grey Street, the one was in Cross Street, the other in Prince

Edward Street... (1991: 14); to Phyllis Naidoo's specific address: "The office of Phyllis Naidoo and Archie Gumede was on the seventh floor of CNR House, Cross Street, Durban" (2002: 18); to Coovadia's Ismet who "wander[s] over to Queen Street, on the Field Street corner" to buy cigarettes (2001:161); to Akabor's characters Zohra Bibi and her servant Princess who "walked into Ultra Fresh Grocers, which was situated on the corner of Grey Street and Fountain Lane" (2006: 47); all are mentally traversing and remembering lived spatial patterns in clear geographic detail over a period of many decades. By walking this area, the writers have got to know this place and therefore their own place in the world – this claiming of intimacy they pass on to their characters or their own histories. By repeating these patterns in writing about these same places, they retain their significance in the collective memory.

Even the 'fictional' trail stops are based on real places – the Corner Shop Café and AK Mansions in Akabor's *Flat 9* are based on Haribol's Superette on the corner of Grey and Lorne Streets, and Afzal Building, 292 Grey Street respectively. And so it is that the last stop is, appropriately enough, Little Gujarat restaurant – food being the great carrier of diaspora, culture and 'home' that it is the world over. On arriving in Durban, Ismet and Khateja from *The Wedding* "for four days ... lived on bunny chows from the café on Victoria Street: loaves with their insides scooped out and replaced with a steaming dollop of curry, meat, fat butter beans, and potato coins" (2001: 157). At this old established and always busy eatery, tired literary tourists can try out a bunny chow, a Durban adaptation of 'curry to go'. This is an apt end to the trail: the bunny chow, after all, is a potent reminder of people who came from afar, who stayed on and adapted to local conditions, and who wrote about a place called Grey Street.

## Notes

1. For a discussion of how writers can be identified as linked to a particular part of the world, see Stiebel 2004.
2. See [www.literarytourism.co.za](http://www.literarytourism.co.za)
3. Fatima Meer died in Durban on 12 March 2010, following a stroke. A measure of her stature is the number of tributes from home and abroad that flooded the press in the days following her death.

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