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Between worlds: exploring Imraan Coovadia's The Wedding and Green-Eyed Thieves

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Chapter one: Introduction

This chapter outlines the area of research under discussion and why the study is important. Previous research and relevant literature is discussed to show how it has contributed to the research. Procedures and anticipated conclusions of the research are indicated.

1.1 Topic and themes

Imraan Coovadia is the author of two novels, *The Wedding* and *Green-eyed Thieves*, and has published several short stories and essays. *The Wedding*, in particular, has been widely reviewed, translated into Italian and Hebrew and received various literary awards. As a South African writer of Indian descent, who spent a great deal of time in the US, Coovadia's writing is of interest as it reflects this cultural hybridity.

While Coovadia's narratives allow for an exploration of significant issues of present-day diaspora critical thinking, his texts function primarily as migrant novels. A discussion of both texts, *The Wedding* and *Green-eyed Thieves*, explores the manner in which postcolonial themes feature as characteristic of migrant writing and, hence, reveal the effect of the lack of material reality in the texts. Coovadia's popularity attests to the West's preference for cosmopolitan writing and parallels are drawn to such writers as Salman Rushdie and V.S. Naipaul. The value of migrant or transnational writing over national writing opens the way for further study in the field of South African literature.

Coovadia's texts provide a platform to investigate the position of Indians in pre- and post-apartheid South Africa and of Muslims globally after the events of September 11, 2001. Furthermore, a study of Coovadia's fiction is particularly relevant in the study of the representation of 'Indian South Africans' in South African literature and the establishment of 'south-south' cultural dialogues between South Africa and India as the two countries become increasingly linked.

Coovadia's work has been well received and several interviews with the author as well as reviews of his work have been featured in print media and literary journals. However, there is not enough detailed analysis or critical study of his work.

1.2 Relevant research

Betty Govinden's article 'The performance of post-colonial writing: An analysis of Imraan Coovadia's *The Wedding*' which appears in *Indias Abroad: The Diaspora Writes Back* looks at issues of identity, nation, exile, women in colonial hierarchies and the gendered implications of migration. Ronit Frenkel-Fainman's 'Writing South Africa in Diaspora: Imraan Coovadia's *The Wedding*' focuses on how cultural texts like Coovadia's do not claim centrality, prompting a reconsideration of diasporic constructions of identity and subjectivity. This dissertation advances the discussion of these papers into the field of migrant literature.

Jeanne Hromnik's interview with Coovadia published in *New Contrast* Volume 34:3 (2006) provides an insightful perspective on the author's views regarding *Green-eyed Thieves*, place, identity and community. Various media reviews of Coovadia's work and interviews with him have been published online. A comprehensive list of these articles is included in the bibliography. Coovadia's work also falls into the broad categories of South African Indian writing and diasporic literature.

South African Indian Writing in English, edited by Rajendra Chetty, looks at broad similarities in a wide range of works by South African Indian writers. In his introduction, Chetty traces the literary historiography of Indian writing in South Africa from the apartheid period, through the interregnum, to the present. This dissertation seeks to locate Coovadia's work at the end of that trajectory, where, while the past continues to manifest itself in current writings, there is a move towards new social perspectives.

Isabel Hofmeyr has produced a valuable body of research, highlighting points of intersection between South Africa and India, and Ronit Frenkel-Fainman has researched other individual South African writers of Indian descent, such as Achmat Dangor. While these studies are an important part of this category of critical literature per se, they are outside the scope of this study.

Editors Rajendra Chetty and Pier Paolo Piciucco include Coovadia in that group of writers who belong to both the African and Indian diasporas in their collection of critical essays, *Indias Abroad: The diaspora writes back.* Indian writers scattered

across the world are the authors of a process of writing back to the Indian centre and literature, thus, reflects the significance acquired by the politics of movement in the Indian diaspora. Issues around the concept 'diaspora' that are addressed in the text *Indias Abroad* include the tension between the host country and motherland, the repertoire of ties that bind with India and the cultural and emotional struggles associated with movement, journey, migration and exile. This dissertation examines these issues in relation to Coovadia's texts, and also considers the author's self-imposed exile as a determining factor in the way in which these issues are addressed.

In his book *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures*, Aijaz Ahmad provides incisive analyses of the concept of Indian literature, and considers the work of Salman Rushdie and of migrant intellectuals generally. While Ahmad primarily discusses the role of theory and theorists in the movement against colonialism and imperialism, his discussion of the poststructuralist and postmodernist critics' and writers' de-valuing of material history is key to this study on Coovadia, where collectivist orientations are disregarded in favour of the individual.

A huge body of literature exists on the reading of postcolonial literature. Elleke Boehmer's *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* as well as *The Empire Writes Back* (editors Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin) provides comprehensive overviews of the genre of postcolonial literatures and postcolonial literary theory. Both works consider the rise of migrant literature and its relationship to postmodernist critical theory, which is the subject of this study on the work of Coovadia.

1.3 Procedure

The paradigms of postcolonialism and postmodernism are to be applied to the reading of the texts, *The Wedding* and *Green-eyed Thieves*. The work of Elleke Boehmer and Ashcroft et al in defining and discussing these concepts has been relied on to develop an argument demonstrating the limitations of postmodernist theories being applied to postcolonial writing.

1.3.1 Postcolonial criticism

Postmodernist theory lends itself to the reading of postcolonial texts in stressing the importance of ideological construction in social and textual relations. Developments

in literary theory have gained influence as postcolonial writing has become more prominent: poststructural literary theorists have been concerned with the ways in which class, race and gender are constructed through language and the ways in which language supports or subverts the dominant values of the society in which it is written; postcolonial writing, by its very nature, raises issues of representation, cultural value and the capacity of language to convey meaning or reflect experience.

The key concepts in postcolonial criticism, such as discourse, 'other', hegemony, hybridity and difference, are particularly important in the discussion of postcolonial writing, and can be used to analyse and understand the texts themselves.

The concept of discourse has become a key concept in analysing colonial and postcolonial texts. Edward Said's description of 'Orientalism' as the discourse by which the Orient was constituted in the consciousness of the West is a necessary starting point. Subject lands and peoples were always 'produced' and not reflected. Colonial discourse is the study of how colonised peoples were colonised, represented, even silenced within colonial writing, so that they were either absent or presented in such ways as to make them worthless or simply a confirmation of negative stereotypes.

For Said, Orientalist discourse was characterised by positioning the colonised as 'other', in the sense of alien, non-Western and therefore inferior. The identity of postcolonial societies is always constituted in difference from the metropolitan centre. Therefore, in analysing postcolonial texts, we need to consider whether they assert a distance from the colonial centre and undermine a sense of 'otherness'.

The concept of 'hegemony' can be defined as the force by which people are convinced of the naturalness or rightness of their position and that of their rulers, and culture is the site on which the struggle for hegemonic power is conducted. Postcolonial discourse is grounded on a struggle for power where power is that which determines the production of truth. Power is thus invested in the control of language as language determines the terms of truth itself. The postcolonial literary text then is the rewriting of the historical or ideological subtext of colonialism and neo-

imperialism of the West. Colonial and postcolonial literatures, such as Coovadia's, are thus largely defined by this history.

If empire was supported by concepts which divided the world strictly into neat categories – coloniser/colonised, civilised/savage, Western/Eastern – then the postcolonial world can be seen to reflect the breakdown of such strict definitions. With globalisation, the postcolonial world has become a world of entwined but distinctive elements. The sense of mixing or hybridity, as opposed to cultural purity, is reflected on both cultural and literary levels. Not only are the authors themselves aware of a range of international influences, but the reality which they reflect is increasingly shaped by the breakdown of previously distinct cultural boundaries.

Boehmer points out that due to the large-scale migrancy that began in the late twentieth century, migrant writing is increasingly regarded as representative of postcolonial writing. Yet this hybridity is largely aesthetic and the migrant text is far removed from the material reality of the country of origin. 'Postcolonial migrant literature is literature written by elites, defined and canonised by elites' (1995: 239). This theoretical framework is most conducive to a discussion of Coovadia's texts, which epitomise migrant writing.

1.3.2 Postmodernism

Much discussion of postcolonial literature takes place within the context of postmodernism. Postmodernists highlight a lack of cultural authenticity and purity; instead they emphasise pastiche and hybridity. Postmodernism has been criticised for being the intellectual toy of the First World, for promoting political cynicism and for minimising the importance of postcolonial literature's Third World context. However, postmodernists might argue that, by emphasising what is marginal, different and ambiguous, they celebrate postcolonial writers and writing in a way which is unsentimental and reflects the complexity of the contemporary world.

According to Elleke Boehmer:

> 'The multi-voiced migrant novel gave vivid expression to the open, indeterminate text, or of transgressive, non-authoritative reading.
> Out of the intersection of the two discourses therefore emerged a postcolonial criticism which champions those aspects of the postcolonial narrative which

> particularly appeal to the theory: its interest in the fragmentary aspects of signification, its concerns with the constructed nature of identity. Given their transgressive dispersed energies, the criticism reads postcolonial texts as symptomatic of the centrifugal pull of history, demonstrating the fragility of 'grand narratives', the erosion of transcendent authority, the collapse of imperialistic explanations of the world. Postcolonial and postmodern approaches cross in their concern with marginality, ambiguity, disintegrating binaries, all things parodied, piebald, dual, mimicked, borrowed and second-hand' (1995: 243-244).

Coovadia's work, with its use of allusion and parody, facilitates a postmodernist reading and inclusion into that genre.

1.3.3 Further considerations

In approaching individual postcolonial texts, we need to appreciate not just what is distinctive and individual, but also see how that text is part of the broader genre of postcolonial literature, how the writer has responded to key issues of postcolonial literature. This provides a useful framework for analysis. A critical reading of Coovadia's work demonstrates that such postmodernist texts impact negatively on the aims of postcolonial literature.

Benita Parry asks what the politics might be of a criticism in which discourse is privileged as the primary form of social praxis (1987: 37 in Ashcroft, 1989: 178). Such critics question whether or not the models which stress the inescapability of the discourse which constitutes colonised-postcolonised are not in fact only a mask over the face of a continued, neo-colonial domination. Parry rejects the work of colonialist discourse theorists as apolitical; politically ineffective and even capable of having reactionary implications. She rejects syncretism, viewing it as a device for the reincorporation of native difference into a new hegemonic totality – cultural neo-colonialism. For Parry, Fanon and other decolonising critics writing nationalist liberationist narratives address the issue so that 'the colonised can be written back into history' (1987: 39). However Ashcroft et al maintain that 'syncretism is the condition within which postcolonial societies operate, and accepting this does not involve hiding the role culture plays in the continuing neo-colonial hegemonic formation of the day-to-day experiences of those societies' (1989: 180). It is one of the anticipated conclusions of this dissertation that postcolonial writing and criticism that focuses on particular cultural regions is an alternative to the cosmopolitan approach of Coovadia.

While readings have evolved over time and an awareness of how different

geographical, cultural and historical contexts shape the response of readers, it is also important for us, as researchers, to be aware not only of the context of the literature we are responding to, but also the context which we are writing from and how this affects our own reading, how our backgrounds may affect the appreciation of the text being studied. While objectivity is a prerequisite to academic study and research, it is important to acknowledge that my own subjectivity as a Muslim, South African Indian affects my reading of the texts and influences the findings of this study.

Chapter two: Postcolonial and migrant literature

2.1 Defining postcolonial literature

Postcolonial literature can be defined as writing which has arisen out of experiences which result from contact with Western empire and reflects the effects of colonialism. This might include such diverse areas of focus such as the enforced mass migrations of the slave trade, or the impact of colonialism on indigenous societies. Though it is clearly a response to empire, it should not be defined purely against it. The post-independence of former colonies and the lack of security in such a world is another context which informs the writing of postcolonial authors. Importantly, it also presents alternative perspectives of Third World or developing countries to those presented by the West. The prominence of postcolonial literature also reflects the changing nature of Western society itself, which is now multicultural.

Furthermore, now the writing from former colonies is being exported to the metropolitan centre, reversing the process in the past where English literature was exported throughout the empire. A characteristic of postcolonial literatures is a tendency towards subversion. In Rushdie's phrase, the 'Empire writes back' to the imperial centre through asserting itself as central and self-determining, and by challenging the worldview that polarises centre and periphery in the first place. Many postcolonial writers have rewritten particular works from the English canon with a view to restructuring European realities in postcolonial terms, by interrogating the assumptions on which that order was based (1989: 33). *The Wedding* can be seen as a rewriting of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. Received history is tampered with, rewritten and realigned from the point of view of the victims of its progress, the perception of the 'other'. This dissertation looks at the implications of that shift in the work of Imraan Coovadia.

Postcolonial writing must also be read in the context of colonial discourse. On the arrival of the Indians in Natal in 1860, a press article described the migrants as 'queer, comical and foreign looking' and 'who were all evidently from a different race and kind to any we have yet seen in Africa or England' (Natal Mercury, 1860), clearly invoking the Manichean distinction of colonial discourse. These stereotypical descriptions are crucial to colonial discourse as an apparatus of power, based on the

recognition and disavowal of racial, cultural and historical differences. It also creates the space for a 'subject people' through the production of knowledge in which surveillance and control are guaranteed. The immigrants are cast as a population of degenerates on the basis of racial origin in order to justify colonial domination. Anyone who was not white was dehumanised and inferior. The descriptions are also based on Eurocentric ignorance of the oriental dress code and an irresponsible assumption to judge everything in terms of itself.

We see Coovadia subverting these constructions as Ismet, the consummate businessman, is more English than the English in his dress and manner, while the family of green-eyed thieves is easily capable of adopting different guises to change their appearance. In a similar ironic inversion, Coovadia situates South Africa as the birth place of modern India while simultaneously reconstructing South African history by inserting Indians centrally into the narrative:

> 'Since Durban housed the largest number of Indians in a single place outside India, it was, excluding the subcontinent, the most rhetorical place in the world. (And thanks to its piebald, multistriped composition, the municipality of Durban inculcated in the mind of the expatriate Mohandas Gandhi, who was currently residing there, the outrageous conviction that each disparate subcontinental belonged to the same nationality – and so, in a sense, Durban created the nation-state of India)' (2001: 142-3).

2.2 Indian diaspora and identity

Dislocation: to put out of place

Locare: to place. Locus, place

Questions of place and displacement, rootlessness and identity have been taken up by many contemporary writers. The major issues are summarised here.

For H.S. Komalesha, 'the term 'diaspora' signifies the political as well as individual consequences of cultural alienation, a strong sense of exile and a terrible reality of homelessness, resulting in the loss of boundaries' (2004: 151). It is a result of imperialistic aggression and therefore intrusion into the private space of culture, leading to cultural dislocation. And one of the consequences of cultural dislocation is the necessity to construct a new self and world, not in a vacuum, but against and in contradiction to constructions already imposed by the dominant culture.

Significant issues around the concept 'diaspora' include the tension between the host country and motherland, the collection of ties that bind with India, and the cultural and emotional struggles associated with movement/journey/migration/exile. A major feature of diaspora writings is the concern with place, displacement, myth of identity and authenticity.

Displacement is the key feature of the postcolonial world as more than three-quarters of the world's people have been affected by colonialism, Its effects, both cultural and psychological, are central themes in postcolonial literature and literature is one of the most important ways in which the realities experienced by colonised people is expressed.

Ashcroft et al note that a major feature of postcolonial literatures is the concern with place and displacement:

> 'It is here that the postcolonial crisis of identity emerges, the need to develop or recover an effective identifying relationship between self and place. A valid sense of self may have been eroded by dislocation or it may have been destroyed by cultural denigration. Place, displacement and a pervasive concern with the myths of identity and authenticity are a feature common to all English postcolonial literatures' (1989: 8).

Identity is thus constituted by difference.

The twentieth century has seen a great increase in understanding the transnational experiences experienced by communities of immigrants, such as loss of selfhood and the shift from the individual to the communal consciousness. The loss of identity or the representation of new identities as imposed by the globalised world has become a fundamental part of current postcolonial studies. New de-territorialised identities resulting from hybridity see contemporary Indian diaspora writers engaging ethnic, cultural and political conflicts that are re-shaping previous constructions of the West, as well as of the East.

Chetty and Piciucco state, in their introduction that mass and individual movements – journey, migration, exile, return – have become a new area of debate. Indian writers scattered across the world are the 'authors of a 'revolutionary movement' trying to pin down the coordinates of an emergent identity, a manifesto of a process writing back to

the ‘Indian’ centre’ (2004: 7). The ambivalent relationships with the host land and the motherland have become the common interest, presenting a portrait of the complexities and struggles of the Indian ‘other’ in the West: ‘Beyond the thirst for the exotic, the sincere search for authentic and historical materials, epic stories, lost identities and Indian cultural constructions has resulted in a distinct canon’ (8).

Furthermore, Piciucco argues, the fact that diasporic writers are keen on asserting a new transnational and transcultural identity is not surprising considering that they are authors who must negotiate the terms of their identity with an Anglophone world on a daily basis. The various dislocations of these voices on the East-West axis, their different degrees of entanglement with the West and commitment to the motherland, are all factors which contribute to being a long way from having a single voice which represents the diasporic Indian writer (Piciucco: 49-50).

According to Nasta, African, Caribbean and Asian literatures can be defined as ‘literary representations of displacement and diaspora, aesthetic valorisations of the inscription of realities other than those familiar to a Western worldview.’ (2002: xi). She adds that diasporic literatures do not aim at destroying the Western point of view, or at replacing it by another opposite egocentric one: the diaspora rewrites home and presents new identities within a confluence of heterogeneous cultures. The typical ambiguity arising from the reading of such texts arises from the reader’s sense of belonging which ‘makes him see what he wants to see.’

Sandhya Shukla distinguishes between the particular terms of diaspora, immigration and transnationality. Traditional ideas of immigration posit that people leave one country for another, adopting new identities in the process. The idea is based on a unilinear notion of the movement of people and cultures (2003: 11). Transnationalism, on the other hand, conceptualises how people live between borders of various kinds where ‘immigrants forge and sustain multi-stranded social relations that link together their societies of origin and settlement’ (12).

In *Questions of Travel*, Caren Kaplan links the tropes of exile to more contemporary representations of ‘cosmopolitan diasporas’ (2000: 24) and signals the valorisation of these dislocations and subsequent repression other types of dislocation, such as those

of the immigrant or refugee. She describes how the binary oppositions of diaspora/immigration or global/national leads to immigrants being seen to replace one nationalist identification for another while diasporic émigrés confound territorial and essentialist nationalisms in favor of transnational communities, going on to say 'The valorisation of the generalised hybridity is presumed to construct a global or cosmopolitan set of identities that are superior to the nineteenth-century inventions of nation, race and gender that immigrants negotiate in their efforts to assimilate. The global is valorised over the local' (36).

In an interview, Rushdie claimed not to like the word 'immigrants' as it seems to have acquired a whole body of cultural and political baggage (quoted in Nasta 2002: 149), whereas migrancy on the other hand highlights the possibility of constant movement, the refusal to be contained by any one position. While every immigrant is literally a migrant, and vice versa, the choice of which of these two labels to affix to an individual is dependant not on the position of the person (whether they are in the space of arrival or the space of departure), but on the class and social positions of the individual being labeled, and the need and obligation – or lack thereof – to travel with cultural and political baggage. The immigrant is weighed down by the 'baggage' of having to secure a job and livelihood, whereas his cosmopolitan counterpart, freed from such baggage by his wealth, has the possibility of constant movement.

According to Ronit Frenkel-Fainman:

> 'The diversity of diasporic peoples is further compounded in Coovadia's case because he is part of more than one diaspora as a South African of Indian descent. The African diaspora is usually conceptualised in racialised terms as a black diaspora with its attendant history of slavery, persecution, forced movement and dispersal; and South African Indians are not usually theorised as forming a significant part of this group. The South African diaspora is marked by its history of both apartheid exile and voluntary movement. With over a decade of democratic rule in South Africa, it seems fair to say that apartheid exiles that have stayed abroad have become part of a diasporic community – in such cases, the displacement of exile becomes the placement of voluntary 'home' outside of originary homelands. Displacement, in this context, does not refer to people being out of place through movement, for living outside of their areas of origin, as this usage points to too narrow a definition of national belonging. 'Displacement' rather refers to particular historical currents that unsettle reified notions of identity and location - the adjusted sense of self that necessarily emerges out of relocation, an idea Imraan Coovadia invokes in his novel *The Wedding* (2008: 6).

There are however different ways of responding to this split in the postcolonial writer's identity, including attempts to accept one's fractured inheritance, to return and rediscover one's society, one's place, even to look ahead to a fusion of the fragments into a heterogeneous local culture of the future, which is evinced in more 'national' writers. The more transnational works of writers like Naipaul, Rushdie and Coovadia, display a different response; pervaded as they are by an overwhelming sense of personal dislocation, apparently defeating any potential reconstruction of the personality, the self, in future. Their writings seem to represent an attempt to discover the sense of self that eludes the writer, which they believe eludes all colonial peoples.

2.3 Diasporic culture

Culture is defined as the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of human beings and transmitted from one generation to another (Random House Dictionary). Culture is the only area of human living that needs no physical demarcations. Cultural differences are so embedded in our system that everywhere we find undrawn territorial lines based on culture or its differences, so that true national frontiers are not determined by mountains and rivers, but rather by language, the customs, the memories, all that distinguishes one nation from another (Hobsbawm 1995: 98). Indians largely retain oneness within the diaspora in terms of the following cultural components: food (we find uniformity in food habits of the Indian diaspora globally – they eat the same kind of food garnished with the same spices used in the old world), marriage (an intrinsic part of the social fabric, has fixed cultural boundaries – Indians mostly marry among their clan), and gender inequality (gender inequality is found at two different levels; in the way Indian women are treated by Indian men, the way they are treated by the white rulers).

Conflicting cultures or cultural conflicts have come to dominate all literatures of the postcolonial period, conflicts between what is perceived as the traditional culture of the past and incorporation into a global modern culture. 'Diasporic culture by its very nature is fragmented and as a result exhibits a lot of gaps. These gaps can be filled only through the socio-cultural osmosis – a process that automatically begins the moment two cultures come to share a common space. Therefore Edward Said's statement that cultures in exile treat plurality of vision holds good for diasporic cultures too. Such a plurality of vision 'gives rises to an awareness of simultaneous

dimensions actually acquiring together contrapuntally' (Said 1984: 172), correctly pointing out that the presence of many cultures within the diasporic culture in the absence of any particular culture. This kind of multiculturalism within the diaspora treats the issue of identity as an illusion because the issue of selective amnesia, which constitutes identity, is problematised here. Cultural amnesia in their case is fatal because they have been removed from their culture. Therefore construction of identity is not merely an intellectual exercise but a practical necessity' (Komalesha 2004: 156).

Coovadia's identity is shaped by three different spaces: India, South Africa, and America. Two opposing strands of the diaspora surface: the lost space as utopia and the host space as dystopia (strangers in a foreign land). In Coovadia's work, culture is addressed as a textual construct – the focus is on issues around exile, dislocation and homelessness.

2.4. Migrant or transcultural writing

The global nature of postcolonial literature means that writers may not belong to or identify with one geographical region, but cross both regional and cultural boundaries through their writing. It would be a mistake to imply that all postcolonial writers can be tied to their countries of origin. Indeed a sense of origin or belonging is often conspicuously absent. Furthermore the setting and scope of much postcolonial writing is international rather than local in focus.

One characteristic feature of such transcultural writing is a sense of rootlessness. It reminds us that writers do not always have a rich sense of culture to draw from and that their relationship with the culture or nation of their birth can often be problematic. A key problem for many writers in the postcolonial world is how to make sense of and represent a world which may not seem ordered and meaningful. This does not mean denying uncertainty and doubt, but incorporating it into the picture. The process of writing across cultures affects the actual writing process itself where the experience of exile gives the writer the clarity and distance to manage the material.

However, exile presents different problems for different authors. In his essay entitled 'Imaginary Homelands', Salman Rushdie elaborates:

> 'It may be that writers in my position, exiles or emigrants 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 means 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 …' (in Butcher 1983: 76).

Piciucco finds that the diasporic novel is a respondent to the new aesthetic demands of an emergent social entity, the hybrid subject. 'Diasporic fiction is the recognisable sign of a newly emergent identity which occupies a new territorial space by negotiating terms of approach with the two extremes, East and West. 'I was both and nothing' is the comment made by Rushdie's narrator in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, exemplifying the in-between position of the diasporic novel. They are thus distinguished by a twofold and ambiguous integration of opposites' (2004: 36).

Due to the large-scale migrancy that began in the late twentieth century, migrant writing is increasingly regarded as representative of postcolonial writing. Elleke Boehmer aptly describes the migrant writer as ex-colonial by birth, 'Third World' by cultural interest, cosmopolitan in every other way, working within the precincts of the Western metropolis while maintaining thematic connections with a national background (1995: 233). Often retracing the biographical paths of their authors, novels by migrant writers like Rushdie, Ghosh and Mukherjee circle across separate geographical, historical, and cultural spaces. Like its authors, the migrant novel itself draws attention to the regenerative experience of straddling worlds. Based on their different cultural riches, it brings into prominence the translations and migrations of which it is itself a product (241).

If the postcolonial text is a hybrid object, the migrant text is that hybridity writ large. This hybridity gives form and meaning to the bewildering array of cultural translations which migrants must make. The hybridised colonial text is more intensively hybridised in its migrancy to the Western metropolis, which is also undeniably transformed. London, for example, has ceased being a national city and come to resemble colonial cities, mirroring the diversity of the former empire (235).

Coovadia's work is neither wholly Indian, nor wholly Western, but an expression of the fertile interaction between two traditions. As Ashcroft et al point out, 'The postcolonial text is always a complex and hybridised formation. It is inadequate to read it either as reconstruction of pure traditional values or as simply foreign and intrusive' (1989: 110). In Coovadia's work we encounter a diasporisation of fiction without the actual conditions of diaspora, in a very similar way to what we encounter in Rushdie; a connection in the urge to recover a lost home, and in its conception of the family.

Green-eyed Thieves stands for the urge to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural difference. These in-between spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself (Bhabha 1994: 1-2). According to Bhabha, mass migration and the political phenomena of diaspora and exile have reconfigured the world's boundaries, proposing a new model, the figure of the migrant, because of his hybridity, has come to have a privileged position to look at the world, of a particular critical subjectivity.

The aim of the novel, *The Wedding,* is not the recovery of an original authentic past, but the acknowledgement of its cultural hybridity. Ismet decides to leave India not because he is looking for new opportunities like many passenger Indians, but rather for personal reasons. A friend, Tejpal Reddy, tells him that his wife was 'tamed' by living in Durban, becoming obedient in the face of such unfamiliarity. Unfortunately Tejpal is a person who tells others what he thinks they want to hear, rather than relying on accuracy, and Ismet is the perfect audience for Tejpal's untruths. Coovadia is pointing to the relationship between colonialism, race, gender and migration through both this conversation and Ismet's consequent actions. Ismet decides to migrate partly as an attempt to change Khateja. 'While colonialism was subjugating people on the basis of race, it was in turn being used by the colonised to subdue women in traditional societies' (Govinden 2004: 6).

Coovadia gives three alternative reasons for his grandparents' migration to South Africa: Rashida and Khateja did not get along, Ismet dreamed of founding a new race and finally, Ismet believed that he was required to undertake some sort of heroic action as the husband of the most beautiful woman in the world. The usual migration narrative of entrepreneurial passenger Indians moving for material gain is deconstructed because Ismet, as a registered clerk in Bombay, is migrating in order to shift his personal instability rather than his financial circumstances which are quite solid. This retelling of Indian migration to South Africa serves to dispel dominant misconceptions that Indians moved solely to alleviate poverty. Coovadia inserts heterogeneity into the narrative, widening the scope of history to reflect the diversity of migration narratives. The following chapter constitutes a more detailed analysis of the implications of the theoretical issues around postcolonial and migrant literature on the writing of Imraan Coovadia.

Chapter three: Coovadia's writing

3.1 Identity

In *Green-eyed Thieves*, Coovadia has chosen an unconventional plot and highly unlikely characters as the means to transgress traditional conceptions of 'Indianness' itself to see how far the limits of such identity extend and what they yield on the edges. He examines diasporic identity with the narrator's sense of himself while 'in transit' and shifting spaces are central to the storyline as the different lands are juxtaposed in ironic twists mixed with humour and terse dialogue. The story follows a mixed family – one half criminals, the other half philosophers – who begin their career in Fordsburg, Johannesburg, and move onto Pakistan and Brooklyn, New York. Firoze Peer, arrested for impersonating a police officer and other misdemeanours, is in prison awaiting trial. The 'jailhouse memoirist' takes up the task of writing his family's story and the reasons for his arrest. Firoze is a victim of a mistaken identity: he gets caught by police pursuing his identical twin brother Ashraf. Both have inherited the striking green eyes of generations of Peers. Firoze has also inherited his mother's bookish habits and interest in philosophy, whereas Ashraf is more interested in girls, and in his appearance.

Coovadia's tale crisscrosses nationalities, cultures and territorial boundaries. His Muslim, Indian characters are sentimental about their religion, but the attractions of the Western world get repeated reference. Coovadia displaces the idea of stable identities. For instance, even in a predominantly Muslim country such as Pakistan, one of Coovadia's characters proudly shows off his daughter's interest in piano playing, French films and hip-hop. There are constant references to how multicultural interlocution takes place, and is mediated. In New York, that melting pot of races and nationalities, Ashraf the Indian is easily mistaken for a Puerto Rican or a Jew. Coovadia's characters live in their own world, while participating quite functionally in mainstream culture, without having to give up either. In this diasporic cosmopolitanism identities eventually wither away or simply choose to work the hegemonic cultural landscape to service needs, while keeping their own cultural world view private and safely distanced from the mainstream.

Even the September 11 bomber, Mohammad Atta, is exploited in the book. There are sex, alcohol and homo-erotic tendencies, unlike the religious Muslim stereotype. However, everything changed after September 11, when Atta and his fellow Jihadists flew planes through the Twin Towers. The repressed prejudices about Muslims which found a new political space in America are mentioned in Coovadia's book. Firoze finds that he must peddle his writing skills at the behest of Republican propagandists who are eager to publicise Muslim voices of moderation. As the novel is set at the time of the September 11 bombing of the Twin Towers, a time of chaos in America and Britain with the ensuing war on terror, a sense of disintegration of formal order, and the need to create clarity in the world, is conveyed in the structure of the novel. Each chapter opens with an apparently random list of unrelated things which are then shown to be somehow linked.

Coovadia is skilled at detailing place and time, whether Fordsburg in the 1970s or post-millennium New York. In *Green-Eyed Thieves* he captures not one culture, but several. Issues of identity are at the core of this tale – How do we define ourselves? Manners? Morals? Can they all be faked?

Though the novel's settings move between South Africa, Pakistan, and New York, none of these places could be considered the true 'home' of the characters. Like true postcolonial migrants, the characters themselves wander through these urban settings, living in each one at the same time and yet are always detached from them. The landscapes of the cities, teeming with urban menace, thus form an almost surreal backdrop for this story. The main characters are removed from their culture of origin, and the nature of their experiences mean that they become entwined in lives of those from cultures other than their own.

Twins are almost invariably used in literature to depict a split personality, a divided self. The split between the twins thus dramatises the gap between the individual and his past and also for Coovadia, the book is about two strands of Muslim religiosity, one Sufi and one more criminal. He elaborates that Muslims are traditionally represented in literature as the lyrical Persian or Iranian, or the rascally Muslim of *A thousand and One Nights* and *Kim*. Representing these different sides in the brothers, he realised that the opposition was not real. Firoze, the philosophical brother, is the

darker of the two brothers, representing doubts about reality and existence. Ashraf, apparently the more sinister and criminal, represents doubts about moral conventions. The series of guises he assumes give him different identities. For Coovadia this is a way of talking about writing and imagination, a critique of authenticity. When asked about the importance of place in establishing the identity of the characters and a feeling of emotional involvement, without which the text amounts only to verbal play, Coovadia stated that verbal play is perhaps all we want from a novel (Hromnik 2006: 34). Where Firoze is presented to President Bush as the right kind of Arab, who detests the Muslim countries opposed to the US, Coovadia claims that while he was angry, as a comic he can't confess to it, thus skating around the question. And in that perhaps is the strongest criticism of Coovadia's work.

J.M. Coetzee has called *The Wedding* 'A tender love story, rendered in prose of dazzling comic wizardry' (Coovadia 2001: cover). The novel is set in Durban, Bombay, and New York, and raises related to identity, nation, exile, women in colonial hierarchies and the gendered implications of migration. The text also shifts rigid notions of location and identity constructions. Coovadia conceives diasporic identity constructions, such as Indian and African, place and displacement, past and present, race and nation, gender and sexuality, as fluid and thus being able to hold seemingly contradictory positions concurrently. Migration narratives become new versions of national, gendered and racial belonging. Coovadia captures some of these multiple placements and displacements of identity in the seemingly autobiographical interlude at the end of *The Wedding*.

The last section centers on the narrator, who we assume to be Coovadia, in Boston taking a taxi on his way to the movies. The driver identifies Coovadia as being of Indian descent. Coovadia's response to the identity question, points to the placements and displacements of history, in that he does not initially reflect his self-identification as South African. Physicality does not always correspond to our centers of identification. Yet, for Coovadia there is some identification with Indianness in his ambiguous response, being "sort of" but "not really" from India, and his inability to identify where his grandfather is from points to the displacements of the past

3.2 History and memory

Since postcolonial writers often respond to particular historical events, postcolonial literature is intimately entwined with the contexts in which it is written. The colonised were always the objects of someone else's story or history. The retrieval and rewriting of history is important for postcolonial writers, and for some writers is also the source of identity. For this reason autobiography and memoir has been a favoured genre among postcolonial writers – the return to a remembered childhood being one of the most telling means of summing up the past in order to find some shape for a life within the confusions and uncertainties of the present.

The profound irony for these writers is that they tell their story, their history, in the language and, to a greater or lesser extent, by means of the cultural forms introduced by the coloniser, demonstrating that the relationships between history, culture and language are not easy to disentangle.

In *Green-eyed Thieves*, the reader is asked not to mistake fiction for reality. The narrator addresses the reader directly about the process of narration. The overtly fictional, stylised nature of his writing is emphasised, encouraging the reader to regard what is being presented with healthy distrust. The reader is continually made aware of the gap between what happens and what is narrated, the reality of the experience and the myths of history that are made from it. For instance, Firoze, in writing an article denouncing the September bombings, is introduced to President Bush as the right kind of Arab, who detests the Muslim countries opposed to the US.

In *The Wedding*, Coovadia narrates the story of his fictionalised grandparents Ismet Nassim and Khateja Haveri from the time that they meet in India through their migration to South Africa. The narrative culminates in the narrator's own movement to the United States. Through a blend of humour, dialogue and historicity, Coovadia both writes and rewrites the story of Indian migration to South Africa:

> 'The unconventional story of Coovadia's individual grandparents, replaces the wider autobiographical narrative of indenture, which characterises much literature on Indian migration to South Africa. Coovadia's particular representation of the past inserts heterogeneity into the narrative, widening the scope of history to reflect a diversity of migration narratives, thereby repositioning this past in a post-apartheid present' (Frenkel-Fainman 2008: 7).

Coovadia frames Ismet's actions in broader historical terms where chance, in the form of Ismet's view of Khateja from the train window, sets history in motion. Coovadia, in narrating this micro-history, suggests links to larger historical processes. In highlighting both the ordinary and accidental aspects of the unfolding of historical events, the authority usually associated with historical determinism is disrupted, because the tide of historical determinism hinges on incidental rather than deliberate causal relations. 'So the past continues to speak to us in the present, in this language of familiar gestures and words that are passed down quietly across times and generations' (Frenkel-Fainman 2008: 8).

Derek Walcott says, 'history is fiction, subject to a fitful muse, memory … if they can contemplate only the shipwreck of the world, they also experience an oceanic nostalgia for the older culture and a melancholy at the new' (1978: 38). Coovadia's character Ismet in *The Wedding* is a fictional character, someone whose feelings about India represent the deeply ambivalent emotions of the Indian intellectual exile about the home he has left behind but who also cannot help returning to again and again in memory and imagination in his continuing search for identity, acculturation and belonging. In Rushdie's 'Imaginary Homelands' essay, he states that 'it's my present that is foreign and the past is home albeit a lost home in a lost city in the mists of lost time' (1992: 9). As the Indian abroad tries to reclaim the lost home through the 'double filter' of time, the India that is remembered is no longer the one that was left behind, nor an invented one, but an imagined one. Coovadia highlights this idea as a literary trope in *The Wedding*, where the negative connotations of India are forgotten by the protagonists Ismet and Khateja as India recedes from their lived experiences in Africa, and they begin to construct an idealised image of 'home'

Ismet, 'bred into mildness' (181), is an ordinary middle-aged man with ordinary middle-class hopes and expectations, a representative Indian. As he goes through everyday life, its small joys, struggles and disappointments, pains and problems, it is inextricably bound up with the larger forces over which the ordinary has no control. 'Ismet's private feelings of dejection in his relationship with Khateja are exacerbated by negative feelings he develops towards the wider society in India' (Govinden 2004: 161). In travelling through colonial India shortly after their wedding, they see it is a

'great gutted land' (72). India, burdened by history, is marked by neglect and decay. Coovadia's India is a land gone irrevocably wrong, reminiscent of Rushdie's India in *Midnight's Children*, which is buffeted by too much history and is slowly disintegrating.

Salvation in a crumbling India that corrupts, traps and destroys everything is possible through an individual decision to move, to continue that journey to free oneself from the closures of the past. Migration is the only opportunity for Ismet to pursue. The famine, strife and disease of India is in sharp contrast to the prosperity and adventure offered in moving to the Natal colony. Here the orientalist representation of history is subverted so that India is depicted not as a land of dream and myth, but a broken land. Ismet's decision to leave India is thus a personal choice and not the result of historical determination. However, Ismet's rather dreamy logic gives him a vulnerable if engaging air, reminiscent of Foster's characterisation on Aziz. If Ismet is to be seen as representative of the all-conquering civilisation of the West, it's certainly not a role that makes him look very formidable.

Similarly, the narrator continues to move to the West at the end of the novel. *The Wedding* is a story about self-discovery and transformation, of rewriting history and loss. Coovadia's concern is with the journeys individuals and communities have continually made, the way they have transformed their circumstance and been transformed by them. The narrator's journey to the US re-enacts the diasporic experience and makes his South African-Indian story part of the story of America; America is after all a land of immigrants.

If India is stumbling under the weight of history, Africa is history-free; to Ismet Africa is vast and undeveloped, a dark continent which would 'throw them ever more tightly into each other's arms' (120). Coovadia is drawing attention to the way Africa is traditionally represented, its inhabitants dehumanised, its history obliterated, and subverting these concepts through parody. Ismet is a parodic colonial adventurer, but the parody here is intended for humour only, with no valorisation of the culture of the postcolonial traveler as in other postcolonial novels.

For Betty Govinden, Coovadia's allegorical narrative uses the historical background of one family to denote the wider events of history. Coovadia concentrates on the margins of history, the centre seeming distant and aloof, its hegemony internalised and rendered implacable. Khateja's marriage is seen as part of the betrayal of humankind; waging a 'freedom struggle' in her private life, parallel to the freedom struggle of India, SA and the rest of the colonised world (2004: 169). Unfortunately, Coovadia's writing does not go beyond parody and comedy to get to the depth of these characters or issues.

Rushdie believes the shards of broken glass of nostalgia are not simply a mark of loss; reassembled they can become a useful tool for the novelist to portray the fractured and liminal exilic condition, the heap of broken images that also sums up contemporary life itself. The remains of the past are also frequently reassembled by the imagination to form a new and kaleidoscopic design, one which, according to Bhabha does not merely recall the past, but renews it, refiguring it as an in-between space, that innovates and interrupts the performance of the present (Bhabha 1994: 7).

Stuart Hall most effectively sums up this point as follows: 'Diaspora identities are those which are constantly producing and reproducing themselves anew, through transformation and difference. It is because this New World is constituted for us as place, a narrative of displacement, that gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless desire to return to the lost origins. And yet, this 'return to the beginning' is like the imaginary in Lacan – it can neither be fulfilled nor requited, and hence it is the beginning of the symbolic, of representation, the infinitely renewable source of desire, memory, myth, search, discovery…(1990: 235-6).

Coovadia's major concern is to chart the emotional territory of the New World for the immigrant from the Old one. India is not simply a metaphor for what is lost, but what must be lost; India is a dream of the past from which the subject must awaken. But the fragmented realities of the diasporic condition are inextricably tied up with its Indian roots; the present cannot be understood without the past, and the past can exist only in memory; identity can be (re)constructed only in and through the act of imagining what has been lost and left behind.

The Wedding involves a journey, but this is the journey of the innocent abroad, a traditional satire subject from *Huckleberry Finn*. Here we have the predicament of the colonial who has journeyed to the metropolitan centre, seeking freedom but finding the imprisonment of exile. Frenkel-Faiman points to another ironic twist to *The Wedding*:

> 'Coovadia who comes from a prominent anti-apartheid activist family, does not explicitly focus on apartheid history. Events like his grandparents being forcibly removed from their home, when it is declared part of a white group area, are given merely a few lines in the novel. Interesting historical anecdotes, such as how anti-apartheid activist Yusuf Dadoo came to be buried on the right side of Karl Marx in Highgate cemetery, appear in the text. Coovdia explains his focus on such micro-histories in *The Wedding* as emerging from a desire 'to restore the other story – the oddity of the many different lives that existed under apartheid' (Masala.com in Frenkel-Fainman 2008: 20).

As a 'novelised memoir' the story is not autobiographical; instead Coovadia gives new meaning to everyday events to construct the story. Govinden rightly points out that it is in the texture of the writing, the speech and dialogue rather than the plot, that there are autobiographical overtones (158).

In *The Wedding*, Khateja and Ismet represent the different emotional responses to migration and remembering. Ismet is concerned only with achieving success in the new land, letting go of his old romantic dreams of marriage and sentiment. Migration often forced people to abandon old social mores for new ones as a matter of survival, also demonstrating that status and former histories counted for little in displaced communities attempting to forge a new identity in a foreign land.

On the other hand, Khateja's loneliness is exacerbated in SA, nostalgia for the home left behind results in idyllic constructions thereof. 'At times she believed this exile from India, which had been so crudely forced upon her at pains of marriage to an idiot, this exile has sapped her strength and left her defenseless' (211). Longing for the open spaces of India she had been free to roam, she feels stifled and confined in Durban by contrast. Khateja's nostalgia for home reflects the mediation between new and old identities and the political, cultural and economic preoccupations of the newly settled community. By the end of the novel she has not quite lost the will to fight, in driving over Ismet's foot at his second wedding, but the fact that he remarries shows just how powerless she is to change the staus quo.

3.3 Cosmopolitanism

As Coovadia is placed within the American multicultural framework, it is pertinent to consider his point of origin. Since Coovadia is of Indian origin from South Africa, there is an element of the old Indian diaspora in South Africa shaping his sensibility as a writer. Typical of the postcolonial writer of the last decade of the 20th century, Coovadia is a cultural traveler. The hyphens that chracterise Coovadia's identity, Indian-South African-American, signify his otherness, of having a feeling of participating in several cultural groups or traditions without being fully at home in any. If *The Wedding* forms part of the historical legacy of colonialism and indenture, *Green-eyed Thieves* weaves South African and American locales in the protagonist's journey in an effort to merge the several fragments of his life in South Africa and America. Together the books are Coovadia's attempt at redefining himself vis-à-vis the social and historical parameters of the South African and American societies.

In *The Wedding*, Coovadia tries to relocate himself in the history of the Indian diaspora in South Africa, in order to gain a proper perspective of his present reality, the reality of living in America's multicultural society. Shared histories, cultural affinities, and common racial memories are integral to diasporic consciousness. The Indian diaspora shares a consciousness generated by a complex network of historical connections, spiritual affinities and unifying racial memories which get manifested in the cultural production of the Indian diasporic communities around the world. However Coovadia's tale is different from the typical national or geographical dislocation of the old Indian diaspora where the resulting cultural estrangement is not of their choice. Indians were forcibly taken to British colonies as cheap forms of labour, bringing to the place new forms of culture, which are neither native nor extensions of settler culture back home.

Just as Coovadia maps various places, his narratives too sit above the economic and social structure of these places, favouring a global or cosmopolitan engagement with this location over a more rooted politicised one. Even where the narrative gestures towards conveying the space as that of the racialised immigrant, who struggles against cultural hierarchies , for instance in Ismet's dealings with his white boss or Firoze's involvement with the Republicans, this gesture does not materialise into anything.

The tension between localised personal detail and the national overview recall the interplay of local and global, which allows Coovadia to avoid the paths dictated by the broad sweep of history in favour of those suggested by traces of the specificities of his protaganonists' lives. The narrator's ability to choose to absorb himself in the stories that he has inherited from others is a product of his privileged social status. A further irony is that it is Coovadia himself, the Indian cosmopolite writer, is claiming the authority to comment on the customs and peculiarities of Muslim and Indian 'others' behind the voice of his narrator.

3.4 Voyeurism

Coovadia explores in his works an increasingly connected but not homogeneous world. One of his concerns is movement across frontiers, which flows across national and political boundaries. However, the shifts in geographical locations in *The Wedding* and in *Green-eyed Thieves* are not paralleled by shifts in terms of social class in the narrative. There is little suggestion of a threat to the class status of the narrator and protagonists. Despite the presence of working-class Indians in South Africa and their differentiation from the narrator's cosmopolitan lifestyle in both texts, their experiences are 'contained' within the fragmentary glimpses the text offers. This distance inhibits any engagement with the harsh realities of the lives lived, positioning the narrator as 'voyeur'

Sara Ahmed claims that 'the making visible of the violent histories behind identity as self-presence can become the basis for a transformative and collective politics' (1999: 104). Coovadia's narrative does not in fact make visible the violent histories behind Indian immigration. While his narrator does weave places together to form an itinerary by re-enacting the stories of the past and physically tracing their routes, his lack of engagement with cultural economy obviates any need to adapt it to his own interests. Far from transgressing or manipulating the socio-economic order or forging politicised connections between places, his itinerant behaviour and fragmentary occupation of the spaces described seem to glide above it. The ability to attain a cartographical grasp on a certain space is associated with detachment from that space; conversely, immersion or rootedness in a particular space implies an immersion in the

self (105). While the novels complicate these associations, it shows how mapping through stories can be linked with elitism and an evasion of the political.

By employing de Certeau's theory on the narrative representations of space (1984: 115), the narrator's point of view from a privileged position reveals strict resemblances to a voyeur's attitude, showing privilege with mapping. De Certeau associates wandering through the city with the 'walker' who lacks a proper place and can only impact on space through transgression. Yet, wandering, either aimlessly or through a personal desire like Khateja, is surely an elite activity, dependant on the ability to move through space at will.

3.5 Patriarchy

The Wedding, like most diasporic novels, is concerned with the shifting boundaries of nation, culture and self that immigrants constantly deal with, and it focuses primarily on the woman's experience as the traditional site of national/cultural contests and a metaphor for the marginality and dislocations of the diasporic condition. Khateja is not the traditional Indian woman, living in an India of acceptance and tradition, facing social or emotional oppression. Khateja is confident and independent, defying conventional expectations. At twenty, she is past the marriageable age for girls at that time, but sees no reason why she should be sold as if she were a 'box of vegetables' (43), protesting the assumed inevitability around women and marriage. Even when she is forced to marry Ismet, Khateja refuses to accept her prescribed role, promising to make his life miserable. Until the end of the novel, she feels betrayed in her father selling her off and never discusses her past (Govinden 2004 : 159).

Ismet believes that he is the master of his fate and that he will forge a new successful life in SA. He believes that Khateja will be tamed in moving to South Africa, like Tejpal's brother's 'difficult' wife who was tamed in moving to SA, the same will. Coovadia is subtly pointing at the way in which migration was a way of maintaining patriarchy and subduing women, so that women were subjected to the double-bind of colonialism and patriarchy, where gender and race constructions are disseminated as if immutable and divinely ordained. The social structure determines the proper role and proper value for everybody, which determines a disarticulation from the world in those who are not accepted in the system and do not occupy a defined position. To

Khateja this appears as a product of patriarchy, determining a hierarchy inside the family where Ismet is at the top.

The experience of women within empire was often one of double oppression. Colonised men had to be subservient to their colonial masters, but colonised women often had to be subservient to both their colonial masters and the patriarchal nature of their own societies. Though colonialism and patriarchy have been closely entwined historically, an end to formal empire has not meant an end to the oppression of women. Women continue to be marginalised and stereotyped, ironically by many postcolonial authors who might themselves claim to be challenging a culture of oppression. It is perhaps Coovadia's most significant contribution that *The Wedding* ties into feminist criticism, challenging assumptions and stereotypes about women in both literature and society, through the character of Khateja.

In their quest to readjust to life in the West, women display a variety of emotions ranging from loneliness, worthlessness, neuroticism and assimilation. One common theme that runs across many diasporic novels is that for those Indian-born women living new lives in the West, independence is a mixed blessing. The possibility of change, of starting anew is at once terrifying and filled with promise.

Khateja's reasons for migrating with Ismet add an additional layer to this story, centralising the gendered experience of movement that is rarely told. Khateja's reasons for accompanying Ismet to South Africa assert her agency in dire circumstances and destabilise another migration narrative which posits migration as a disciplinary mechanism of patriarchy. Khateja, although trapped between the orchestrations of her family and a marriage she has not chosen, also has a personal agenda. Coovadia situates Khateja as an agent in the narrative where "..dire as it was the force of circumstances doesn't altogether account for her persuadability. The truth is that Khateja long intended to widen her horizons. An appetite for travel – she was the first to admit it….." (Coovadia 2001: 141) Khateja harbors a long-held desire for travel. Men have traditionally been mobile across different cultures while women have not. Coovadia is able to capture this historical predicament while simultaneously positioning Khateja as able to expertly maneuver within these confines and assert her own agency. Coovadia portrays Khateja as a character who has railed against the

strictures imposed on her, and who manipulates her environment, within the confines of patriarchy.

Ismet offers to divorce Khateja rather than force her to migrate against her will, at which point she explains to him that her family will force her to marry the village idiot, Ahmedu, if she returns to her family home. Ismet utilises this information as a bargaining device, negotiating for Khateja to cook him meals in South Africa, while he agrees to have no physical contact with her. According to Frenkel-Fainman, in Ismet's logical universe, cooking is intimately related to domestication and another of his delusions is that Khateja will be transformed in the culinary process. Ismet is, of course, mistaken and Coovadia is highlighting the ludicrous side of such assumptions. Khateja, inverting her husband's sexist assumptions, ironically utilises cooking as a means of revenge. When Ismet eventually insists that she hold up her side of their agreement, Khateja cooks a feast, putting such huge quantities of chilly into the food that Ismet becomes ill. Coovadia's subtle depiction of Khateja's ability to subvert the various mechanisms that Ismet employs to bend her will point to the gendered experience of both traditional marriage and movement, as well as the expert ways women have historically found to subvert patriarchal power. Ismet's position is one of a figure-head because Khateja is able to utilise "informal" power (usually associated with women) to subvert any framework that Ismet constructs. Power is then represented as capillary rather than arterial, within this family structure. The relationship between food as a form of culture and migration is also highlighted by Ismet's assumption that he can perpetuate 'India' in South Africa through Khateja's cooking (Frenkel-Fainman 2008: 13).

Coovadia deals with the issues surrounding arranged marriages with ironic humor, depicting both its cultural currency in impoverished communities as a form of security for aging parents, as well as the oppressive side of the practice for women who do not wish to comply. Coovadia portrays the severely limited options open to women at this time by using wry humor and by creating nuanced and sympathetic characters.

Chapter four: Western preference for cosmopolitan texts

Ashcroft et al point out that while the structure of imperialism has been dismantled, the weight of antiquity continues to dominate the cultural production of the postcolonial world:

> 'Cultural hegemony has been maintained by identifying postcolonial literatures as isolated national off-shoots of English literature and relegated them to marginal and subordinate positions. As the strength of postcolonial literatures has become undeniable, the centre has sought to incorporate those works and writers of which it approves as British' (1989: 7).

As postcolonial culture is a hybridised phenomenon, the construction of identity can only occur as a dynamic interaction between European hegemonic systems and peripheral subversions of them. 'It is not possible to return to or rediscover an absolute pre-colonial cultural purity, nor is it possible to create national regional formations entirely independent of their historical implication in the European colonial enterprise. It is the project of postcolonial writing to interrogate European discourse and discursive strategies from its position within and between two worlds (196).

Boehmer's discussion of migrant writing forms the basis of my discussion of Coovadia, so the key points of her argument have been summarised here. Boehmer states that it is important to note that migrant literatures tend to win readers because, though bearing all the attractions of the exotic, the magical and the 'other', they also participate reassuringly in aesthetic languages familiar to Anglo-American culture (Brennan: 1989 in Boehmer 1995: 236).The status of migrant writers like Rushdie and Mukherjee means that postcolonial literature is defined as necessarily cosmopolitan, transplanted, multilingual and conversant with cultural codes of the West.

It is important to note that migrant literatures represent a retreat by writers from the new ailing nations of the postcolonial world to the old metropolis. As a product of that retreat, they are marked by its disillusionment. Writers who are not forced to seek refuge are thus seeking refuge in richer places of the world. These writers are advantaged by the class, political and educational connections with Europe or America which they enjoyed. They have developed a cosmopolitan tendency as a

result of their elite upbringing. By migrating, they have been able to secure for themselves a more comfortable location in the wider world.

Yet in securing this position in the wider neocolonial world, postcolonial migrant literature is another instance of the appropriation by Europe and America of Third World Resources, maintaining a cultural map of the world as divided between a wealthy gifted metropolis and the meagerly endowed margin. And the writing most often called 'truly' hybrid is that which has successfully bridged the gap between Third and First Worlds, and established itself at the centre.

And yet because of the very success of bridging, the cosmopolitan work can seem very far removed from the material devastation of the author's nation of origin. While the hybridity signify a freeing of voices, a technique for dismantling authority, a liberating polyphony that shakes off the authoritarian yoke, it is a hybridity that remains primarily an aesthetic device; a source of themes and metaphors, national and cultural change are used to furnish images for their art (237-239). So while migrant writers may be opposed to neo-colonial formations, their work has been criticised for being a literature without loyalties, lacking in the regional and local affiliations so necessary at a time of mass globalisation. It remains an open question whether this kind of writing holds much meaning for the people who inhabit the scenes of Third World confusion. So while migrant literature celebrates a national or historical rootlessness, sometimes accentuated by political cynicism, this weightlessness could also be interpreted as an evacuation of commitment, or as a dilution of those concerns which originally characterised postcolonial writing. Postcolonial texts like *Midnight's Children* have been dismissed by nationalist critics as reproducing in a translated or 'plagiarised' form the traditional technique of narration and so failed the test of authenticity. The danger of the diaspora writer's dalliance with the India theme is that sometimes the writer plays into the hands of readers who look for the exotic, a kind of tourist culture in their yearning for Indian writings. Indian literature in English suffers because of the tendency to inflate, ethnicise, exoticise, present, explain or package India for foreign audiences.

It is necessary to bear in mind the gulf separating East and West, the distance between the two cultural poles impacts on relationships between culture and ideology and how

writing aimed at different targets is likely to be questioned or even rejected by a Western-oriented public. The fact that the vast majority of Indian novels read in the West are originally written in English itself is indicative of current tendencies. This vast majority is then represented by novels written by Indian diasporic writers, those Indians whose identity has to a greater extent come to terms with the West than has happened for those who remained at home and kept writing in their regional languages, and are works written by authors who have greater access to media exposure and are better marketed. This is why all Indian novelists who win international renown are authors who write in English and those who have acted as crossover agents between the two cultural poles.

4.1 Cultural affiliation of the text

Pier Paulo Piciucco asserts that a novelists' affiliation to the East or the West can be discussed in terms of their use of techniques revealing a more emotional stress, thereby conferring on the work an epic ring, or keeping a more detached tone which enables them to make use of irony. Some critics suggest that post-colonialism is best conceived of as a reading practice. They argue that the postcoloniality of a text resides in its discursive features, and that modes of representation such as allegory or irony are transformed as a practice by the development of a post-colonial discourse within which they construct counter-discursive rather then homologous views of the world.

Indian postcolonial narratives are mongrelised fictions in that they constantly combine the novelistic and epic form (in the Bakhtinian sense), in the same way they speak for the East and the West (Piciucco 2004: 37). Bakhtin argues that the world of the epic is the national heroic past: it is a world of 'beginnings' and 'peak times' in the national history, a world of fathers and founders of families, a world of 'firsts' and 'bests' (Bakhtin: 1980, 13). Memory plays a crucial and dominant role in the construction of episodes … memory as opposed to knowledge is the source and power of the creative impulse (15). We see this combination of form in Coovadia's writing, for example in the reasons for Ismet's decision to leave India: to escape the weight of history, to gain the love of the most beautiful woman in the world and to be the founder of a new race.

In the postcolonial literary traditions authors write back to classic English texts with the intent to subvert the Western canonical centre. Shashi Tharoor's *Great Indian Novel* is postcolonial in its intent to question the imperialist assumptions, to deconstruct and to dismantle canonical models through parody. However, for Tripathi (1994: 124 in Capello 2004: 56), Tharoor's novel does not go beyond the mere caricature and the grotesque, making his text neither a good, postmodern historiographic meta-fiction, nor a true literary text in the postcolonial tradition. This holds true for Coovadia's work as well.

Tharoor's novel, *The Great Indian Novel*, like the *Mahabharata*, is structured into eighteen chapters several of which show clear references to well-known literary works in India, references which parody illustrious works. Tharoor's intertextuality conforms to postmodernist attitudes with the use of parody, irony, rebellion and intertextuality. According to Umberto Eco's textual philosophy, a text is always the rewriting of/through other texts and nothing said is ever completely new. Thus a text appears as a confluence of themes, subjects and topics coming from other texts. *The Great Indian Novel* appears as a collage of themes, ideas, styles and registers. Prose and poetry alternate, myth switches to reality, high style gives way to vulgar tone, history, art, mathematics, philosophy, facts of life and thoughts on language become indissoluble parts of the novel (58). If this intertextuality brought Tharoor much acclaim from the academic world, there are also scholars who did not regard it as a positive literary choice which does not go beyond the mere stylistic exercise. Being a subversive history, the predominant style and tone is that of parody and polemic. The narrator's attitude as an ironic observer means he has no emotional involvement in the experience of the nation and therefore the story does not involve the reader emotionally (Choudhury 1994: 58 in Capello 58). Similarly, Coovadia can be critiqued for his use of postmodern intertextuality, cyclical narratives and detached narrators.

4.2 Mimicry

The growth of Empire and the study of English are intrinsically bound together. Literature was made central to the cultural enterprise of empire and the value of the peripheral, the marginal, the uncanonised was denied. So when elements of the

periphery threatened the centre they were rapidly incorporated. According to Said, this was a process of conscious affiliation, a mimicry of the centre proceeding from the desire not only to be accepted but to be adopted and absorbed, causing those from the periphery to immerse themselves in the imported culture, denying their origins in an attempt to become 'more English than the English.' (Said: 1984 in Ashcroft et al 1989: 4)

Coovadia explores issues of mimicry, authenticity and assimilation of those on cultural borders. The friendship between Ismet and Vikram crosses religious cultural lines. Vikram, Ismet's friend, talks to him of the need for Indians to be united in order to be successful in SA. Ismet is skeptical of such nationalistic and ethnic essentialism, knowing the reality of India to be very different, thus refuting to accept the myth of homogeneity of the homeland as it is distanced from him. With migration however, the Indians had to brave significant identity shifts from the caste system in India to that of a servile underclass in South Africa. Thus, there is a slow emergence of ethnocentricity in Ismet and Khateja, an identity is constructed based on difference from 'others'.

Ismet's desire for the colonial culture is expressed in the mimicry of the Englishman's style of clothing and manner of speech. According to Ayub Sheik, in the ambivalent nature of mimicry, the notion of being almost the same but not quite is used to liberate the immigrant from his role of colonial subject. The immigrant in mimicry emerges as a representation of a reformed, recognisable 'other', immediately recognisable for his shortcomings and excesses. Since his partial likeness can never be taken seriously he is cast as a comic figure oscillating between sameness and difference. While the colonialists perceive the mimicry as a visual representation and affirmation of their power, mimicry also reflects the recalcitrance against the regulations of colonial control. The immigrant is a colonial subject and at the same time participating in an illegitimate exercise of power (Sheik 2004: 193); the civilising mission of colonialism is displaced by the gaze of its disciplinary double. Mimicry is at once resemblance and menace, disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse and disrupting its authority. And so only mimicry or parody remain for the departed colonial, doubly deceived in that he imitates an imitation of an imitation, like the familiar character of the Indian immigrant in London. Yet, Coovadia does not explore the development of

an ethnic consciousness as a basis of solidarity against hostility towards Indians, as there is little indication of the existence of such hostility, even though the novel is set during the period of colonialism and segregation.

Like Naipaul's conclusion to *In a Free State*, *The Wedding* concludes with Dickens' 'circus people', the writer finds himself surrounded by people of various nationalities, finally 'at home'. For Naipaul, US hegemony is alluded to as taking over the cycle of empires from the distant past. Those who imagine themselves to be in a 'free state' are in reality the prisoners of the colonial experience; each is a citizen of a world that offers neither security nor fulfillment, and each attempt to relocate leads to misunderstanding and further dislocation. For Coovadia however, it points to the fluidity of identity of the cosmopolitan migrant.

4.3 Naipaul's writing and its critique

For V.S. Naipul the cultures of the new and old worlds alike are insufficient. They offer no escape, nor a redefinition of his place in the world. It is the condition of exile that defines the individual; the rest seems illusory. To this extent Naipaul situates himself within a (post)modernist tradition, whose formal inventiveness and experimentation, whose concentration on the power of language, seem to come from a parallel experience of dislocation and cultural rootlessness. Trapped by this sense of existential ambiguity, Naipaul became one of the severest critics of his own world, 'a borrowed culture' as he calls it. Naipaul's corrosive criticism of post-independence societies set him apart from other postcolonial writers, for while many question and challenge the status quo, Naipaul lacks allegiance to the reconstruction of cultural values that engages most writers, for whom commitment is the most important issue.

Naipaul's impression of colonial societies shocked and dismayed West Indians at home and aboard for its dismissal of Caribbean culture, history and society. Even more upsetting was the enthusiastic reception it received from English and US critics, who praised its critical detachment and descriptive power. While other writers have also become increasingly critical of post-independence societies, they still express a powerful and intimate sense of belonging to a specific, living culture. George Lamming observed of Naipaul's work, 'His books can't move beyond castrated satire; and although satire may be a useful element in fiction, no important work … can rest

safely on satire alone. When such a writer is a colonial, ashamed of his cultural background and striving like mad to prove himself through promotion to the peaks of a 'superior' culture whose values are gravely in doubt, then satire is for me nothing more than a refuge (Lamming: 1960, 225). The generalising, cynical and sarcastic tone in Naipaul's writing is what offended those who felt themselves part of a rising nationalist movement of the post-colonial period, and whose writing contributed towards it. It is as if Naipaul was stuck within what Fanon called the first phase of interaction between the metropolitan and cosmopolitan cultures – successfully assimilating European modes of expression, but not going on to assert an identity, much less becoming Fanon's revolutionary 'awakener of the people'.

4.4 Rushdie's writing and its critique

Pier Paulo Piciucco has related the form of Rushdie's texts to his cultural affiliations. According to Picucco, Rushdie's novels are positioned on the border line between the opposing poles of the novel and epic, resulting in the ambiguity of his ideological position, the multiplicity of its voice, its cultural hybridity, and the magic realist distinctiveness of his writing. Although he overtly shapes his texts as epics dealing with the history of the East, his fiction is directly tied to the Western canon because he employs modes, techniques and aesthetic criteria of the novel. Rushdie's subjectification of the epic in negotiating between national and personal experience, his violation of the sacred past, his reducing the distance between the 'absolute past' of the epic and the narrating present, his centering the narrator's word instead of the hero's deeds at the core of the narrative, are all attributes of *Midnight's Children* that give us an idea of the heavy remoulding the epic form has gone through in Rushdie's hands.

More can be said about the subversion of the epic form in terms of the rhetoric employed: there is a radical switch from the elevated style of sacred legend to the playful, frivolous, trivial rendering of Rushdie's narrative. What Ahmad says focusing on *Shame* can be applied to *Midnight's Children* and to Rushdie's fictional corpus in general, 'The problem is that those parts of the book which attempt to create fictional equivalents of the literary facts of recent Pakistani history tend too much toward parody, while many of the other parts tend too much toward burlesque. Both the parody and the burlesque are at times delicious, inventive, hilarious, but in re-creating

the major strands of contemporary history in the form of a spoof, and then mixing up this spoof with all kinds of spooky anecdotes whose symbolic value is sometimes unclear and often excessive, Rushdie has given us a laughter which laughs, unfortunately, too often.' (Ahmad 1992: 141 in Piciucco 2004: 43)

Rushdie's impulse to laughter is the phase that proves his ascendency from Western rather than Eastern models. His texts employ the criteria on which the original model of the Western novel were founded, 'For the first time, the subject of serious literary representations (although, it is true, at the same time comical) is portrayed without any distance, on the level of contemporary reality, in a zone of direct and even crude contact…Of special significance in this process of demolishing distance is the comical origin of these genres: they derive from folklore (popular laughter). It is precisely laughter that destroys the epic, and in general destroys any hierarchical (distancing and valorised) distance. As a distanced image a subject cannot be comical; to be made comical it must be brought close. Everything that makes us laugh is close at hand, all comical creativity works in a zone of maximal proximity. Laughter has the remarkable power of making an object come up close … Laughter demolishes fear and piety before an object (Bakhtin: 1980, 22-3 in Piciucco 2004: 44).

This passage is relevant because it proves Rushdie's adherence to the aesthetic rules of the novel genre and also it corroborates the impression that his novels acquire such a resonance among Western academic circles and audiences because his humorous reverberations alleviate the innate fear of the West for the unknown – hence mysterious, fascinating, frightening – Orient. 'Rushdie's narration is valorised at the cost of the world he narrates.' (Leela Gandhi 1998: 158) Free from the fear of the Orient, Western readers can safely turn to Rushdie's pages and experience the intellectual pleasure of a sophisticated narrator leading them in and out of a world which will amuse them without end. According to Khair, while Rushdie's novels teem with accidents, illness, amputations, and torture, all this suffering remains on the level of thought, of 'idea'. (Khair: 2001, 285) Rushdie's writing do not require any emotional engagement from his readers, all that is emotionally engaging is the chosen target of the narrative voice's ridicule. What is therefore sad is that his being considered the most representative Indian writer today can also be seen as a mix resulting from the admiration for his extraordinary affabulatory skills on the one hand,

and a never suppressed diffidence towards the Orient on the reader's part on the other. Therefore Huggan says, '*Midnight's Children* has been successful because its author has catered, or even pandered, to the exoticist predilections of his Western metropolitan public.' (Huggan 2001: 72)

Other novels tagged as exotic which have also been hugely successful are *The God of Small Things* and *A Suitable Boy*. They were marketed on the basis of their exotic provenance. Furthermore both novels focus on a typical Indian love story; an inter-caste affair and the husband's choice in accepting or rejecting a set of secular norms, like *The Wedding*. As Huggan rightly points out in *The Postcolonial Exotic*, the Eurocentric mindset is trained to read these stories as exotic; the Orient is a romantic land where dream-like affairs can magically materialise. The Western matrix of postcolonial studies therefore tends to appropriate Indian fiction. When Indian authors write novels which have epic reverberations and contribute to creating cultural roots, such discourses are often likely to be misunderstood because Western-oriented criticism appropriates them by assimilating the Indian voice to a Eurocentric/colonialist representation of the Orient and again failing to recognise the cultural gap (Piciucco 2004: 45-48)

4.5 Critique applied to Coovadia

Indian writers in English tend to essentialise India through evocation of local colour or standard signifiers, and readers are more interested in romanticised pictures of India. Bharati Mukherjee vociferously declared in a recent lecture: 'I am an American writer in the American mainstream, trying to extend it. I am not an Indian writer, not an exile, not an expatriate. I am an immigrant. My investment is in the American reality, not the Indian' (in Mandal 2004: 133). Coovadia's position is very similar. Yet reading both authors' novels it is obvious that they do not practise what they preach, showing that while changing citizenships is easy, swapping cultures is not.

Equalising differences can be read as a strategy of containment, masking the ideologies of the text. Sara Ahmed calls for an analysis of the ways in which potentially transgressive tactics can be managed in such a way that they are rendered unthreatening (Ahmed: 1999, 89). Stuart Hall cites Benetton as an example of a general proliferation of ethnic images within Britain's popular culture which

constitutes ‘a kind of difference that doesn’t make a difference of any kind’ (Hall 1996: 467). In Coovadia’s work, the elision of race and class difference, and the apparent corroboration of the ideological binary opposition of the global and the local all lead to a depoliticisation of the construction of space and suppression of all its conditions of production. Rather than deconstructing any homogeneous notion of movement across geographical space, through their circumvention of the issue of class and the interrelations of class and location, the representations of travel in the texts fail to move significantly beyond an elite, cosmopolitan construction of dislocation.

The following criticism leveled at Naipaul by Maja-Pearce can, to a certain extent, be applied to Coovadia’s: ‘Everything is reduced to farce, derision... No one denies that many of the perversions of modern Africa are absurd…But our laughter [at it’s tyrants] is tempered by the knowledge of the suffering they cause, suffering which affects real people who feel real pain. The laughter of Naipaul isn’t tempered by this knowledge … This is what offends. And the key to his attitude lies in his worship of the West and Western tradition’ (Maja-Pearce 1985: 114-116).

The questions whether one can be considered an Indian writer by virtue of one’s birth alone, and whether it is the literature or passport that makes one Indian must be addressed. Being Indian does not preclude one from being a New Yorker or a cosmopolitan citizen of the world with access to other cultures. For many writers of Indian descent, there seems to be a notion that writing fiction, for an Indian, must involve a pre-occupation with one’s own identity or roots. Not so for Coovadia who proclaims entertainment rather than instruction as the proper aim of fiction. Chapter five will deal with the implications thereof.

Chapter five: Findings

5.1 The shortcomings of migrant literature

Imraan Coovadia's biography positions him in the category of elite, migrant writers; he was born and raised in a medical family in Durban, though this upbringing was interspersed with year-long sojourns in Birmingham, London, and Melbourne, Australia. He attended Hilton College, outside Pietermaritzburg, and then studied in the United States, first at Harvard where he majored in philosophy and later, at Yale as a graduate student in English.

Crucial to the analysis of his writing is the background of the author. Coovadia is a man of many cultures, brought up and educated abroad, with a highly Western education. Balaswamy describes Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* as 'a splendid debut by the London-born-India-grown-American-educated author (1994: 229 in Capello 2004: 57) and Coovadia can be similarly described. It is when you are born somewhere, brought up somewhere else and educated in a third place that you feel you are in a 'liminal position' as Bhabha terms it, which makes you question your identity. A diasporic identity suffers the oftentimes imposed spatial one and creates a desire to reinvent and rewrite home.

The interest in Coovadia's *The Wedding* centres not on the liminality of the Indian settler, on his anxieties of ethnicity, but rather on his continuous crossing of ethnic and cultural boundaries. The Indians who have made south Africa their home, whether Hindu or Muslim, may be rooted in cultural traditions which originated in India, but they do not look back at India or return. Ismet had left India because it had nothing to offer the young, hopeful and deserving.

Just as Coovadia's narrators in both his novels live between cultures, the sense of being caught between cultures can be seen to reflect his own predicament. Coovadia's writing highlights the subjective, personal element of the postcolonial world. A sense of the transcultural informs much of his work, whether in the form of migration, international displacement or the personal search for his family's past. His work heightens a sense of a world which is not ordered and fixed, but relative, composed of various perspectives and histories. Coovadia's work challenges the usefulness of such

pure definitions as Eastern or Western and his ability to cross cultural and imaginative boundaries can be read as a way of emphasising the pluralistic nature of transcultural writers.

For Coovadia, the concept of identity is very complex; his identity is shaped by and also in three different spaces: India, South Africa and America. Socially he is rooted in America where he was residing while writing, historically he belongs to South Africa, the place he grew up, and his origins are in India as the land of his ancestors. His multiple identities allow a reconfiguration of cultures, converting the creative urge into a transfigured social model of text. Text provides the diaspora, its lost cultures, space and boundaries where they can engage in the political as well as in the artistic act of culture formation. The loss of culture results in the creation of a new culture in the text, restoring the primacy of the word, 'the bliss of language' (Coovadia 2006: blurb).

For the diaspora the lost space always appears to be a utopia, places of paradise; flowers, rain, sun, sunset. The host space gives them the status of a guest, never an insider. They cannot be natural citizens, and their green-card status inevitably places them down the ladder. But for Coovadia, diaspora has created an inevitable situation to which he has to rivet himself. This involves an act of acculturation. It is the only way to escape the status of the 'other'. This act involves the conscious erasure of one's identity in order to merge with the mainstream.

Coming from an affluent background, Coovadia belonged to a particular subculture within the multicultural, multilayered society of South Africa, a subculture permeated with a sense of difference. Coovadia is not daunted by the sense that he's confronting a powerful culture to which he is denied access. Perhaps the way India is imagined in *The Wedding* is partly due to the double-distancing of Coovadia's personal circumstance, his South African-American diasporic identity, which accounts for his lack of first-hand knowledge and experience of what it means to be Indian.

One of the themes in Indian-South African fiction is the uncovering of the old, submerged interaction and commonality between India and South Africa, which, as in *The Wedding*, surfaces through the tension between the diasporic need for memories

of India and the acceptance of the hybrid status of the contemporary Indian South African. The gendered meanings of home or recreating home in the context of migration and diaspora, emerge in the text through issues around cooking, objects and "family." When Ismet and Khateja arrive in Durban, they unpack and "…India, multifold, many-fingered, articulated, cloth-covered India issue[s] from their luggage," (Coovadia 2001: 148) in the form of objects such as an old Koran and Ismet's father's walking stick. For Coovadia, these objects construct India as a portable country, a construction that is further enacted through family ritual and food. Coovadia positions the Indian diaspora as a recreation of cultural phenomena in diverse locations. Ismet centralises food as the mechanism through which he is able to connect to India. The irony of Ismet's focus on food is that India was in fact marked by the absence of food due to the culinary impasse of Rashida and Khateja, but this memory is sanitised and reinvented in a new context. Coovadia is thereby exposing the romanticisation of homeland that occurs through migration, which is often marked by the disjuncture between memory and past experience (Frenkel-Fainman 2008: 14).

It is the consciousness of cultural hybridity that informs Coovadia's texts in exploring the way the lives of the people from Indian settlers to European colonials constantly intertwine. The story of each individual is made to include that of the other, in a history that joins together past, present and future, India, Africa and the West. This is achieved through the act of narration, negotiating new forms of being in these 'contact zones' where disparate cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other.

Coovadia has resisted being classified an Indian or Muslim writer. In an interview with Jeanne Hromnik (2006: 37) Coovadia, when asked about his identity as a South African, responds 'Who are my people? Which ones? Which ones aren't?' He resists the notion of community saying that the concept of a group always obscures the more important relationships involved. He further states that seeing things from an Indian or Muslim perspective is having the nature of one's thought coloured entirely by birth, culture and history.

Nor can Coovadia be easily categorised as a 'South African' writer. Ashcroft et al note that South African postcolonial literature has clear affinities with those of Australia, Canada and New Zealand, while Black South African literature is

comparable to that of other African countries. The common themes of the literature of settler colonies – exile, finding and defining 'home', physical and emotional confrontations with the new land, dispossession, cultural fragmentation, colonial and postcolonial domination, and the crisis of identity still emerge, but are muted by an involvement in race politics (Ashcroft 1989: 26) Chetty elaborates on this point to say that the question of race and identity is central to South African texts. The invasion of the private realm by politics meant that even writers who might usually have ignored politics were forced to deal with it (Chetty 2004: 147).

For Frenkel-Fainman, it is in this sense that we can examine what it means to be Indian in South Africa at different times:

> 'When Ismet and Khateja arrive in Durban, they move into an apartment building on Queen Street, in a predominantly Indian neighborhood, that is partly owned by Vikram and Pravina Naidoo, who also live in the building and become their "family." While Ismet is concerned about fitting into the community due to Khateja's undiplomatic nature, it is his own ideas that are forced to change. Ismet had no intention of 'coming with stories' as Vikram says, not because of some nationalistic impulse but because of his desire to fit in. When he goes to work at the Birmingham fruit company, he immediately encounters a different aspect of national inclusiveness in the form of Roderick Campbell's racist ideas. 'The subtleties of national consciousness that bridge difference are highlighted in these dual processes of national inclusiveness: Vikram's Gandhi-esque advice to Ismet that South Africa is a place where the entrenched differences of India are to be overridden occurs in the context of Indianness as it begins to become a language of both race and nation. On another level, the reformulation of self that occurs in diasporic communities could also be a factor in this development of a communal Indian identity in South Africa' (Frenkel-Fainamn 2008: 16).

In the process of migration, the perception of self image changes with the influence of new experiences, both at an individual and group level. The Indians did not possess a strong sense of their ethnicity prior to movement but were overwhelmed by confrontation with an alternate ethnic awareness which labeled and relegated them to a stereotyped 'other'. In his reference to Gandhi's conviction that each separate subcontinental belonged to the same nationality, Coovadia is thus building on Anderson's notion of the nation as an imagined community beyond territorial boundaries, and alluding to the ethno-nationalist thinking that supports the construction of diaspora. A number of South African writers of Indian origin, like Coovadia, aim in their writing to discourage nostalgic nationalism and cultural exclusivism and are concerned that attention may be diverted from the problems of a contemporary society.

While there is, therefore, an engagement with race politics in Coovadia's work, it emerges as glib comment and political cynicism, characteristic of migrant writing. For instance, in *Green-eyed Thieves* Firoze says: 'There is no such thing as a completely innocent South African.' Above all, Coovadia is a cosmopolitan writer whose work needs to be analysed within that framework. A 'non-elite' cosmopolitanism and nationalist writing are proposed as two alternative models, better suited to the aims of postcolonial literature.

5.2 Non-elite cosmopolitanism

Bruce Robbins work on cosmopolitanism focuses on Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* as an example of 'non-elite cosmopolitanism' , where cosmopolitanism is not just a reflection of global capital but can incorporate national and local interests too (Robbins 1999: 100 in Ahmed 2004: 81). In Ghosh's *The Glass Palace*, the two main characters of the rival Indian and Burmese families are seen together at the end of the book in a sweet embrace. Such a final reconciliation symbolises the end of a transcultural and transnational journey Ghosh wants to make outside the West, in search of people who inhabit a space or resistance to colonial and imperial power. *The Glass Palace* is a scathing critique of British colonialism in which the narrative construction shows the heart of national communities, their most human and spiritual aspects (Zullo 2004: 68). We do not have a sense of such reconciliation in the ending of the love story of *The Wedding*; in fact, we have the very opposite where Khateja is ultimately betrayed by Ismet taking a second wife. Nor is there a reconciliation between the brothers, and what each represents, at the end of *Green-eyed Thieves*.

Zullo looks at Amitav Ghosh's oeuvre focusing on the way his works explore an increasingly connected but not homogenous world, of movement across frontiers, so that 'we need to think of ourselves beyond the nation' (Appadurai 2000: 158 in Zullo: 61). Ghosh is always trying to subvert and problematise the categories of nationalism, neo-nationalism and anti-colonialism within the East-West theme, so as to transform it altogether. In *The Shadow Lines*, the narrator says that all communities are imagined or narrated and we all live in stories that have to be recalled and retold to make them part of our identity, again recalling Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*, where the process of recalling the memories of the nation and writing

its biography is considered to be vital for the integrity of its identity (Anderson 1983: 325). In The *Shadow Lines*, there is an obsessive recording of names and dates, reflecting a postcolonial need to investigate identities formed across different worlds. The mapping and naming of people and places becomes an operation of self-construction and self-discovery. Whereas Coovadia is operating from the same premise, his lack of attention to historical accuracy makes his work less authentic.

Ghosh writes about people from distant places who are linked by universal feelings of cosmopolitanism, as a way to subvert the usual binaries between East and West and to form transnational communities. Edward Said criticises nationalism, maintaining that intellectuals should be in favour 'of the larger, more generous human realities of communities among culture, people and societies. This community is the real human liberation portended by the resistance to Imperialism' (Said 1993: 262). Ghosh always looks for possible alternatives to certain visions of the world entrapped in colonial binaries and the essential conceptions of culture, history and politics. His subaltern stories offer an original counter narrative of nation and coloniality in terms of re-evaluation of human participation in non-official history and the efforts of ordinary people to break down the divisions imposed by imperialism and colonisation. Politics, wars and traumatic evolutions of the nation deeply affect the characters lives that are equally distributed by the author in three countries in *The Shadow Lines*, so that each character is remembered not as Burmeses, Indian or Malaysian, but as Uma, Dolly and so on. It is only a dialectical conception of global and local, where the specificities of place and the tiny threads that form the trajectories of ordinary lives are seen in the context of the gigantic tapestry of which they are part that could lead to an engaged and political representation of space (Ghosh 1992: 95). Coovadia's texts can be praised as rediscovering of the ordinary, retelling familiar stories from a novel perspective, but it is the specificities of having lived those 'ordinary' lives that are absent from his work. These specificities are to be found in more regional, nationalist writings.

5.3 The strengths of nationalist writing

In sharp contrast to migrant or transnationalist writing, nationalist writing presents the very distinctive features of history, society, economics and race; an experience of multiculturalism in which not everything is likely to be understood by every reader

and their meaningfulness is a function of their unintelligibility (Dasenbrock 1987 in Ashcroft et al 1989: 220). Boehmer's argument for nationalist writing as the 'other' of migrant writing is important and therefore summarised here at length.

Boehmer points out that despite its hybridity, postcolonial literature may be a zone that is ultimately not accessible to the Western reader (1995: 242). Postcolonial writers may at times introduce an untranslatable strangeness into their work, so emphasising its borderline position, situated within and without Western traditions. The writing of decolonisation is much more than postmodern slippage and disintegration, and exceeds the hybridity for which it is so acclaimed; the postcolonial text also emerges out of the grit and rank specificity of a local culture or cultures, history or histories. That specific culture or history may not be immediately comprehensible to a foreign reader even though an ahistorical hybridity is set up as a universal category bracketing together writing from very different countries (244).

Boehmer contends that cultures in relationship will always experience difficulty in completely understanding each other. This is not to say that a society is enclosed within its own structure of values, but that certain cultures remain inaccessible or there exists a partial opacity between different conceptual worlds. Furthermore as Gayatri Spivak and others have stressed, indigenous religious, moral and intellectual traditions in colonised countries were never as fully pervaded by colonialism as the authorities may have desired (245). In homogenising writers and text from different continents, nations and cultures together indiscriminately as being migrant or polyphonic, Western postcolonial approaches are once again projecting metropolitan conceptual patterns onto the rest of the world, creating a situation that bears an uncanny resemblance to orientalism. In its all-embracing, totalising response to other cultures, the discourse takes what it needs for its own theoretical purposes and disregards what is seen as incomprehensible (247).

Boehmer concludes that while the neo-imperial world continues to camouflage the reality, a certain incommensurability of historical worlds has to be conceded. So despite the globalised McDonalds, Coca-Cola culture, cultures are not always mutually intelligible; obscurities and silences will still exist. Thus, hybridised and objectifying Western representations cannot give us an accurate reflection(247).

‘No country or people are as knowable as a migrant novel might lead us to think’ (246). The specificity of that country or people is necessary in doing justice to understanding the text. To avoid neo-orientalism, postcolonial writing must be more adequately addressed through a serious recognition of difference; an acceptance that postcolonial realities are far more diverse than the critical approach of postmodernism could hope to describe. Postcolonial texts represent locally rooted perceptions, demanding work from postcolonial readers (248). We need to develop an awareness; an ability to locate texts in their own specific worlds of meaning. For people living in ex-colonies, the signifiers of home, self, past, and identity, far from being arbitrary postmodern notions, are live and pressing issues. Said’s notion of the secular intellectual becomes important here; the job of writers and critics is to bring to light the lived experiences of the past in order to improve the present and future of these people.

Ashcroft et al conclude that postcolonial literature is about a void, a psychological abyss between cultures (1989: 63). Cultural details serve not as local colour but as the central feature detailing this void. Canadian author Dennis Lee sees the exploration of this gap, its acceptance as the legitimate subject matter of the postcolonial, rather than a sign of failure and inauthenticity, as the crucial act of appropriation and challenge of the postcolonial writer (Lee: 1974 in Ashcroft et al: 63).

If hybridity is one extreme of postcolonialism, then cultural distinctiveness is the other. Asserting difference from the colonial centre can be done in a number of ways, such as using non-English vocabulary, depicting specific cultural practices or alluding to indigeneous literatures or oral traditions. Difference then is a way of asserting a specific culture in opposition to the stereotypes which made up a picture of empire. The effect can be to create a ‘distance’ or ‘gap’ between the text and the reader who is not familiar with what is depicted. This distance is significant because of the uncertainty and ambiguity it creates. Such gaps in understanding reflect those aspects of different cultures which are unbridgeable, absence which lies at the interface between two cultures.

Language variance is a feature of all postcolonial texts, where the language is appropriated but strategies to maintain distance and otherness are employed. Ashcroft et al discuss how postcolonial writing abrogates the centrality of English by using language to signify difference while employing a sameness which allows it to be understood (1989: 51). It uses language variance to take control of the language:

> 'Language variance is metonymic of cultural difference where variance itself becomes the metonym. The use of foreign words, for instance, has an important role in inscribing difference. They signify a certain cultural experience which they cannot hope to reproduce but whose difference is validated by the new situation. They are directly metonymic of that cultural difference which is imputed by language variance. 'Thus the untranslated words, the sounds and textures of the language can be held to have the power and presence of the culture they signify – to be metaphoric in their inference of identity and totality' (52).

Language may therefore serve to install the gap between cultures as its dominant metonymic referent. This constructed gap consolidates the difference of the postcolonial text; the signs of identity and of difference are shown to be always a matter of construction, not representation.

Similarly, allusion can perform the same function of registering cultural difference in the postcolonial text where the process of allusion instills linguistic distance itself as the subject of the text (57). The process of allusion, though the use of untranslated words for example, reconfirms the absence which lies at the point of interface between the two cultures. By developing specific ways of constituting cultural difference and simultaneously bridging it, the postcolonial text indicates that it is the gap rather than the experience which is created by language. The maintenance of this 'gap' is profoundly important to its ethnographic function, where a new set of presuppositions resulting from the interchange of cultures is taken for the cultural reality of the 'other' – the text creates the reality of the 'other' in the guise of describing it (58-59). In light of this argument, we can then analyse the authenticity of migrant texts like Coovadia's.

5.4 Authenticity

To what extent can a piece of writing be seen to reflect or convey truly a particular moment or event? Postcolonial literatures offers us fictions, such as Rushdie's 'Indias of the mind', which have been constructed and selected, and are not accurate,

complete representations of the world. How authentic is a work that operates on the border between fact and fiction, history and literature?

A modern writer, like Coovadia, stands in an interpretive space; his cultural location 'creates' two audiences and faces two directions, wishing to reconstitute experience through an act of writing which uses the tools of one culture and yet seeks to remain faithful to the experience of another.

Coovadia's novels, if contrasted with the more explicitly realistic and political work of other South African writers of Indian origin, can be criticised as being overly fictional and allegorical, the work of an academic. His work has a distinctly 'literary' quality. Certainly, at one level, the novel is a reworking of Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*. However without calling into question the assumptions and values that are embedded in Shakespeare's work, such a novel could be regarded as merely a literary game. In both texts, the story is sufficiently located in recent history to seem real, and sufficiently generalised to seem representative. But even Coovadia concedes that the book is historically inaccurate with regard to such details as the date of arrival of the narrator's grandparents. Coovadia has left out everything that is too disturbing, too unpleasant. Only very briefly does he confront the scale of the misery, dirt and squalor as the consequences of the desperate poverty that grips much of the nation.

Most expatriate writers have a weak grasp of actual conditions in contemporary India, and tend to recreate it through the lens of nostalgia. The fact that Coovadia's India and South Africa are 'imaginary homelands', written after he had emigrated to the US, mean that his version of both places are thus implausible and inauthentic.

History and representation assume importance incidentally. Coovadia offers a blend of the fictional with actual historical characters and events. The main characters are invented, but interact with the political activist Yusuf Dadoo and the setting of the Casbah in Durban is very real and Gandhi is cited. The mix of fact and fiction is a complex one, but while some writers like Vikram Seth attain an authentic picture of place, Coovadia's falls short. Coovadia's characters exist in a vacuum, with little or no contact with other 'real' South African characters. While his evocation of place is colourful and interesting, it remains a textual construct and is not a convincing

representation of life in the Casbah in Durban or Fordsburg. It is a partial picture for it is created from memory and from the longing to regain and reconstruct what is lost – home, the home of the imagination. But unlike other writers where nostalgia is overlaid with despair, Coovadia does not display a sense of loss.

Coovadia's work defies any categorisation into the prevalent fictional modes adopted by other diasporic writers, such as the widely used realist modern autobiographical fiction, the historical novel, or magic realism. That the language of market forces has come to affect the body of contemporary literature in a great way is another disturbing phenomenon. A readership is being created by offering them exotic tit-bits to titillate them.

Coovadia's narrative, whether third or first person, is not convincing that the perspective of the narrator is from within. Instead we detect a detached and objective tone of a narrator which idealises, exoticises, belittles or undermines the values of the culture it is presenting, very similar to Foster in *A Passage to India*, which criticises colonialism yet maintains certain colonial assumptions. We are being introduced to a community – its history, myths and culture, by a voice that doesn't belong to it. In Coovadia's work, we have an allusive, ironic, indirect, postmodernist narrative which deals with the contemporary postcolonial world and characters from a multitude of backgrounds. It is hard to extricate Coovadia from his shadowy, disengaged narrative voice or the depoliticised cosmopolitanism of his texts.

It is telling that *Green-eyed Thieves* is based not on Coovadia's own childhood memories of Fordsburg as he visited it *once* as a child, but on the childhood memories of his editor Shaun de Waal. In Coovadia's work India and South Africa, like Trinidad and India in Naipaul's work, feature as points of contact, of questioning, rather that as either home or destination. A sense of place in a writer's work refers to descriptions of scenery, cities and journeys, to an awareness that different political and physical geographies shape people's lives, but in broader terms, a sense of place can be seen as a cultural identity, a landscape of tradition that can give a writer clarity and purpose, becoming one of the means by which literature defines its continuing part in a changing world. It follows that a sense of displacement has profound political implications for those writing in a postcolonial society. But searching for roots might

sometimes lead a writer to find something more unsettling than that identity. In Coovadia's fiction we see a philosophical rather than political assertion that no one can ever reach a sense of wholeness, that identity is always fluid and fragmented.

5.5 Conclusion

Coovadia's work can be viewed as a response to the totalising view of Indians and Muslims that still finds expression in the neo-imperial world we live in, particularly in the aftermath of the September 11 bombings. While *The Wedding* is very much about recovering his own story or his history, written after he had emigrated to the US, *Green-eyed Thieves* sees him engaging with more political issues of race, religion and 'otherness'. However, as a migrant writer who straddles more than one culture, writing from that in-between space, while providing him with generative writing material, also means he is not 'at home' in either space. His Indian, Muslim origins are at odds with his life as a contemporary Western academic. His texts can be seen as an attempt to bridge this divide.

The fact that his work has been so well received is indicative at his success in bridging the gap between cultures in creating multicultural texts that his readers can appreciate. His strategy to bridge the gap is to represent Indians and Muslims as equal to their Western counterparts, to convince the world that they are just as human and the same as everyone else – equalising differences.

In the process of writing this dissertation, the 2009 war on Gaza has come to a devastating end. It is necessary for us to consider what the role of literature is in a world where, clearly, all are not equal. A serious recognition of difference in order to lead to a deeper understanding of different cultures seems to be the best way forward for postcolonial writers to achieve the aims of the genre – to write back to and subvert the continued process of imperialism.

Suggestions for further study in this field

It may be useful to compare how two writers have responded to an historical event or period, or to make a comparative study of two texts which are relevant to the same region; for instance Aziz Hassim's *Lotus People* and *The Wedding*, which both deal with the experiences of Indian immigrants living in the Casbah area in Durban, and

discuss issues of representation and perspective and the relationship between the texts. This will introduce the debate of national and transnational writing into the field of South African literature.

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