The Ambivalence of Indianness in Ahmed Essop's *The Hajji and Other Stories*

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Abstract This article explores the ambivalence of Indianness in Ahmed Essop's debut collection of short stories, *The Hajji and Other Stories*, 1978, against the contested discourse of the nation. The article is underpinned by Bhabha's theory of nation and narration, specifically the authenticity and context of cultural location and representation. The image of cultural authority, like that of the Hajji, is ambivalent because it is caught in the act of trying to compose a powerful and religious figure, but stuck in the performativity of typical South African racial, class and religious prejudice. Essop's ambivalent narration evokes the margins of the South African space, the Indian minority; it is also a celebratory or self-marginalisation space. The ambivalence of the characters resonates across the collection—the insincerity of the Fordsburg community towards Moses and the two sisters; the deceitful Hajji Musa, the hypocrisy of Molvi Haroon seeking refuge with the perpetrator of blasphemy against the Prophet, Dr Kamal's pretence of having virtues and the charade of the yogi. In essence, the characters display virtues of Indianness and Muslim/Hindu piety that they do not actually possess.

Key words Ambivalence; Ahmed Essop; Indianness; The Hajji; South African Indian writings

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Introduction

South African writer, Ahmed Essop (1931-2019) is best known for his widely anthologised short story, "The Hajji." The collection from which the story comes and to which it lends its name, signalled a significant talent who was concerned

with figuring out life in Fordsburg, a suburb in Johannesburg where the descendants of Indian migrants lived (Fick). Essop's short stories were written during the interregnum between Sharpeville and Soweto and appeared in alternative journals that flourished during the 1970s: "Mr Moonreddy" was published in *New South African Writing*, "Ten Years" in *Classic*, "Gerty's Brother" and "In the train" in *Purple Renoster*, "The Hajji" in *Contrast*, "Hajji Musa and the Hindu Fire-Walker" and "Two sisters" in *Quarry,* and "Gladiators" and "Film" in *Staffrider.* The South African academe did not acknowledge the wealth of contemporary writings published by black writers during that decade and belies the commitment of universities to the dominant Anglo-colonial liberalism and hegemonic discourses. It is the current decolonial turn heralded by #Rhodesmustfall that will disrupt the canon and contest the power to devalue writings of the other and contest the notion of whose English forms the standard.

Essop's understanding of Indian culture and identity through its nuances and lived experience has a certain currency within forms of critique associated with cultural studies. This approach is valuable in drawing attention to those easily obscured, but highly significant, recesses of the national culture from which alternative constituencies of people and identity may emerge. His writings should be read against debates on the nature of aesthetics and "high culture," of the value of writings not conceived in elite forms and an unquestioning academe that privileged the western canon and marginalised black writing. The larger project of excavating black writings during the interregnum is for the margins of the nation to displace the centre, the peoples of the periphery return to rewrite the history and fiction of the metropolis.

Essop's ambivalent narration in his debut collection *The Hajji and other stories* evokes a marginal space, the Indian minority; it is also a celebratory or self-marginalisation space. Cultural boundaries of the nation are drawn not only by apartheid, but by the marginalised within the periphery as well. Essop acknowledges these boundaries by noting them, but he also crosses them, erases them and translates them in the process of cultural production. It resonates with Edward Said's (171) prescription of "analytical pluralism" as the form of critical attention to cultural studies. The ambivalent narration holds culture at its most productive position, as a force for subordination, fracturing, diffusing, reproducing, as much as producing, creating, forcing and guiding (Said 171).

Fordsburg is neither a unified Indian space nor unitary in relation to Indianness, but simply seen as "other." Indianness is a perception or feeling of being an Indian socially, culturally and spiritually. The notion of "Indianness" in this article refers to

people of Indian descent who lived in Fordsburg at the time when Essop wrote the stories in the 1970s. Historically, the 1970s is recognised as the height of apartheid repression: intense segregation into homelands, townships and ghettos; the Soweto uprising; emergence of the Black Consciousness Movement and most ominously, the murder in detention of a large number of anti-apartheid activists including Steve Biko, Ahmed Timol and Neil Aggett.

Apartheid, Othering and Indian Identity

Racial identity controlled numerous aspects of daily life during apartheid, including where people were permitted to live. There was a distinct ambivalence in terms of the political identity of Indians - legally classified as a single race group, they were on the "inside" conscious of their cultural heritage, and on the "outside" they increasingly self-identified as African, South African and South African Indian. Indian identity forms a heterogeneity that is forever irreducible and difficult to grasp (Chetty). Bhabha notes that the ambivalence of identity as a problem of outside/ inside is a process of hybridity, incorporating new "people," producing new sites of political antagonism and representation (3). It is an in-between space where the meanings of cultural and political authority are negotiated. The "other" is never outside or beyond us; it emerges forcefully, within cultural discourse, when we think we speak most intimately and indigenously "between" ourselves (Bhabha 4). De Beauvoir , heavily influenced by Hegel's dialectic of identification and distantiation, introduced the notion of "the other" and the concepts "othering" and "otherness" as a construction opposing and thereby constructing "the self." Cultural geographer Crang (61) describes othering as a process through which identities are set up in an unequal relationship, a simultaneous construction of the self or in-group and the other or out-group in unequal opposition through identification of some desirable characteristic that the in-group has and the other lacks. The desirable characteristic in the South African context of the 1970s was constructed as whiteness by the powerful Afrikaner regime concomitant with othering of the non-white populace.

South Africa has always struggled with the notion of a nation—colonial conquests, union, the apartheid state and contemporary rainbowism with its capitalist democracy, African nationalism and neo-apartheid tendencies (Matsinhe). The regime often exploited the Indian community as a prime showpiece of separate development. Indian culture, business, education and religions were portrayed as the success of enforced segregation. The paradox is that this community suffered the highest levels of forced removals (Gopalan). It remains a mystery why, at the advent of the nation state in 1994, Indians and coloureds voted overwhelmingly for their

oppressor (Habib and Naidu).

The ambivalence of the South African nation is complicated by its racial history and tyranny of place. It is a particular contradiction that haunts the very idea of a nation, the language of writers like Essop who write of it and the lives of those in Fordsburg, Fietas and Pageview who live it. Bhabha (1) notes accurately that in spite of the description of the nation by historians and politicians, the cultural temporality of the nation inscribes a more than transitional social reality. Tom Nairn names the nation "the modern Janus" and argues that nationalism is by nature ambivalent (348) as the uneven development of capitalism inscribes both progression and regression, political rationality and irrationality. The metaphor of "Janus-faced" also implies the idea of liminality and Bhabha's (1990) notion of the "third space." Bhabha describes it as a space where identity positions are negotiated and where socio-political initiatives can emerge. Rather than being derived from previous historical or essential categories, these identity positions radically undermine notions of cultural essence or hegemony (Bhabha and Rutherford 1990).

The notion of "Indianness" as a perceived collective cultural identity is a fluid and multi-layered discourse that is always "imagined" by ideological positions. Essop's fiction displays Indianness within the subjugation of space—Fordsburg is the place apartheid allocated for Indians in metropolitan Johannesburg (Tomlinson). Like Cato Manor in Durban or Brick Lane in London, Essop's Fordsburg is an absurdly self-centred Indian space with Indian names and languages, arranged marriages and Hindu-Muslim rivalry.

The uniqueness of Essop's stories lies in his jesting and how he turns the Islamic and Hindu communities with their double standards as the butt of his comedies. We note in Mbulelo Mzamane's humorous collection of Soweto stories, *Mzala*, how comedy and laughter have double significance not only as a gesture of defiance but also as a token of spirited survival. Barnard (285), in her analysis of Zakes Mda's *Ways of Dying*, observes Toloki's comic character and gay counter-theology of carnival: it is by means of laughter that the doors to a better world will be opened. Mda's tale of a very loud orator who tells a naughty joke at a graveyard where four funerals are held simultaneously is hilarious. The joke is infectious, with the result that the whole graveyard breaks into laughter and the collective hilarity is so irrepressible that by the time the four processions finally march off, any semblance of solemnity has evaporated. Toloki sums up the incident with a fitting piece of folk wisdom. "In our language," he reminds Noria, "there is a proverb which says the greatest death is laughter" (Mda 194).

Being Indian has acquired a particular set of meanings with its unique history,

place and literature that presents distinctive frames for densely constituting Indian subjectivity. For example, the focus on family values and relationship labelling and identification across the borders of biological and genetic kinship is a critical value Indians identify with very strongly (Laleman, Pereira and Malik 440). Imraan Coovadia portrays this notion of Indians as one big family in *The Wedding*:

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

This is further complicated by the space that Indians occupy within the racialised state as Vikram once again explains to Ismet in *The Wedding*:

> This a new world for Indians. We cannot imagine the opportunities. The next generation will all be professionals and whatnot. Doctors and solicitors! This country is literally made of gold and diamonds. Tell me if it is the law of the universe that Indians should not cash in also? If we stick together as Indians, then the sky is the limit. (Coovadia 188)

Racist stereotyping designated Indians as unscrupulous traders who posed a threat to white-owned business (Hiralal 100). This characterization is also evident in South African literature—Ezekiel Mphahlele painted a picture of the devious Indian traders of Marabastad in his memoir, *Down Second Avenue* and Nadine Gordimer portrayed the exploitative Indian store keeper in her Booker Prize winning novel, *The Conservationist*. These stereotypes were strengthened by the fact that the racial groups were hierarchically placed with white at the top, followed by Indian.

However, there is a major contradiction underlying Indianness as the community is far from homogenous. In the story, "Dolly," Essop offers one of the clearest examples of the complexity of Indian ancestry. Dolly, a character from indentured labourer stock, sugar cane plantation workers, assumes a South African consciousness that sets him apart from passenger Indians, the merchant class, who he defines as "Indians." Dolly reveals a contradiction underlying Indianness in South Africa, when he lambasts Mr. Darsot, a rich merchant, who he suspects of seducing his wife:

> You Indian dogs, there were not enough bitches in India so you came to South

> Africa. Now you look for our wives. You lock you wives up and want to joll ours? You Indian bastard? (27).

Dolly's outburst underscores the class differential in the Indian community that seems to separate the poor indentured labourers into South African nationals and rich traders or "passenger Indians" into diasporic subjects. While we note a strong sense of cultural and ethnic identity among the Indian community in Fordsburg, there is always the undercurrent of a distinctive differentiation along class, religious and educational lines. It should be acknowledged that Indians do create a self-contained mini-India in the colonies, a form of exclusiveness noticeable in Jackson Heights (New York) and Brick Lane (East End, London). Mishra (422) sees this as a coping mechanism among the displaced immigrants and the need to put down roots with their own people in a foreign colonial space concomitant with its racism, exclusion and negative constructions of the "other." Mahmood Mamdani (4) highlights how the Indian forms a buffer between European colonialists and Africans thus engendering homogenising tendencies. However, perceiving Indians as homogenous may result in us overlooking significant differences that Indianness embed. There is physical proximity to each other in Fordsburg, but little evidence of psychological unity or a closely-knit community. Essop registers this ambivalence—when the "sweet-time girls" in "Two Sisters" moves in, the neighbours observe, decide and comment. The entire community is aware of what goes on with the sisters—there are elements of conflict and jealousy among the women towards the two outcasts, yet amorous feelings stem from the men. The sisters provoke a range of reactions:

> Some residents felt sorry for the babies and wished to adopt them; others suggested that they be given to the carnivores in the zoo; others wanted to set fire to the apartment. (32)

When the Hindu fire-walker comes to town everyone is present to witness the drama. Essop recreates the modern urban ghetto of Fordsburg with authenticity, without plastering over the cracks and representing them as a community without conflict.

The two sisters continued residence is a threat to the moral fibre of the people living in the yard and a blot on the "fair name and fame of their religion and holy Prophet" (34). Although the community invokes Islam to justify their righteous indignation, there is a rebel consciousness in Molvi Haroon, the head of the Islamic

Academy, who recognises the injustice and informs Aziz Khan, the community's self-appointed representative, that "the punishment of the two women [rests] in the hands of Allah" (34). Unfortunately, the cultural institutions are insignificant against the hegemonic and financial power of the landlord, Mr Joosub, who evicts the sisters.

Janus-faced Indianness

Almost all the stories may be associated with the two-faced god of Roman mythology, Janus, who kept the gate of Heaven. Although Essop is a Muslim writer writing about Indians, it is interesting to note that the first edition printed by Ravan Press has the filigree archway on the cover, reminiscent of entrances seen in Pageview and Mayfair, and alluding to Janus, the god of gates. Characters like Hassen the Hajji, display a two-faced persona, containing contrasting characteristics of piety and vengefulness. The ambivalence of the characters resonates across the collection—the insincerity of the Fordsburg community towards Moses and the two sisters; the deceitful Hajji Musa; the hypocrisy of Molvi Haroon seeking refuge with the perpetrator of blasphemy against the Prophet; Dr Kamal's pretence of having virtues; Khrishnasiva's charade of a believer with yogic principles. In essence, the characters display virtues of Indianness and Muslim/Hindu piety that they do not actually possess:

> Your brother can't be allowed to die among the Christians.
> For ten years he has been among them.
> That means nothing. He is still a Muslim.
> But for ten years he has lived in sin in Hillbrow.
> If he has lived in sin that is not for you to judge.
> Hajji, what sort of a man are you? Have you no feeling for your brother? Mr Mia asked.
> Don't talk to me about feeling. What feeling had he for me when he went to live among the whites, when he turned his back on me?
> Hajji, can't you forgive him? You were recently in Mecca. (8)

Muslim society is generally known for the practice of solidarity and brotherhood, living by the principle: "No one can be a good believer until he loves for his human brother all that he loves for himself" (An-Nawawi's Forty Hadeeth: No. 13). This principle is portrayed in the behaviour of Mr. Mia and the priest at the Newtown mosque; both are seen in contrast to the Hajji's character. Hassen has great hatred

for Karim, his brother, who had rejected his Indianness by cohabiting with a white woman. Karim wishes to spend his dying days with his own people after having "cut himself off from his family and friends ten years ago" (2). Hassen remains unforgiving: "by going over to the white Herrenvolk, his brother had trampled on something that was vitally part of him, his dignity" (12). Hassen confuses self-respect with self-importance since it is the latter that continually overrides his better nature as viewed in his response to Catherine's plea to grant his dying brother's wish:

> Let the Christians bury him... His last wish means nothing to me ... Madam, it's impossible ... No ...Let him die... Brother? Pig! Pig! Bastard! (2)

It is in this title story of the book that one finds Essop's satire on the notion of Indianness the most significant. This is a community that celebrates its religiosity, bearers of non-violence with respected contenders of social justice with the likes of Ahmed Kathrada and Fatima Meer. Essop parodies Indian holy men and their tendencies towards injustice. The hajji is holy in name only and not in his deepest self or in the way he lives his life. The satire is extended to the Hindu Yogi as well, highlighting that the sham of religious leadership is a universal human weakness which applies to the followers of all religions. It is the cultural representation of this ambivalence that is central in Essop's writings. Bhabha's reminder of the ambivalence in narratives on the nation resonates eloquently with Essop's stories:

> (T)he comfort of social belonging, the hidden injuries of class; the customs of taste, the powers of political affiliation; the sense of social order, the sensibility of sexuality; the blindness of bureaucracy, the strait insight of institutions; the quality of justice, the common sense of injustice; the langue of the law and the parole of the people. (2)

It is significant that in spite of Essop's description of the Hajji as glib and hollow, the writer was not attacked by the Muslim community who resolutely defer to religious authority. Rather, it was the South African Hindu Maha Sabha that called for the removal of *The Hajji and other stories* as school set work and objected to the story of the Hindu fire-walker. The controversy is absurd. In the story, the character Hajji Musa, in a bid to demystify fire-walking at the expense of Hinduism, offers to perform the feat himself to the good humoured incredulity of onlookers. Gravely scalding the soles of his feet, and in order to save face, he uses his spiritual failure

to belittle Hinduism further, accusing its devotees of charlatanism. Essop's response to the Hindu organisation's interpretation of the story is poignant:

> It was taken out of context. Characters comment in texts; I deal with characters and realities and it is not Ahmed Essop saying that. I created a character who had a particular vision about certain things. The Maha Sabha felt that I had attacked the Hindu community. If the character makes positive or negative comments about something that is not my view, it is the character's view. I am dealing with the world of human beings and human beings have different views about different objects. And I had to create a comprehensive picture of life if it is going to be worth anything. (Chetty 277)

The satire was lost on the Maha Sabha; an intelligent reading of the book would have led to an appreciation of the complexity of Essop's artistry. The message in the story is ironically the essence of Hinduism according to the Sanatana Dharma which includes honesty, refraining from injuring living beings, patience, self-restraint and compassion. A similar fate befell Aziz Hassim with the release of *The revenge of Kali* when the same Hindu organisation took umbrage at the writer's reference to the goddess Kali.

Essop's writing displays the wide dissemination through which we construct the field of meanings and symbols associated with national life, and in particular Indianness. It is the human element that is dominant in his stories:

> I was exposed to the different aspects of life in the community. There were humour, joy, marriages, funerals, and so on. I felt that in my writings I should represent a comprehensive whole, rather than selecting one aspect, the apartheid aspect, the aspect of oppression. It was not to constitute our entire life. (Chetty 273)

Essop's comment on apartheid is noteworthy given the fact that most South African writers during the interregnum had a morbid fascination with politics, and opposition to apartheid motivated much of their writings. Essop skilfully navigates the tension between the social commitment to the freedom struggle and the aesthetics of arts. According to Jean Marquard (93), the source of Essop's inspiration is a vivid sense of the adventure of living with no trace of the morose pre-occupation with literature as a means of exposing and cleaning up a gloomy society, so prevalent in the fiction of the 1970s.

The ghetto style of English is used by writers like Essop and Bessie Head with instances of direct quotation where they display their affinity with working class English. Essop's use of the Fordsburg patois is deliberate and he adapts English to his own purposes with imagery and metaphors.

The Hajji and Other Stories forms a microcosm for the larger social issues of the country and the follies and tragedies of people generally. Essop engages with issues such as class prejudice, superstition, arranged marriages and religious fanaticism. He is disenchanted with his own community as with others—black, white and mixed-race. Lionel Abrahams claims:

> [I]t is hard to think of another South African writer, apart from Herman Charles Bosman, who is capable of bringing off, on the one hand, stories as lightheartedly funny as 'Hajji Musa and the Hindu fire-walker', as sweepingly satirical as 'Film' and, on the other, ones as astringently poignant as 'Gerty's brother', as mysteriously disturbing as 'Mr. Moonreddy' or as poetically sombre as 'The hajji'. (x)

Christopher Hope acknowledges that over all of them a kind of gentle ruefulness plays, and that is so rare in South African writing and so singular that he really can't think of anybody else who does it in quite this way (103).

Essop is unabashed by the fact that in the first place he is Indian. Unlike fellow South African Indian writer, Ronnie Govender, that refutes the label Indian: "Indian writer? I am not an Indian writer. For God's sake, I wasn't born in India. I am as South African as anyone else…" (Chetty 2). It is interesting that Lionel Abrahams (x) claims that the emotional richness and vivacious variety of Essop's stories are reminiscent of V.S. Naipaul. I feel, in contrast to Naipaul who had difficulty identifying with the atmosphere and geography of his surroundings, Essop relishes every scent, colour, plant and street about him. To Naipaul, the vision of Trinidad was alien, it diminished his own and did not give him the courage to do a simple thing like mentioning the name of a Port of Spain street. Essop has no inhibitions, he writes about the streets of Fordsburg and the people that he knew. Everything in the literary, artistic environment of Essop's world declaims authenticity and originality. He rebels against any cultural overbearance and impositions on his life:

> Aesthetics and reality, the human experience, have to be combined. The socio-political reality is just one part of my life that I wish to present. I refused to limit the scope of my art and I also resist the attempt to pigeonhole my

writings. (Chetty 274)

We witness the hypocrisy of the community in the story, "The Commandment." An elderly Black servant, Moses, who has lived among the Indians in Fordsburg's inner-city enclave for as long as all the others and without incident, is ordered to vacate the area and to move to the Transkei. He was a factotum in the community, much loved, spoke Gujarati and was a member of the Rehman family for whom he worked. Moses is hounded out of Fordsburg by the political system that determines that Xhosas belong in the Transkei. Unlike his biblical namesake who was the bearer of God's sanctified commandments to his people and who was brought close to them in this role, this latter-day Moses faces expulsion from the people he knows and loves, and the promised land he is offered is a slum.

The dreadful pass law is symbolic of the commandment made to Moses in the Bible story. The ironically named Moses reacts with emotional violence to the threat of removal, night after night disturbing the yard with his lamenting. Essop traces in the story, as a counterpoint to Moses's misery, the responses of the people in Fordsburg and the shift in their attitude to him. He illustrates how widespread and pernicious the effects of racial abuse can become. The community which Essop constantly describes as followers of the principles of Gandhi, a rich resistant culture with their red square orators and "coolie saboteurs," not only go silent on Moses's suffering, but turn against him:

> We began to hate him. Vague fears were aroused in us, as though he were exposing us to somebody or something, involving us in a conspiracy — he spoke our language — threatening our existence. Indefinable feelings began to trouble us. Of guilt? Of cowardice? We wanted to be rid of him as of some unclean thing. (71)

Moses becomes the victim of a Janus-faced community. Essop draws the story to an end by quoting Moses's mournful soliloquies about the Transkei:

> There are cities there! There are parks there! There are hospitals there! And there are no cemeteries! (72).

In a sad twist to the story, Essop quietly observes the suicide of Moses in the lavatory. He is unafraid to reflect the finer nuances of racism in Fordsburg. We also find racism towards white society, but more significantly, he provides insight into

the Indian community of Fordsburg by setting it in contrast to white society by revealing its qualities of humanism. He compares the sense of communal ethic in Fordsburg with the individuality in Sandown. It is a tactic by which Essop celebrates the Fordsburg community with its liveliness and hilarity against the seriousness of spaces that whites occupy:

> Henry's parents lived in Sandown. On several occasions I accompanied him to his home, but I found the atmosphere of the suburb with its avenues of trees and solitary mansions amid acres of gardens, chilling. It lacked the noise — the raucous voice of vendors, the eternal voices of children in streets and backyards — the variety of people, the spicy odours of Oriental foods, bonhomie of communal life in Fordsburg. (99)

Although Essop alludes to a binary between the black and white worlds, he hastens to contest the communal ethic of Fordsburg with intensity and acerbity, evident in the stories on race and religion. The inner conflict between charlatanism and racial resentment in the Hajji towards his dying brother is narrated within the ambivalent context of Fordsburg and like "Mr. Moonreddy," the inner conflict becomes progressively more nightmarish.

The critique of religious conviction is extended into "The Film" where Essop draws on the hypocrisy of cultural leaders. The members of the Action Committee of the Islamic Council attempt to stop the debut screening of "The Prophet" and view their opposition to the movie as a fight for freedom (80). In a twist of irony, Molvi Haroon and his entourage, shocked and bewildered by the commotion they have caused, view with relief the sudden appearance of Mr Winters, the manager of Hermes Films, who as part of the alleged anti-Islamic conspiracy, had earlier invited them to sit in the theatre and sin by seeing the film (77). Comically, Mr Winters emerges as the saviour of the holy men at the end of the story as he conducts them to a place of safety inside the theatre (84). In their "white robes with ferocious beards," Molvi Haroon and his group ditch all their earlier resistance and religious objection to the movie and take their seats in the cinema. Essop undermines the claim to religious leadership by this elite group.

There is an absurd aloofness in Mr. Moonreddy, "a waiter of distinction." He does not associate with other waiters and the customs of the "dirty Tamils" were kept out of his home. Similarly, Mr. Rijhumal Rajespery, the protagonist in "Gladiators" considered his fellow Indians to be the "filthiest and most uncouth denizens on the earth's crust" (61). Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Mask* (1967)

describes this self-hatred of blacks as a form of neurotic behaviour - the native is dehumanised and thus he is anxious, insecure, devalued, abandoned, hypersensitive, and feels worthless. This self-hatred in turn fosters intra-group rivalries among the blacks (51). Mr. Moonreddy's imitation of colonial mannerisms and Essop's parody of his behavior echoes Bhabha's theory of mimicry:

> It is from this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double, that my instances of colonial imitation come. (127)

Bhabha (153) argues that a colonial identity is seen as a fluctuation between self-confident universalism on the one hand and anxiety of being imitated and mocked on the other. While Fanon (1967, 51) regarded this imitative behaviour as a sign of an inferiority complex, Bhabha in his essay "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse" strips it of any identity or essence and sees it instead as mimicry which he understands as subversive, a form of metonymic resemblance, a repetition with a difference. Or, as he repeatedly states, "almost the same but not quite," which means that mimicry always tends to teeter on the brink of mockery, parody and menace (Bhabha 127).

Essop plays the irony of self-hatred interestingly: while Mr Moonreddy and Mr Rajespery preferred white woman to Indian women, the yogi and Karim were looked down upon because of relationships with white woman. But, for Mr. Rajespery, the pendulum swings:

> Are you suggesting that I terminate my single state of man by marrying an Indian Yahoo? The day I marry, I shall marry a white woman. (61)

The also exposes his contempt for his "inferior Indian neighbours":

> The words "Thank you," "Please" and "Pardon me" do not appear in the vocabulary of Indians. You are a mob of unruly Yahoos. I find your manners odious and crude. (61)

The aloofness and superiority complex as represented in Mr. Rajespery's comic condemnation of his fellow Indians is also evident in some of the other stories where the feeling of superiority is extended against black and white people.

Conclusion

Essop's collection of stories discussed in this essay may be perceived as a testimony to the interregnum and the everyday human condition experienced in apartheid racial ghettos like Fordsburg, not dissimilar to Richard Rive's "*Buckingham Palace," District Six* and Mphahlele's stories of Sophiatown in *Down Second Avenue* (1959). Van Zyl, in an interview with Essop, points to potentials and possibilities of the Fordsburg stories as an important contribution to the metamorphosis of society into a rational, humane and compassionate one.

Oliphant (59) observes that a body of short stories produced over a particular period provides the reader with a field of multiple perspectives on the divergent perceptions and experiences and a literary site inscribed with the marks of a particular historical moment. While the centrality of South Africa, given its racialised history, in shaping Indianness cannot be overemphasised, the leitmotif in Essop's collection of short stories is the hope and frustration of the characters. The particular Indian ethos of Fordsburg radiates through each of the stories in values that Essop opposes (specifically hypocrisy), the context within which the key protagonists like Hajji Hassen, Hajji Musa, Kamal, Mr Rajespery, Mr Moonreddy and Mr Khrishnashiva define themselves. The "scraps, patches and rags of everyday life" (Bhabha 297) from which Essop creates his characters, though consisting in practices and values that derive mostly from the notion of Indianness, define them implicitly as South African.

Finally, the ambivalence of the community of Fordsburg is portrayed in the irony of the "close-knit" community: when Essop was persecuted by the Hindu religious body, by the state (represented by the House of Delegates) and the Education Department because he revealed the ambivalence of Indianness and the hypocrisy of religious leaders, the community was silent. Essop has a history of being summoned because of his words, and like many South African writers, have been hounded by both the state and bigoted religious organisations.

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