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Reviewing Current Post-Transitional Culture in South Africa Through the Works of Four South African Indian Writers

By
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Dissertation Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts in ENGLISH in the FACULTY OF HUMANITIES at the UNIVERSITY OF JOHANNESBURG

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May 2019
Declaration

I, the undersigned, hereby declare that the dissertation submitted herewith for the degree Master of Arts in English to the University of Johannesburg is my own independent work and where secondary sources have been used, these have been acknowledged and referenced in accordance with the University of Johannesburg and Faculty of Humanities requirements. Furthermore, this work has not been submitted for any degree at any other university.

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Loren Elizabeth Townshend
May 2019
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Acknowledgements

This project has been a long journey and there are many times in which I wanted to give up. I would not have reached the point of completion without the support and assistance I was given by those around me.

I am indebted to my supervisor, Professor Sikhumbuzo Mngadi for their guidance throughout and for accommodating my needs over the long duration of this project. I am grateful for your patience. Thank you for stretching the limitations of my mind and teaching me to think in a more critical way. Whenever I thought I was satisfied with what I had written, you challenged me further.

To my family and my children, you have motivated me in ways unknown to you.

Lastly, to my husband, thank you for being my rock and for believing in me more than I did myself. Thank you for running our household during the uncountable hours that I was too busy working on this. You are an inspiration.
Abstract

While it has long been seen as a minority corpus in South African literature, South African Indian writing is gaining momentum for its unique stance and reflections of current culture. Contemporary South African fiction allows for a reading of the post-transition, conceptualised through its ambiguities, layered temporalities and paradoxes. This study provides a reading of the post-transition through the varied perspectives captured in contemporary South African Indian novels. The post-transition has been represented as an ambivalent period, in that it portrays complex and progressive movement towards cultural entanglement and national unity, yet at the same time placing these notions under critical pressure through its exposure of the lacunae and flaws in South Africa’s ‘rainbow nation’. Read together and against one another, the novels provide an interesting reading of complex identities, agency and newness, while simultaneously drawing on the bleak realities of the present, marked by a general sense of disaffection post-1994. This project considers Zinaid Meeran’s *Saracen at the Gates* (2009), Shaida Kazie Ali’s *Lessons in Husbandry* (2012), Imraan Coovadia’s *High Low In-between* (2009) and Shubnum Khan’s *Onion Tears* (2011), for their contributions to the South African Indian literary canon and the critical readings they allow of the post-transition.
Introduction

This study aims to consider South African Indian writers and their work through the lens of a growing body of South African literary criticism that conceptualises post-transitional society as characterised by ambiguities, paradoxes, and complex forms of inter-subjectivity.

South African Indian fiction has long been considered a minority body in the context of South African literature post-transition. Recognising that South African literature and cultural studies need to accommodate and reflect the nature of the present, Ronit Frenkel notes that South African literature and cultural studies “are at a crucial crossroads; where previous understanding has been debunked and the [literary] canon is being forced to change further to include marginalized writings” (Frenkel, 2011: 2). However, I argue that, although it has gained momentum more recently in current South African literary and cultural studies, South African Indian writing still occupies a largely peripheral position and is not given due attention for its potential in reading current South African culture, post-transition. I read the post-transition as an ongoing movement in current culture that reaches back to 2009-2010, and which has been re-evaluated in more recent theory in the present. My contention here, and the motivation for this study, is that the peripheral position that contemporary South African Indian fiction currently occupies in the South African literary canon needs to be re-addressed in light of the contributions that such fiction makes toward understanding the complexities of post-transitional society.

Recent critiques of the term post-transition reflect the complexities of South African current culture as it is situated in the gap between hopeful expectation born at the onset of democracy in 1994, and the harsh realisation that the reality of the present, some twenty-four years on, does not live up to these. The current situation has led to a need for a re-evaluation of the present, in which temporal overlaps of past, present and future contribute to the highs and lows of a society still in its transitional phase. Moreover, the post-transition is a period ambivalent in nature: while it reflects progressive shifts towards a national entanglement and tolerance of difference, at the same time it deconstructs such ambitious manoeuvres in the realisation that the ideal of rainbow-nationalism and equality are far from being achieved in present-day South Africa.
The writings of contemporary South African Indian novelists display these undulating trends in South African post-transitional culture from a unique and unconventional perspective: they are Janus-faced in that they simultaneously portray both national movement towards a democratic state and away from this ideal. South African Indian fiction depicts ideas of entanglement and newness through its multifarious markers of South African identity and culture, while also drawing on the bleak realities of the present, marked by disappointment and a general malaise post-1994.

Through conducting a close reading of four South African Indian novels, I aim to demonstrate how these literary works are used in modelling the complexities of the post-transition as an entangled, ambiguous cultural sphere in South Africa today.

1.1 Overview of primary texts

The novelists under study all adopt the strategy of focussing on the private, interior lives of the individual protagonists. However, this focus is not to the exclusion of the broader concern of post-apartheid society and culture – rather, the focus on interiority affords the authors the space to investigate how an individual (whose character and development form a significant component of these novels) engages with his/her cultural framework. In this way, the reader is presented with an account of both the microcosm of the personal lives and histories of the protagonists and the framework of post-transitional South Africa and the history that continues to play a role in shaping society. Thus, the manner in which these South African Indian authors have adopted intimacy and a focus on microcosms as part of their narrative strategies is effective in exploring the character of the post-transitional society in both a broad and more familiar sense. The focus on private lives in the context of public culture in these novels is, in other words, an example of the move away from what Sarah Nuttall calls the “apartheid optic” towards the complexity of post-apartheid South Africa (Nuttall, 2009: 11).

The first of the novels in this study is Zinaid Meeran’s *Saracen at the Gates* (2009), which is a dynamic trenchant display of South African current culture in the cosmopolitan city of Johannesburg. Revolving around the protagonist, Zakira Cachalia, it is an account of a young woman’s exploration of her identity, which is juxtaposed with the equally complex identity of her twin brother Zakir. Moulded into a Johannesburg ‘curry-mafia-princess’ by her Indo-Islamic cultural context, Zakira’s plight challenges the Manichean boundaries of society that she and her brother have been raised to accept. The structure of Meeran’s novel demonstrates a shift from a limited, rather intolerant environment to one in which the twins find themselves
shaped by their culturally overlapping, entangled society. The novel therefore explores the possibilities and opportunities for identity that arise through the move away from bifurcated distinctions of identity in terms of race, class and creed and towards ambiguity and ambivalence. By mapping out the private developments of these siblings, Meeran is able to explore the workings of race, class, religion, education, transnationalism and gender – not as generalised or simplistic ideas, but rather as influential realities that reflect the complex entanglement of post-transitional society.

Shaida Kazi Ali’s novel, *Lessons in Husbandry* (2012), is the second novel on which this study focuses. It can be read as a further example of how the stories of the South African Indian community reflect the shifts and developments of current culture. Ali contests simplistic societal divisions such as race, religion and tradition through, in part, the characterisation of the novel’s protagonist, Malak. In particular, the character’s revelation of the personal and legal irrelevance of her marriage, which leads to a new-found agency for the character, acts as a metaphor for rewriting oppressive histories. Like Meeran’s novel, *Lessons in Husbandry* focusses on private, introspective journeys and, in so doing, is able to explore hybridised places, power relations and cultures.

Imraan Coovadia’s *High Low In-Between* (2009) portrays the ambivalence of the post-transitional, providing perspectives that urge a re-evaluation of South Africa as a nation. Coovadia continues the trend of exploring hybrid spaces wherein prevalent issues faced by South African society are made visible and open to scrutiny. Set in Durban, the novel centres on the life of Nafisa, a South African Indian doctor whose personal plights reveal scenes of bleak realities involving, for example, organised crime and the national denial of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In addition, the novel depicts complex interpersonal relationships that address reconfigurations of race, cultures, religions and class in ways that encourage an evaluation of the post-transitional.

Lastly, Shubnum Khan’s *Onion Tears* (2011) connects the stories of the Ballim family in Bronkhorstspruit near Pretoria, an area less explored in the canon of South African Indian fiction. By voicing the contrasting and private stories of three generations of South African Indians, Khan retraces and rewrites histories and, as Ali, Meeran and Coovadia have done with their novels, reflects on the ambivalent state of the present through this process. Furthermore, Khan’s strategy of focussing on personal histories allows her to interrogate the intersecting relationships between space, race, history and nation (Frenkel & Mackenzie, 2010: 2). The
ideas of ‘nation as home’ (Bystrom & Nuttall, 2013) and belonging are key issues in Khan’s work, and the manner in which she addresses them resonates with Kerry Bystrom and Sarah Nuttall’s idea that one’s “inner lives, bodies and interior spaces help us begin to chart the distinct kinds of intimate exposures that surface in contemporary South African culture and the way they become entangled in public debate” (2013: 310).

1.2 A review of research on South African Indian life and writing

In the main, many theorists have identified the need for further research into the field of South African Indian Studies – not only to give voice to a marginalised group of writers and the histories they carry, but also because the writings of South African Indians allow for a unique platform from which current cultural movements can be studied. Thus, while much post-apartheid literature tends to be narrated from a black or white stance, South African Indian writing addresses local culture through its inclusion of previously marginalised voices that open up an array of layered and complex features of South African Indian identity, rooted in trans-oceanic histories.

Rehana Ebr-Vally’s *Kala Pani. Caste and Colour in South Africa* (2001) and Uma Dhupelia-Mesthrie’s *From Cane Fields to Freedom: A Chronicle of Indian South African Life* (2000) provide a detailed account of the history of Indians in South Africa, both as indentured labourers and Passenger Indians, as well as the hardships encountered during these periods. Offering foundational knowledge of the history of Indians in South Africa, both books provide insightful contributions in situating South African Indians within the national body politic of South Africa. Linking the historical routes of Indians in South Africa to present day spaces in KwaZulu Natal, Lindy Stiebel in “Last Stop ‘little Gujarat’: Tracking South African Indian Writers on the Grey Street Writers’ Trail in Durban” (2010) “Crossing the Kala Pani: Cause for “Celebration” or “Commemoration” 150 Years on? Portrayals of Indenture in Recent South African Writing” (2011) and “Sugar-coated Stories? Plantation Literature by Selected South African Indian Writers” (2016) then develops Ebr-Vally and Dhupelia-Mesthrie’s observations by overlapping current-day places in Durban with their historical stories of South African Indian life. Here, the past histories of colonialism and indenture intersect with apartheid and post-apartheid narratives that point to the ambiguities of national change in the post-transition.¹

¹ See Steibel in “Sugar-coated Stories? Plantation Literature by Selected South African Indian Writers” (2016); “Crossing the Kala Pani: Cause for ‘Celebration’ or ‘Commemoration’ 150 Years on? Portrayals of `Indenture in Recent South African Writing” (2011); and “Last stop ‘little Gujarat’: Tracking South African Indian Writers on the Grey Street Writers’ Trail in Durban” (2010).
Developing her ideas about Indian life, Pallavi Rastogi’s *Afrindian Fiction: Diaspora, Race, and National Desire in South Africa* (2008) addresses issues around belonging and Indian identity in South Africa. In a call for further research into what she identifies as an exciting site for cultural excavation, Rastogi emphasises the need to acknowledge the largely systematic erasure of the South African Indian voice in the country’s contested space and to re-address the resultant marginal position of South African Indian Studies in the South African literary canon. In her more recent work, Rastogi addresses the positionality of South African Muslim Indians, which is also a motif seen in all of the novels chosen for this study. In her article, “International Geographies: Looking Out in Ishtiyq Shukri’s *The Silent Minaret*” (2011), Pallavi Rastogi refers to a subgenre in South African Indian fiction in which Islam is situated in South Africa through texts by Muslim Indians, rather than situated globally.

This need for inquiry into the connection between India and South Africa can also be observed in the work of Betty Govinden (with Isabel Hofmeyr) in “Africa/India: Culture and Circulation in the Indian Ocean” (2009), as well in Meg Samuelson and Grace Musila’s “(Un)settled States: Indian Ocean Passages, Performative Belonging and Restless Mobility in Post-apartheid South African Fiction” (2010) and “Locations and Locutions: Which Africa, Whose Africa?” (2011) Specifically, Samuelson and Musila appeal for further inquiry into the Indian Ocean, or the passage that connects India and other Asian countries to South Africa. Similarly, in her theoretical compilation, *South Africa and India, Shaping the Global South* (2011), Isabel Hofmeyr “explores the idea that the port cities of the Indian Ocean constituted a network of textual exchange and circulation that built on, sustained and invented forms of cosmopolitan universalism across the Indian Ocean” (Hofmeyr, 2011: 10). The appeal is well-founded and relevant to South African Indian Studies, given the nature of the space of the Indian Ocean as a contested site fraught with entangled histories, identities and memories that influence ideas of spatial belonging within post-transitional South Africa.

Ronit Frenkel’s work on South African Indian fiction addresses the niche for inquiry into a people whose histories have been neglected and whose positionality, when interrogated, allows
for new readings of South African post-transitional culture. In her article, “Reconsidering South African Indian Fiction Postapartheid” (2011), Frenkel observes that “in highlighting a shift away from the bifurcated logic of the past, South African Indian fiction points towards a type of emergent cosmopolitanism that is rooted in the local” (2011: 13), and that “the multiple placements and displacements of Indianness highlight the legacies of colonialism, apartheid, and globalization where non-normative migration narratives become new versions of national, gendered, and racial belonging” (2011: 3). In Reconsiderations: South African Indian Fiction and the Making of Race in Postcolonial Culture (2010), Frenkel explores Indian identity and culture in South Africa, which, at the time of inquiry, still functioned largely on racial taxonomies. Her work, which interrogates what it means to be Indian in a multifarious South African setting, is integral to my study as it addresses a time between apartheid and the recent years of the post-transition that have been largely marked by hybridity, syncretism, and cultural blending, as opposed to race-based binaries.

Much writing on current post-transitional culture in South Africa connects with South African Indian fiction through the study of specific works by the South African Indian writer Imraan Coovadia. For instance, Frenkel and Andy Carolin both connect South African Indian fiction to the temporal overlapping of the post-transition. In her article, “Imraan Coovadia’s Metonymic Aesthetics and the Idea of Newness in the South African Cultural Imaginary” (2016), Frenkel observes that:

While the dominant narrative in apartheid era discourse can be read as having a stark division between good and bad, black and white, and so on, post-apartheid imaginaries highlight the entangled and ambiguous imbricated new-old cultural formations of the present – new in the sense that suppressed narratives have emerged, but old in that they existed in the past but were silenced (2016 : 5).

Frenkel’s point here exhibits the connection between South African Indian fiction and reading the ambiguities and paradoxes of the post-transition. To add to this, Andy Carolin links post-transitional ideas with South African Indian writing through his analysis of the temporal

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2 Indianness is used as a term throughout the field of South African Indian writing. It refers to Indian racial and cultural identity within South Africa and other diasporic countries that have Indian communities. It is a term that captures the vast diversities of Indian identity and belonging in the post-colonial space and incorporates the stories of belonging and identity of those ancestrally from India, whose histories may link to indentured labour or to those of passenger Indians [see Frenkel, Reconsiderations (2011) and Rastogi, Afrindian Fictions (2001)].
entanglements of the era through the metaphor of the palimpsest in “Imraan Coovadia’s Post-transitional Palimpsest” (2016).

The theoretical works from this section provide necessary background to the comprehension of South African Indian writing as a platform from which current culture is examined in this project. Juxtaposing this with a mapping of post-transitional theory situates this study as a relevant contribution in the review of current post-transitional culture in South Africa through the South African Indian voice.

1.3 A mapping of current trends within post-transitional theory

This project draws on the theoretical assumptions of the term ‘post-transitional’ and integrates these with contemporary South African Indian fiction as a unique point of analysis through which the post-transitional space can be debated. However, the term ‘post-transitional’ has become one of contestation among literary critics. As such, an overview of post-transitional theory and the relevant debates surrounding it are fundamental in this introduction to this study.

I argue that the term ‘post-transitional’ is rooted in ideas originally denoted by cultural theorist Sarah Nuttall in *Entanglement. Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid* (2009). Although theories of ‘entanglement’ have since been criticised, as will be detailed in this overview, the idea of cultural entanglement is nonetheless a point of departure from which I will map the conceptual developments around the idea of post-transition. Nuttall’s *Entanglement* centres on a deconstruction of boundaries of difference that enable a cultural overlapping within the complex arena of contemporary South Africa. In general, her concept of entanglement acknowledges the possibilities for reconfigured identities that are inherent in a system that resists the kind of definite and binary classifications that characterised South African apartheid history. Illustrating this idea, Nuttall writes that entanglement enables complex temporality of past, present and future; one which points away from a time of resistance towards a more ambivalent moment in which the time is potential, both latent and actively surfacing in South Africa, exists in complex tandem with new kinds of closure and opposition. It also moves away from an apartheid optic and temporal lens towards one which reifies neither the past nor the exceptionality of South African life (2009: 11).
Here, Nuttall alludes to a shift away from the restrictions that bifurcated constructions of identity guaranteed under apartheid towards a more ambiguous and ambivalent state of being that, according to Nuttall, ultimately provides the space necessary for cultural tolerance.³

Resonating with Nuttall’s call for tolerance and acceptance, Meg Samuelson, in “Scripting Connections: Reflections on the Post-Transitional” (2010), suggests that post-transitional writing allows for a freeing from the entrapment of apartheid, making space to “open up the cultural scene and slough off some of the straightjackets of the past” (2010: 114). Samuelson also mentions the role of South Africa in the global arena as an emerging trope of the post-transitional. Influenced by Nuttall and Samuelson, yet with more application to South African literature, Craig MacKenzie and Ronit Frenkel’s “Conceptualizing ‘Post-Transitional’ South African Literature in English” (2010) posits the term “post-transitional”. Coined as a term to mark the recognition of a change in the literary scene, post-apartheid, in an attempt to embody the growing trends that marked this shift, ‘post-transitional’ became assimilated into contemporary cultural theory of South African writing. In their article, MacKenzie and Frenkel claim that:

> We have chosen the term ‘post-transitional’ South African Literature to suggest something of the character of this new wave of writing, which is often unfettered with the past in the way that much of post-apartheid was, but may still consider it in new ways. Equally, it may ignore it altogether. Other features include politically incorrect humour and incisive satire, and the mixing of genres with zest and freedom. All of this renders nugatory traditional markers like nationality, race or ethnicity (2010: 2).


³It is important to note here that while I use Nuttall’s Entanglement as a starting point from which post-transitional theory is developed, it is not devoid of criticism. Theorists have since critiqued Nuttall’s concept as being too focused on the future while largely overlooking the present state of South Africa. While these critiques will be detailed more fully in this theoretical overview, I maintain my stance of using Nuttall’s entanglement as a precursor for post-transitional theory at this point.
Lives, Interior Places”, 2017), public and private lives (Bystrom & Nuttall, 2013) and how these notions all point to reconstructed ways of living together.

While the dominant themes of the post-transitional remain relatively uncontested, the term ‘post-transition’ itself is not without its problems. The term has been critiqued for its representation of historical temporalities rather than the conceptual movement for which it was intended. Chris Thurman tackles the problematics of the term “post-transition” in “Places Elsewhere, Then and Now: Allegory ‘Before’ and ‘After’ South Africa’s Transition” (2010), suggesting that the term post-transition implies a kind of finality and completion of a phase, which he argues is not fitting in the South African context. Rather, Thurman reads the current cultural arena as being in a state of flux, or still ongoing. With reference to Thurman’s article, Aghogho Akpome (2016), in “Towards a Reconceptualization of ‘(Post) Transitional’ South African Cultural Expression”, argues that terms such as post-transitional or post-apartheid are “premised on a ‘false division’ between the apartheid past and the democratic present” (2016: 43). Similarly, Thurman does not see that South Africa has moved on from apartheid fully, or from the transition, thus urges for the term post-transition to be used with caution. Thurman also notes that “we are still living under conditions that emphasise the legacy of apartheid and because [...] many of our authors are still ‘writing out of’ apartheid, just as the youngest ones are ‘writing out of’ the transition”— and the same applies to respective generations of readers [...]” (2010: 101). This is a notable point and I will return to it in the third chapter of this study. However, Thurman’s reading of the term post-transition as denoting a specific discontinuity with the past has perhaps been semantically misinterpreted. His reading of the term is based on temporality rather than on its conceptual status. Thurman notes that in response to his temporal reading of the term post-transition, “Ronit Frenkel rightly pointed out that the prefix ‘post’ can be, and has been, used to signal not so much a temporal as a conceptual shift (‘post-feminism’, for instance, does not indicate that feminism is moribund)” (Frenkel in Thurman, 2010: 91). Nevertheless, the observations noted in conversation between Ronit Frenkel and Chris Thurman provide us with two lenses from which the post-transitional can be analysed: the conceptual shift in thought denoting markers of post-transitional writing as suggested by Frenkel and MacKenzie (2010) and teleologically, as Thurman points out.

From a conceptual perspective, cultural trends underpinning the term post-transitional include: cultural entanglement, interiority, aspects of newness, a shift away from racial fetishisation, ambiguity, temporal overlaps and cultural paradox (Frenkel & MacKenzie, 2010). Using this observation, Nuttall’s use of entanglement as a precursory term is evident, as identity as a
construct needs to be redefined from a less categorical perspective, thus making room for cultural undecidability and a tolerance of difference. As Olivier Moreillon and Alan Muller note, “entanglement has a palimpsestic character in that it emphasises multiple overlaps or intersections of social spheres [...] (Moreillon & Muller, 2016: 81). These junctions of social histories give way to a state of, to use Nuttall’s term, “human foldedness” (2009: 1).

The concept “human foldedness” idealises a sense of national unity that appears easier said than done. To this end, Nuttall’s notion of entanglement has been targeted by critics for its unrealistic optimism of a type of ‘dreamland’ rainbow-nationalism. In his review of Nuttall’s book, Mark Sanders dispraises the concept as being an over-zealous and unrealistically optimistic portrayal of South African current culture, one that does not do justice to the term ‘current’ because it is focused more on the future than the present (Sanders, 2010: 93-97). In addition, Sanders finds fault in the setting of Nuttall’s Entanglement, in that it is based solely on Johannesburg, specifically the city’s trendy areas where change is most noticeable, yet the notion of entanglement has been extended to serve as a subordinate theory for reading the whole nation. Sanders argues that rural areas or cities outside of Johannesburg do not provide such tangible evidence of socio-cultural change; in fact, they are still largely indicative of the apartheid era (Sanders, 2010: 94).

This observation leads us to the second lens through which the post-transitional can be analysed: teleologically. The temporal aspects of reading the presents have gained much attention by theorists writing on current culture and literary trends, especially in the work of Andrew Van der Vlies in Present Imperfect (2017) and Nedine Moonsamy in “Death is an Other-Country: Grieving for Alterity in “Post Transitional” South African Literature” (2013), “Spectral Citizenry: Reflections of the ‘Post-transitional’ in Contemporary South African Literature” (2014) and “The Logic of the Looking Glass: Representations of Time and Temporality in Agaat and High-Low In-between” (2015). Earlier research by Achille Mbembe, notably “Passages to Freedom: The Politics of Racial Reconciliation in South Africa” (2008) and “At the Centre of the Knot” (2012), and Dilip Menon in “Living Together Separately in South Africa” (2013) is also relevant in that the authors read the post-transitional arena from the perspective of the national disappointment in South Africa post 1994. Central to this research are themes of such disappointment resulting from promises that have not been realised within the ‘new South Africa’ – the temporal aspect features in that the sense of national unanticipated disappointment and ‘waiting for change’ is caught within a type of time-warp: the future that was promised in the past is still in processes of negotiation in the present. In the
words of Ashraf Jamal, it is a time in which the nation “[…] suffers the unease of never having begun” (Jamal in Moonsamy, 2015: 3). Born out of a re-evaluation of the country some twenty years post-apartheid, ideas of rainbow nation optimism have been jettisoned and replaced by an overall sense of national despair. Van der Vlies (2017) illustrates this point, depicting the grand sense of hopelessness and disaffection in a nation that is grappling with the realities of current-day South Africa that shadow the empty promises made in 1994 in the awakening of democracy. Hope for an entangled future, as alluded to in Nuttall’s work (2009), has dwindled in light of current day reality. Achille Mbembe contributes to the post-transitional debate, enabling further inquiry into the temporal aspect of reading contemporary South Africa. Quoted by Aghogho Akpome here, Mbembe notes that:

One of the main tensions in South African politics and culture today is the realization that there is something unresolved in the constitutional democratic settlement that suspended the ‘revolution’ in 1994 but did not erase apartheid from the social, economic and mental landscape. This settlement led neither to final victory nor to crippling defeat for any of the protagonists in the historical drama. (Mbembe in Akpome, 2016: 53).

In addition, Leon de Kock (2015) describes the contemporary cultural space of South Africa as a liminal one, noting:

[…] South Africa entered a historical interval. It is still caught in this interval, between an intractable present and an irrecoverable past; between things that are no longer and things that are not yet. This is the stalemate many would now like to end. The argument about continuity or discontinuity between apartheid and postapartheid in South African literature, I suggest, needs deeper conceptual treatment of how past and present are disjunctively conjoined within a disenchanted anticipation of a looming future; the time of now-going-forward and the time of history, I argue, are mashed together in a way that suggests the widespread conception of a split temporality—the bad ‘before’ of apartheid and the better ‘after’ of postapartheid—is perhaps an overdone disposition, despite its softening by qualifiers about nonlinearity […] It might, I argue, be more accurate to describe what occurs ‘in’ postapartheid as a reconfigured temporality in which art historian Hal Foster’s ‘future-anterior,’ or the ‘will have been,’ persistently surfaces. (De Kock, 2015: 57).
At this point, it is important to note that neither Nuttall’s *Entanglement* (2009) nor Frenkel and MacKenzie suggest a clean severing from the past in South African history. Nuttall suggests a temporal entanglement as one of the pillars supporting her overall theory. She quotes Achille Mbembe, who states that, “this time ‘is not a series but an interlocking of past and futures, each age bearing, altering and maintaining the previous ones’” (Mbembe in Nuttall, 2009: 4). Furthermore, Frenkel and MacKenzie make explicit that

the term post-transitional is certainly not without its problems. It is, and is not, a temporal marker, as it does refer to something moving but does not claim that the issue involved has been resolved. As a referent it cannot but highlight the passage of time that has passed since South Africa’s transition into democracy, yet it also points to the period before and after this formal transition as an unbound period and discourse. (Frenkel & MacKenzie, 2010: 4)

While Nuttall, Frenkel and MacKenzie acknowledge the teleological overlays of the post-transition, Nuttall’s *Entanglement* still holds a dominant focus on an envisioned (yet not necessarily achieved) future, while Frenkel and MacKenzie focus more on common motifs that have formed distinctive trends in a cultural zone termed ‘the post-transition’. Their interest is therefore not on the temporal aspects of current culture but in the concept of the post-transition as a hypernym for the embodiment of current tendencies that mark a new cultural movement, making it distinct.

Moreover, while Nuttall, Frenkel and MacKenzie’s concepts do address multiple temporalities, they do not overtly suggest the condition of ‘unfulfilled expectation’ or ‘disaffection’, as Van der Vlies terms it (2017). Markers of ambiguity and paradox, as noted by Frenkel and MacKenzie, lend to a state of uncertainty, yet the link between teleology and the murky state of the post-transition is not a dominant focus.

Nedine Moonsamy provides an interesting alternative to reading the post-transition (2013, 2015). Her views provide a new perspective that balances teleological aspects with the ambiguous markers of the in-between time of the present. Moonsamy projects ideas of death, loss and mourning onto the South African post-transitional space, stating:

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4 Despite the date of Mbembe’s publication here, the concept of reading South African culture through overlapping teleologies is even more pertinent now as a dominant trend in current post-transitional theory and has been further developed by Van der Vlies (2017) and Moonsamy (2015).
[the aim of the term post-transitional] is to account for the dynamic changes that occur within a national and literary imaginary after discarding the politically laden impetus of the antiapartheid struggle and the easy optimism of post-apartheid nation building. Yet […] the pervasive representations of death and grieving in contemporary South African literature illumine a premature appraisal of a ‘post-transitional’ state. (Moonsamy, 2013: 77).

To clarify this statement, Moonsamy suggests that to imply a clean break from the past (seen metaphorically as ‘death’ here), in light of the post-transition as a new era, overlooks the in-between time of the present, so aptly written about by Van der Vlies (2017). Moonsamy notes that “structural representations of death can be read as a symptomatic failure of nationalistic desire” (2013: 8).

Moonsamy refers to the liminal space between life and death, comparing it to the period of waiting that the country is experiencing in the post-transition, which Van der Vlies describes (2017). In both her 2013 and 2015 articles, Moonsamy claims that time is not linear and a new mode for reading the present—one which in this case is an amalgamation of the past and future—requires a different teleological lens. In her 2015 work, she argues that mourning, as one would do after death, cannot be applied when understanding the post-transition because it would suggest a finality and point of ending of a prior era, just as death is a final act. She suggests that because the past has not been severed from the present and future in the post-transition, melancholia is a more fitting lens through which the post-transition should be read. Moonsamy thus draws on the works of Jacques Derrida’s Spectres of Marx (1994) and Aporias (1993), in which shift towards the spectre allows for a melancholic reading of entangled temporality as representative of the post-transition. Moonsamy quotes Derrida,

The spectre, by its very nature, challenges the conceptual boundaries between the ‘living’ and the ‘dead’ and so calls into question the equally superficial borders that are often placed between binary oppositions such as a ‘self’ and ‘other’, the ‘past’ and ‘present’. In declaring the border non-existent, the spectre teaches us that ‘there is no limit. There is not yet or there is no longer a border to cross, no opposition between two sides: the limit is too porous, permeable, and indeterminate. (Derrida in Moonsamy, 2015: 70)

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5 Frenkel and MacKenzie (2010) suggest that the post-transitional is not devoid of aspects of the past, but rather that it is present but ‘reconsidered’ and ‘reconfigured’.
Moonsamy weaves Derrida’s concept of *Contretemps*, or ‘against time’, as a mode to address the illogical and unchronological readings of time that portray the temporal overlaps within the post-transitional. Moonsamy suggests that “Derrida’s formulation offers a paradoxical acknowledgement of the future that is both ruptured and restored in its very expression. It thus allows us to account, more suitably, for representations of time and temporality in contemporary South African fiction” (Moonsamy, 2015: 3). The idea of *Contretemps* relates to the observations by current theorists writing on the post-transition, such as Van der Vlies, in that it captures the temporal junctions that ultimately denote a sense of ‘blocked futurity’ in the current nation-state (Van der Vlies, 2017: 17).

In summary, current post-transitional theory simultaneously displays a sense of progress and regress in South African current culture. What this section on current trends in post-transitional theory has portrayed are the ebbs towards and away from rainbow-nationalism and its faults and unfulfilled promises. Although critiqued for its messianistic attitude, I argued that Sarah Nuttall’s *Entanglement* (2009) outlines new and relevant trends in current culture post-transition, which have been continued by Frenkel and MacKenzie (2010), who propose markers of the post-transition and describe the era as ambiguous. Critiques of the terms ‘entanglement’ and ‘post-transition’ by Mark Sanders, Chris Thurman, Leon de Kock and Agogo Akpome, who question the term *post-transitional* through a temporal lens, were then assessed. Finally, Nedine Moonsamy’s arguments of an alternative reading of the post-transition, which suggest that a linear reading of time does not suffice when applied to the South African post-transitional context, were examined.

This theoretical overview of the post-transition is pertinent in this study in that it connects directly to the works of contemporary South African Indian writers. Set in the post-transitional cultural arena, the novels chosen for this study portray aspects of cultural entanglement, hybridity, agency and newness, as suggested by Sarah Nuttall, Frenkel and MacKenzie, and Meg Samuelson. They also demonstrate the paradoxical elements of the present that critique the shortcomings of the theory of entanglement and can be linked to Van der Vlies’s disaffection in the present and Moonsamy’s use of Derrida’s *Contretemps* for reading the illogicality of the post-transitional.

1.4 Justification of the study’s research methodology

This study combines current post-transitional theories with ideas surrounding South African Indian identity (or Indianness) through a close reading of the chosen texts by South African
Indian writers. The methodology for the proposed study comprises close readings of four South African Indian texts through the lens of contemporary post-transitional theories, evaluating this from both the view of rainbow-nationalism and the realization and resultant despair of unfulfilled promises. In addition to a contextualisation of Indian identity in South African literature, the concepts of newness and entanglement will be contrasted with ideas of unanticipated disaffection by the South African nation post-1994 as theoretical frameworks with which to analyse the four texts under consideration in this study. Through this process, I aim to address the need for further study into contemporary fiction by South African Indian writers, whose novels, I argue, reflect the complex and ambiguous state of culture in post-apartheid South Africa. My reading will argue that Zinaid Meeran’s and Shaida Kazi Ali’s novels emphasise movement towards the idealised rainbow nation, where entanglement, hybridity, agency and humour are present and racial oppression and segregation are left behind. In contrast, Imraan Coovadia’s novel, *High Low In-Between* (2009), foregrounds issues such as crime and corruption while repositioning social and racial integration, thus debunking stereotypes and shifting away from issues of race in favour of social class. Shubnum Khan’s novel lies between these contrasts in its inclusion of both acceptance of hybridity across generations and evidence of the difficulties arising from issues such as crime and corruption in post-apartheid South Africa, read through overlapping temporalities. My close readings will focus on how the authors employ strategies of interiority, humour, sarcasm, imagery and paradox in their exploration of South African Indian identity in post-apartheid South Africa and post-transitional society in general.

1.5 Overview of chapters

**Chapter 1: Reconfiguring Identity Markers in Zinaid Meeran’s *Saracen at the Gates***

This chapter will consider how the concepts of entanglement and cultural hybridity find expression in Zinaid Meeran’s *Saracen at the Gates* (2009). The structure of the novel and how it symbolises cultural change in South Africa, often from binary oppositions to a freer, more culturally entangled space, will be the primary focus. Concentrating on the transformative identities of the protagonists, this chapter will analyse the ways in which traditional markers of identity are debunked in Meeran’s novel, mirroring the post-transitional arena in its ambiguous and culturally overlapping nature.
Chapter 2: Interiority and Agency in Shaida Kazie Ali’s *Lesson’s in Husbandry*

Chapter 2 will consider how the mechanism of agency facilitates the transgression of socially prescribed traditions that govern alterity. It will examine how the novel explores freedom and how, through freedom, one may possibly redefine one’s own history. I will specifically look at Ali’s use of interiority and how the this technique allows for the contrast of private lives with public spaces as a way of expressing social change and development. Additionally, this chapter will discuss the role of memory and imagery found in the private writings of the protagonist and how these signify a need to address and understand the past in order to comprehend the present and future. Through this reading, the chapter will discuss the complex dynamic between history and entangled present spaces.

Chapter 3: Interrogating the Present in Imraan Coovadia’s *High Low In-between*

Chapter 3 is paramount to this study in creating a comprehensive evaluation of the post-transition. Through a study of Imraan Coovadia’s novel, this chapter will examine the resurfacing of national issues in the post-transitional era that expose the present from an different perspective from the previous chapters. Coovadia’s novel illustrates issues such as crime, corruption and denial of the HIV pandemic, revealing the underbelly of the ‘rainbow-nation’ ideal. The chapter will address the sense of national disaffection in the post-transitional space and the paradoxical elements of the novel that speak to this issue. Through a close reading of the text, this chapter will examine mechanisms of power in current South African culture in light of African Nationalism and denialism. Furthermore, it will explore the metaphorical motif of the looking glass and the connection to current readings of temporality in perceiving the post-transition.

Chapter 4: Layered Temporality and Belonging in Shubnum Khan’s *Onion Tears*

Chapter 4 will discuss how Shubnum Khan’s *Onion Tears* demonstrates the overlaps between history and identity in a multi-cultural space, merging ideas of temporality and belonging. Central to my discussion will be the transference of culture across time and how this process speaks to the teleological aspects of current post-transitional theory. The chapter will serve as a means to integrate cross-generational voices and perspectives, contributing to the novel’s reflection of the ambiguities of current post-transitional culture and, relatedly, the interchange between “race, history, space/place and nation” (Frenkel & MacKenzie, 2010: 2). Through a close reading of the text, notions of South African Indian identity and belonging will be addressed as a necessary part of the involved and layered nature of the post-transition. Building
on from prior chapters, this chapter will assimilate different perspectives of the post-transition, therefore contributing to an overall evaluation of the post-transitional present.
Chapter One
Reconfiguring Identity Markers in Zinaid Meeran’s *Saracen at the Gates*

Zinaid Meeran’s novel, *Saracen at the Gates* (2009), is relevant to this study for two reasons. The first is that it is an example of ‘post-transitional writing’—produced after the transition of South Africa from apartheid to democracy, once the production of ‘protest literature’ had abated. Secondly, it is part of the canon of contemporary South African Indian writing, which tends to draw on ideas that were originally configured into the term post-transitional. Although this term is problematic and has been contested, as outlined in the introduction of this study, the characteristics of writings that fall into this category persist as dominant features since South Africa’s transitional period. Notable characteristics are “[cultural] blendings, interconnections, hybridities and ambiguities” (Frenkel & Mackenzie, 2010:5). Such ideas depart from the racial fetishizations and the Manicheanism of anti-apartheid protest literature. Zinaid Meeran’s *Saracen at the Gates* embleatises this shift in South African writing from a space of cultural and racial intolerance to an expanding arena of entangled identities and cultural intersections. It represents what Michael Chapman refers to as post-postapartheid in his “Introduction: Conjectures on South African Literature” (2011), where the challenge now is connection rather than separation. This chapter will analyse the reconfigurations of identity markers in the post-transitional space in Meeran’s novel. The novel is roughly structured to reflect cultural change in South Africa over the past 24 years; so, the more traditional markers of identity appear in the first half of the novel and will be contrasted to the post-transitional markers of identity in the second half.

Meeran’s novel pivots on the Cachalia twins, Zakira and Zakir, and the formation of their identity within the South African Indian community of Fordsburg, Johannesburg, as well as outside national borders. The focus will be on how the identities of these siblings change over the course of the novel: how they are shaped by their socio-religious cultural surroundings and how they are reconfigured into undecidable, hybridised identities as the novel progresses. This analysis will take into account Rajendra Chetty’s point that “[…] in order to read South African Indian writing to critique identity politics, one must keep in mind the diasporic condition of the author constructing his/her identity in opposition to mainstream ideological constructions in pre- and postapartheid South Africa” (Chetty in Singh, 2011: 48). Similarly, Zinaid Meeran’s *Saracen at the Gates* integrates key issues relating to South African Indian identity, set within
the changing contemporary space of South Africa. He redefines identity politics by using traditional identity markers, such as race, gender and creed, as a starting point, only to then compel his readers to question the validity of such categorical markers of identity within the murky space of the post-transitional.

This chapter will assess Meeran’s use of identity markers in the South African cultural space. It will begin with an analysis of traditional features of race, class, gender and creed as identity markers, read largely as being binary, infused by Manicheanism and stemming from the apartheid era. The chapter will then challenge these views of identity categorisation through a close reading of the metamorphosis of the characters Zakira and Zakir, as they become indefinable, hybridised and culturally entangled beings. Furthermore, the role of space and place and their relationship to changing identities in the post-transitional arena, as depicted through Zakira’s excursions through Johannesburg, as part of the Saracen group, and Zakir’s transnational escapades, will be examined.

As noted, the structure of the novel is set out to reflect the transition of South Africa, through the linear arrangement of the chapters of the book. As such, the first half of the novel depicts early post-apartheid rhetoric that was still laden with protest narratives and Manicheanism, while in the second part, the post-transitional is reflected. Nuttall’s belief that,

the story of post-apartheid has been told within the register of difference—frequently for good reason, but often, too, ignoring the intricate overlaps that mark the present and, at times, and in important ways, the past, as well (2009: 1).

finds expression here: Meeran’s novel uses the past to display markers of difference. However, it is how these markers of difference are embraced and the implications that allow us to trace the trajectory of not only the characters’ development, but also as an example of South African culture post-transition.

It is worth emphasising at this point that, although the term post-transitional has received its share of criticism, I nevertheless use the term because it serves as a hypernym for reading a unique set of cultural trends that have been mapped over a specific period of time. While I agree with Chris Thurman and Aghogho Akpome’s argument that the ‘post’ in post-transitional problematically suggests that the transition is finished or has been completed, in “Places Elsewhere, Then and Now: Allegory ‘before’ and ‘after’ South Africa’s Transition?” (Thurman, 2010) and in “Towards a Reconceptualization of ‘(Post) Transitional’ South African Cultural Expression” (Akpome, 2016), the crux of my argument is that the term post-
transitional remains helpful in reading the complexities of cultural concepts that mark current writing in South Africa. Such complexities are seen in Meeran’s novel and will form the backbone of this chapter.

Indeed, understanding the post-transitional helps clarify the specific shift from a Manichean outlook that governed identity during apartheid and the early years of post-apartheid transition. It allows for a reading of culture from a lens that can account for the ambiguities and paradoxes of identity that arise from living within a shared post-colonial, and thus cosmopolitan, location. Frenkel and McKenzie write about the problematic nature of defining the country in terms of an either-or logic, stating that:

the efficacy of an either/or logic that seeks to classify rigidly according to the concepts of, for example, black/white, transformed/unchanged, colonial/post-colonial, is problematized as a means of understanding South Africa and the transnational relations that connect it to the globe […] This “reading of difference approach” would necessarily lead to unhelpful binary conceptualizations, a tendency that characterizes much scholarship in South Africa, which is then marked by strict polarity between black and white, good and bad, past and present, etc. [instead of mapping the connections between them and overlaps within these features of identity]. Such simplistic dualities mask the blendings, interconnections, hybridities and ambiguities that characterize post-transitional South African cultural formations, resulting in a compacted rather than diversified reading of the present. (Frenkel & MacKenzie, 2010: 5)

This chapter will demonstrate how Saracen at the Gates allows – or even demands – for this type of reading of current culture in South Africa.

1.1 Manichean identity markers as precursors for cultural change in the first half of Meeran’s Saracen at the Gates

Literature in South Africa over the past 24 years has undergone a significant metamorphosis, which includes the rise of protest literature. In Writing South Africa: Literature, Apartheid, and Democracy, 1970-1995 (1998), Rosemary Jolly and Derek Attridge note the importance of such literature, citing it as a reaction to the oppression and pain of apartheid, but also explain that it gave rise to a period of cultural expression that continued to rely on the binaries of ‘us and them’ – not only in racial terms, but also in terms of “patriarchy, sexism, homophobia, class and language bias, ethnic nationalism and so on” (Attridge & Jolly, 1998:2).
Similarly, in the process of reconfiguring identity markers in *Saracen at the Gates*, Meeran exploits traditional identity markers that stem from apartheid-era thought, initially seeming to suggest that identity is founded on binary categories in which one must fit, such as one race or another, one creed or another, one gender or another. At this point, the Manichean, bifurcated approach that governed the concept of selfhood and identity during apartheid and early post-apartheid is suggested. The first half of Meeran’s novel is thus rife with binary constructions that result in discrimination of ‘the other’, resulting in fixed ideas about belonging or exclusion. Reference to *darky-ous* (p. 7), *char-ous* (p. 5) and *kaffirs* (p. 26), as opposed to fairer-skinned people, and *kwerekweres* (p. 9), as opposed to South African nationals, for instance, exhibit the Manichean outlook that dominates the opening chapters of the novel, demonstrating ideas of inclusion and exclusion, self and other. However, as the novel progresses, these bifurcated identity markers are scrutinised through the personal journey of Zakira Cachalia and, to some extent, that of Zakir. This section will focus on the categories of race, social class, creed and gender as simplistic identity markers that reflect a reading of South African culture characterised by early post-apartheid thought. Then, in the second half of the novel, these identity markers begin to shift; they are challenged and reconfigured in the post-transitional space.

The first marker of identity seen in the beginning of Meeran’s novel is that of race. Race was the defining marker of difference in the apartheid era and this extended into the early post-apartheid period as a key feature from which identity was constructed (Frenkel, *Reconsiderations: South African Indian Fiction and the Making of Race in Postcolonial Culture*, 2010: 13). Writing on the position of race in identity construction, Frenkel notes that “[through Apartheid ideology] race was fetishised and all other aspects of identity occupied secondary positions” (2010: 13). This emphasis on race is testament to the Manicheanism that underpinned cultural narratives of the time. In the first chapter of *Saracen at the Gate*, race stands out as a marker of identity. Zakira defines her identity largely through how she defines her race in comparison to those around her. She makes direct reference to her appearance, referring to the shade of her skin. Vron Ware and Les Back suggest that “how we look largely determines how we see” (in Nuttall, 2009: 10). Elaborating on the construction of identity, Stuart Hall, in “New Ethnicities”, proclaims that “we think about identification as a simple process, structured around ‘fixed’ selves which we either are or are not” (2008: 586). Zakira considers race as a simplistic, fixed marker of identity that she can use as a distinguishing
feature of difference in classifying people, including herself. It is only later in the novel that this thought about race as a simple marker of identity is reconsidered.

Zakira’s friends in the first half of the novel are of similar ethnicity and are connected through lineage to India or Pakistan, yet she distinguishes herself from them owing to differences in skin colour. Her reference to skin colour uncovers her preference towards lighter skin tones. Zakira’s persistent commentary denoting skin colour highlights race as a marker in her construction of self. An example of this belief is seen in her description of her friend, Shubnum Khan, whose family has descended from the Pathan tribe in Pakistan (p. 2), as being “so pale that she absorbs the colour of the nearest light source” (p. 5). Furthermore, she contrasts her skin tone and features with that of her twin brother’s:

He is as fair as a boer guy and I am on the darker side. He has eyes the colour of olives, to match his car. Mine are like black eggs. He has a snub nose and I have a beaky one. It is as though he grew up with his nose pressed to a shop window slobbering over the tricycle he was soon to receive for his birthday while I grew up with my face pressed against a door—by him (p. 6).

Zakira’s commentary on race and appearance suggests the limited viewpoint from which she defines herself in opposition to others.

Social class is the second point of focus used in identity construction in the first half of the novel. The Cachalia family holds a respectable position in the Muslim community of Johannesburg, residing in the area of Fordsburg, a predominantly Islamic suburb in the city. Zakira prides herself on her social class and attempts to use wealth and social status to combat the fact that her skin is darker than her friends’. She says, “lucky thing I’m rich, so I don’t have to be fair” (p. 5).

Indeed, Meeran brings attention to the complexities of identity by overlapping markers of social class with ethnicity. Through the actions of the Curry Mafia Princesses, the upper-class group of South African Indian Muslim females that define Zakira’s social life, it is evident how social class is used as a way of discriminating against others who may all fall within the perceived category of ‘South African Indian’. In the first chapter of Meeran’s novel, the Curry Mafia Princesses blatantly discriminate against a group of men they meet at a bar, as they clearly consider them inferior in terms of social class. When the young ladies are approached by a man described as “an alcoholic maths teacher type . . . Benedictine Govindamsy or Angamuthu Applesammy or some such jungle name” (p. 1), it is clear that the man is being
discriminated against through his ethnicity and class rather than his race. The discrimination continues in the same scene. When this man invites Shubnum Khan to a party, she dismisses him arrogantly, replying, “thanks, but I prefer to date within my own species” (p. 3). The reference to the men in the club as ‘desperate Indians’ (p. 6) makes class an obvious factor in identity, forming a barrier of separation. Similarly, the bouncer at the club is described as “an ignorant low-class thing originally from Unit Six, Chatsworth, Durban” (p. 4). Difference can here be seen as a weapon of power to oppress, described by Said in “Crisis [in orientalism]” as “the hegemonism of possessing minorities” (Said in Lodge & Wood, 2000: 371).

In Kala Pani: Caste and Colour in South Africa (2001), Ebr-Vally discusses these roles of sameness and difference in the formation of identity among South African Indians. She critiques an essentialist view of Indians in South Africa, explaining the vast differences within the Indian culture, such as caste and religion, and how they have been repositioned in a South African context. Similarly, Meeran strategically includes this interaction between ethnicity and class as a means of drawing attention to the complexities of identity and the problematic nature of essentialist, simplistic readings. From an opposing perspective, writing on authenticity in South African Indian identity in his doctoral thesis, titled Transnational Cultural Flows and the Representations of Postapartheid Same-Sex Sexualities, Andy Carolin suggests that “in Meeran’s novel, the designation Indian itself comes to signify a racially-pure, ethnic identity rather than a national affiliation” (2017: 180). However, from my analysis of ethnicity and social class, as used to write about difference in the beginning of Meeran’s novel, I argue that a reading of South African Indianness in terms of race and ethnicity is essentialist. Such simplistic categories conceal the multitude of differences that occur within a socially constructed category, such as ‘South African Indian’. The complexities of this term are better understood when considering the history of Indians in South Africa. Doing so allows for the identification of overlaps of ethnicities, religions and classes and overcomes the problem of viewing South African Indians from an essentialist perspective.

As such, the ostracization of the men at the bar by the Curry Mafia Princesses in the first chapter of Meeran’s novel has historical roots that need outlining here. Rehana Ebr-Vally (2001) provides a detailed and complex analysis of the arrival of Indians in South Africa and the social stratifications already in place. She makes distinct reference to two separate influxes of Indians

6 In her article, “Reimagining Muslim Women Through the Prism of Minor Diasporic and National Literatures” (2017), Naseem L. Aumeerally explains that “Kala Pani or ‘black water’ refers to the taboo within Indian society of crossing the oceans. Thousands of Indian agricultural workers travelled the Indian and Atlantic oceans to [South Africa], Mauritius, Fiji and Trinidad [and more], mainly under the system of indentured labour” (p. 40)
into South Africa, namely indentured Indians, who arrived in Natal in 1860, who were followed by passenger Indians, who arrived around 1870 (Ebr-Vally, 2001: 122-123). She notes that “the majority of indentured immigrants were Hindus” (2001: 122), while passenger Indians were predominantly Muslim traders. The passenger Indians who arrived in South Africa after the indentured Indians did so of their own free will with the intention of setting up shops that would serve the needs of the Indians who arrived before them (Ebr-Vally, 2001: 124). The arrival of the indentured laborers was different. These laborers were coaxed into migrating to South Africa to work on the Natal sugarcane plantations. Frenkel notes that, “while the majority of indentured Indians emigrated for economic reasons, many were brought under false pretences or after agents utilised familial strife as leverage to make people sign indenture contracts” (2010: 10). Indentured laborers were predominantly from South India, while passenger Indians were predominantly from the North. Such geographical differences found expression in differences based on language, religion and social caste. Moreover, whilst Ebr-Vally provides a detailed account that argues against a purist reading of what constitutes the category indentured immigrant, she provides a plausible explanation for indentured laborers in Natal being viewed as low-caste Indians, or untouchables. The notion stemmed from the Europeans in the Natal colony, underpinned by racist discourse. Ebr-Vally explains that:

During the 19th and early 20th centuries it was a widespread belief amongst the Natal Europeans that only low-caste Indians or untouchables had immigrated to South Africa. This obviously served the racist purpose of discrimination against those referred to as ‘coolies’. Whites lamented the social practices and lack of hygiene of the ‘Indians’ and attributed these to their supposedly low-caste origins (2001: 127).

It is evident that this assessment of indentured immigrants of Natal has continued amongst South African Indians today, as is seen in Meeran’s novel. The treatment of the South African Indian men who Zakira and her clan assume are from KwaZulu Natal is based on the use of class as a distinguishing factor, which is then used as both a means of discrimination and a tool through which the image of self is configured against the social ‘other’. Identity within historical Indian custom is a complex notion, whereby social caste, religion and gender politics all play a role, as Ebr-Vally details in chapter five of Kala Pani (2001). Remnants of the caste system are evident in South African Indian identity today and overlap with the markers of class and ethnicity seen in Meeran’s novel.
Although Meeran uses the Manichean dynamics here, of ‘upper versus lower class’, in the engagement between the Curry Mafia Princesses and the Indian men at the bar, his irony is noticeable here once Zakira’s ancestry is explained. Meeran dates the arrival of Zakira’s parents’ families: Zakira’s mother grew up in poverty in Natal and her ancestry points to indentured immigrants. Zakira, referring to her grandparents and her mother, explains that,

My mommy’s parents, my Mama and Namina, hell they are dark: I mean, Namina, she is blue-black. They were skrik they would be lumped in with the Africans as another tribe of jungle bunnies. There are rumours my Mommy is of canecutter stock and on top of that a thumbee – Tamil – and that her great grandfather converted to Islam. (p. 44)

With her grandfather having converted from Hinduism to Islam, Mommy’s history reflects a repositioning of the divisions in religion and class, due to the propinquity of a group of people of Indian decent forced into the same space by indentured labour. Zakira’s father, on the other hand, descends from passenger Indians, who arrived in South Africa under far better conditions. Zakira describes the Cachalia history as follows:

The Cachalias got here in 1886, when a tent city had just blossomed over the seven ridges of the Witwatersrand, like a field of dirty lilies. The Cachalias and Ganchis, two of the oldest clans in the curry mafia, were rival grocers, sharp operators who always managed to keep their stores fully stocked. (p. 119)

It is evident from these extracts that Zakira’s ancestry is hybrid. As such, a purist reading of ‘South African Indian’ as a simplistic category is fallacious. These extracts also demonstrate irony; with this knowledge, the reader views Zakira and her clan pride and her discrimination against the Indian men as “ignorant low-class thing[s] originally from Unit Six, Chatsworth, Durban” (p. 4) through a new lens. At this point in the novel, Zakira is portrayed as shallow-minded, determining her identity through a binary narrative structure, through which she either deems herself better or worse than her object of comparison.

Moreover, in these social interactions described above, it is evident that Meeran is examining traditional markers of identity at the start of his novel. Class becomes a distinguishing factor, rather than race and ethnicity in this instance, yet the entire section of his novel still reads for a minimalistic perspective of identity construction. What underlines the various markers of identity in this section of Meeran’s novel is bifurcated thought that rests upon notions of separation rather than integration.
Whereas race and social class have been discussed as features of identity formation used in the beginning of Meeran’s novel, gender is another prism through which identity is filtered in the novel. For instance, Zakira’s experience as a woman is set against her brother’s and contextualised within the realms of their Islamic upbringing as different. The socio-religious pressures that the twins endure derive largely from their parents. However, the demands on each twin are unequal. For instance, while Zakira has to adhere to strict rules at home, such as curfews, her brother does not. While Zakira races against the clock to meet her curfew of 1 am from her nights out in Johannesburg so that she can escape her mother’s wrath, her brother, Zakir,

breezes in whenever his lordship pleases, complete with a new dent in his car, freshly fucked and hungry. He pulls in at 7.30 am and requests blueberry-kumquat pancakes with Canadian maple syrup and my Mommy complies, no questions asked. She even tucks a serviette under his chin, combs the forelock from his eyes, and places a knife and fork in his hands, shaking as they are with the DTs. (p. 8)

Meeran’s use of humour here is a typical feature of his writing, used to introduce large underlying societal issues, such as gender inequality in this case.

Inner reality versus outer appearance and societal expectation collide in Meeran’s novel and the conflict between gender expectations in the family and surrounding cultural norms versus the expectation of the self, create a conflict of identity for Zakira. In the first half of the novel, Zakira has to navigate between her expected identity at home in her Muslim community and her chosen identify outside the home. In “Walking Through the Door and Inhabiting the House: South African Literary Criticism After the Transition”, Meg Samuelson describes one view of home as distinct from the surrounding public social spaces, quoting Rosemary George as follows: “Homes are not about inclusions and wide-open arms as much as they are about places carved out of closed doors, closed orders and screening apparatuses” (2009:132). Yet homes may often reveal private or hidden lives. In Zakira’s case, her home life and expectations of norms and custom are integrated with Indian family structures as well as Islamic customs. The Indian family structure is explained by Ebr-Vally (2001) as follows:

The extended Indian family unit, the fraternity or baradari or bhaiband, consists of an average of three or four generations. A baradari is a male dominated structure in which the father is the head of the family. He rules his son’s lives, and is himself ruled by his elder brothers, his father and grandfather. (p. 112)
This tradition continues as each son gets married and forms his own family. Ebr-Vally goes on to note that, “the hierarchical organisation of the extended family is reflected in terms of kinship that name each family member, both male and female. Although the female side of the family is dominated by the male side, all its members receive equivalent hierarchical kinship titles [which link to hierarchy within social caste]” (2001: 113). It is evident that although women are given equivalent kinship titles, the power within the family still lies in the hands of the male family members. This custom is then reinforced through religion. As such, Zakira’s position within her family can be related to a greater set of customs within her immediate community. Understanding this family structure forms a basis from which Zakira’s conflicting identity can be analysed. It also clarifies the role held by her twin brother, Zakir, whose treatment within the family is different to his sister’s. Indeed, Zakir has enjoyed being spoilt as the only son and has generally had no responsibility – this is, of course, until his father decides to send him, against his will, to Palestine to volunteer as an ambulance driver in the hopes that he might learn responsibility (pp. 20-21). Although he crashes the ambulance while under the influence of drugs, he is still received by his community in South Africa as a hero of sorts. His mother’s first words to him upon arrival are “Zakir! My boohoo! What the Yahudis did to you my baby?” (p. 121), while the Islamic Medical Association and Fordsburg Chamber of Commerce welcome back the boy with the following speech:

We owe our heartfelt gratitude to Zakir bhaai. He how-you-say did us all proud in Falasteen, until the how-you-say Yahudis and Nasaras conspired to disable the ambulance. How-you-say, what you call foul play, dear brother, elders. Who are the terrorists I what-you-call ask you? (p. 124)

Once again, Meeran’s use of humour here raises a number of social issues. The extract is laden with political and religious binaries between Muslims and Jews. Moreover, read against Zakira’s experience as a female in her Muslim household and community, the text expresses clear gender bias towards males.

Thus, while Zakira is restricted at home by socio-religious expectations, outside of the home her actions show a longing for release from such pressures, which are heightened by the fact that she is female and is expected to comply to prescribed norms within her patriarchal family structure. Writing on Muslim women’s identity in diasporic literature, in “Reimagining Muslim Women through the Prism of Minor Diasporic and National Literatures”, Naseem L. Aumeerally (2017) discusses intensified pressures on Muslim women in the post-911 age.
While gender and religion have for a long time been significant factors in female Muslim identity, she quotes Cook, stating that “Muslim women ‘are no longer thought of as individuals: collectively they become the “Muslimwoman”’” (2008: 91). [This perception] attests to the hegemony of orientalist iconography – namely, the veil that she singles out – in charting what it means to be a Muslim woman today” (Aumeerally, 2017: 39). Aumeerally explains the impact of religion on female identity in Islamic culture, in which there is no distinction between being seen as a woman and a Muslim, or vice versa. It is thus demanded of Zakira that she conform to her prescribed socio-religious role. This demand is again made evident in Zakira’s arranged marriage proposal from the pious Jumsheed Dhadabhaai, which takes place the morning after one of Zakira’s clubbing escapades. Carolin notes that, “That this [marriage] negotiation involves ‘brothers’ and male ‘elders’ suggests […] that this community is explicitly patriarchal” (2017: 203). At the beginning of this scene, Zakira’s mother wakes her up to inform her that there are some important guests awaiting her. Zakira’s mother then says that she needs to prepare herself for the guests and ‘dress nicely’ (2009: 11). Zakira tries to make sense of her mother’s nervous energy. She explains that,

“Nicely” is my Mommy’s code for, wear a scarf and make sure your legs are covered, and not simply by pants. It means wear pants by all means, but wear a skirt over them. More precisely, ensure the pants are visible so the menfolk know you are wearing a pair. They must be certain your panties are not exposed to ants or insects which may be able to look up your skirt. In fact, it means make sure you wear a Punjabi (p. 11).

Zakira is thus being told to alter her chosen identity and conform to traditional norms governed by her patriarchal audience. Zakira’s dilemma here reflects a struggle that Meyda Yeğenoğlu, in observations on the representation of Islamic women in “The Battle of the Veil; Women between Orientalism and Nationalism”, aptly describes as “the opposition between the loyal and the disloyal, the believer and the infidel” (2008: 723).

An additional point of note here is the financial implications in Dadabhaai’s marriage proposal. His family’s wealth is what appeals most to Zakira’s parents, specifically to her father. While putting on a religious façade in front of the Dadabhaais and the local Imam, Zakira sees through her father’s pretence:

My father is a hard-nosed business man. He may well have a beard, but it’s because he’s so hairy he would have to shave at least twice a day to keep himself from looking
scruffy. His resemblance to these Holy Joes [the Dababaais] ends there. He speaks the language of cold hard cash, not airy-fairy matters of the afterlife (p. 15).

The financial interest underpinning this marriage proposal display it as a transaction, where Zakira is the commodity to be purchased. The expectation that Zakira will adhere to the custom of arranged marriage within a family that only pretends to be religious infuriates her. Her own image of who she is collides with the image she is expected to uphold in her family and in Muslim society as a woman.

As Zakira walks down the steps and sees the respected religious community in her living room, accompanied by their community Imam, she suspects that her impious social life has been discovered. She assumes she is being punished for living a life of sin:

 Had I been spotted clubbing by a traitor who had shopped me out to Imam Cassimjee […] Had my parents decided that my post-matric malaise would be solved by recruitment into the ranks of madressa teachers? […] Had my Daddy decided to ship me off to Mia’s farm to be reformed? […] What if IDI [Islamic Dawat International] had earmarked me as a suitable bibi to teach Mozambican child prostitutes the thrills of Islam? (2009: 13)

Meeran foregrounds ideas of contradiction and segregation, pointing to religion and culture forming barriers that separate Zakira’s life outside of the home and family with that inside it, where the latter is determined by her gender.

While gender is used to demonstrate unequal social positions and the impact thereof on Zakira’s identity in the first half of Meeran’s novel, the females in the novel are also responsible for transmitting culture through the generations. Frenkel discusses the motif commonly seen in South African Indian writing of the biblical figure of Ruth, who epitomises adaptation (2010: 134). Mrs Cachalia shares these characteristics, specifically when we consider her origins. Frenkel, referring to indentured Indians in South Africa, as documented through the works of Agnes Sam (1989), notes that:

 Indian women were essential to the process of adaptation. They confronted new school systems for their children; struggled to maintain the old religion in a new country; faced prohibitions about marriage that further restricted the limited number of suitors from the same religious background, language group or caste. They experienced indentured labour; discriminatory laws; a poll tax and imprisonment when they could not pay;
isolation from their families in India... Yet they confronted, adapted and won in various situations where their culture conflicted with those of Europe. (Sam, in Frenkel, 2010: 134)

Indeed, Mrs Cachalia has battled oppression based on race, class, gender and creed for most of her life. She carries a history of struggle with her and was directly affected by South African Indian indenture and growing up in poverty in Umlazi, Natal. As a child, she tended to her younger siblings while her mother worked long hours as a seamstress, with a part-time job cleaning out the innards of cattle to then resell. These circumstances suggest that the females, who moved across the Indian ocean to accompany the men to strange lands, are those who adapt and ensure family survival. Referring to the indentured immigrants arriving to work in the sugar cane fields of Natal, Zakira sums up her mother’s ability to adapt and survive, saying that, “she was, after all, a cane rat come good and learned new survival tactics fast” (p. 57). Zakira’s maternal grandfather was largely absent and, when he was around, her beat Zakira’s mother (pp. 55-56). She thus had to help her mother fend for the whole family from a young age. These cycles of gender oppression in Zakira’s family extend through her family in various forms, thus influencing her identity and the identities of female characters generally.

1.2 Redefining identity through a post-transitional lens in the second half of Saracen at the Gates

In the first half of Meeran’s novel, distinct markers of identity – race, class, ethnicity, religion and gender – are apparent. Although Meeran does suggest complications of identity in the first half of his novel, such as through the illustrations of Zakira’s conflicting identity due to gender and religious expectations, markers of identity still tend to function on a fairly simple axis and are easily recognisable. It is in the second half of the novel that reasonably clear-cut identity markers become indefinable and unintelligible through aspects of hybridisation and cultural entanglement. While this development is apparent in Zakira Cachalia, the complex characterisation of those who influence her identity along the way, such as the elusive Sophie, will be analysed from the stance of post-transitional readings of identity. Zakira’s twin, Zakir, whose identity is also transformed, becoming indeterminable and transnational identity, is also discussed in this section.

Literature is used as a means of reading current culture and social change in South Africa in this study. In reading Meeran’s novel through this lens, a clear shift in national rhetoric from the first to the second half is discernible. In “Reconsidering South African Indian Fiction
Postapartheid”, Frenkel suggests that the South African Indian literary canon, of which *Saracen at the Gates* forms a part, “offers a different lens through which to view the tangled and complex forms of interdependency that mark both South African and transnational cultures more broadly” (Frenkel, 2011:3). Thus, while the first half represents bifurcated thought, evident in the simplistic markers of identity that position one in opposition to the other, in the second half, Meeran’s novel moves into the sphere of post-postapartheid, whereby the interplay between characters unveils cultural overlaps and entangled identities. The boundaries set up in the beginning are blurred, demonstrating Nuttall’s concept of entanglement, where, “[in] the sites and spaces in which what was once thought of as separate identities, spaces, histories—come together to find points of intersection in unexpected ways” (Nuttall, 2009). It is notable here that Nuttall’s concept of entanglement is problematic in that it overlooks aspects of the present that, to some, represent a failure of South Africa’s ‘rainbow nation’ (Van der Vlies, 2017). Yet despite these trenchant critiques, Nuttall’s theory still provides a framework from which post-transitional notions of identity, as seen in Meeran’s second half of *Saracen at the Gates*, can be conceptualised.

There is a distinct point at which Zakira’s worldview begins to shift: the moment she meets the elusive character Sophie. Zakira, while on a date with a potential marriage partner at Emmerentia Dam, sees Sophie on the lawn and is immediately drawn to her. Zakira explains, “I had perved girls before, the mintyness of their breath, that citric tomato smell on their skin, the blonde down at their jawlines, but this girl I wanted to leap on” (p. 79). Zakira’s attraction to Sophie and her bisexuality add further conflict to her ideas of her own identity. In “Transnational Cultural Flows and the Representations of Postapartheid Same-Sex Sexualities”, Carolin reads *Saracen at the Gates* as a challenge to the expected heteronormativity within Islamic female identities. He also uses Zakira’s conflict in terms of gender identity to argue that this text portrays the notion of Indianness within the South African context. It is notable here that the identity marker of gender, read within Zakira’s religious community as described in the first section of this chapter, becomes challenged, as Zakira redefines the way in which gender impacts her idea of self. I read this shift from a different lens, where the focus is not on Zakira’s sexual orientation, of which she is not herself sure, but rather as an engagement with change. Sophie is a catalyst for change in Zakira’s identity. In Zakira’s words, “Sophie had a way of forcing freedom on people” (p. 294). It is not her sexual connection with another woman that is the point here, but rather that through her interaction and relationship with Sophie, Zakira’s worldview is altered. Sophie personifies a complexity
of identity markers. She represents change, ambiguity and entangled identity and Zakira’s interaction with her reshapes her own identity. The novel can thus be read as a metaphor for cultural change in South Africa, evident in Zakira’s shifts from a closed-minded, dualistic conceptualisation of identity, to an open-minded, diversified one that questions the limited perspectives she held of herself and the world around her. The focus here is thus on connection rather than separation, between people and places, and how this affects perceptions of identity in the post-transitional arena.

The shift in Zakira’s identity and the alteration of her worldview from ‘Curry Mafia Princess’ to the more informed and open-minded young woman she becomes after her interactions with Sophie, are evident through Meeran’s comparison of her old self with her new identity. Zakira is caught between her old identity, which is defined by her wealth, gender and religion, and her new identity, formed through her engagements with Sophie and her female socio-political activist group ‘the Saracens’. She decides to revisit her past and invite her former ‘Curry Mafia Princess’ friends to join her on a shopping escapade at Sandton City, only to find that she has transformed so much that she can no longer tolerate these girls. Their identities are constructed on their social and financial status, ‘othering’ those whom they perceive as different. While her friends Aziza and Shubnum think the clothing sales are great deals, Zakira, who has never looked at a price tag before, suddenly cannot believe how much the items are (p. 242). She realises here how money defines the ‘Curry Mafia Princesses’ as well as her former identity. Even more telling is the limited worldview and racial prejudice held by the girls when they suspect Zakira’s attraction to a black man in the shop. The racist undercurrent and bifurcated perspective of the Curry Mafia Princesses, and of Zakira in the first part of the novel, underpin Aziza’s reaction:

Aziza caught me perving a black yuppie. “Hey, I saw you checking out that black guy”. Aziza expected me to deny it. She would charf me and then appear to be joking. Secure in the knowledge that none of us could ever find a black guy attractive, we would make little quips about the little curly hairs on the pillow and how difficult it would be to clean them up. We would laugh too long and too hard over the large proportion of the household budget that would go towards deodorant and air freshener. It was an old joke, a bonding ritual. “Ya, I perved him. So, what?” I said instead.

Aziza’s mouth fell open […]
“Zakira, you mean to say you would actually let one of those guys …” Aziza struggled to get the words out, “… touch you?” (p. 242)

This narrow-mindedness and discriminative attitude remind Zakira of her identity before meeting Sophie—one defined by race, class, gender and religion, from which positions of bias and othering were formed in order to distinguish identity from the self. Furthermore, this episode demonstrates the change in Zakira’s identity. Following her engagements with Sophie and the Saracens, the boundaries that were used to define identity have been blurred: her notions of gender, sexuality, race and class have been challenged as markers of identity. Meeran uses this scene to illustrate a reading of the present, of being caught between past national rhetoric and future possibilities. Zakira’s new perspectives can be read as a metaphor for national culture, where the post-transitional becomes apparent. The markers of post-transition here are seen through Zakira’s rejection of the need to fit into socially prescribed categories of identity and in which she accepts her current indefinable state of self. Lisa Propst, in “Reconciliation and the ‘Self-in-Community’ in Post-Transitional South African Fiction” (2017), citing Derek Attridge (2004), describes this process as “respond[ing] ethically to otherness [which] is to give oneself up to it, to relinquish control over the limits of one’s identity” (Attridge in Propst, 2017: 86). The shopping scene marks the point at which Zakira embraces her new identity and transcends the limitations of her past. She calls Aziza and Shubnum out, bellowing “the pair of you are nothing but shopaholic spoilt brats and racists on top of it! […] With that, I lost my crew. […] I abdicated and went into exile in the city I had lived in all my life” (p. 245). This scene can be read as larger-scale social change in which post-transitional questions of identity that reconfigure difference are posed.

To comprehend what it is about Sophie that is so transformative, it is necessary to analyse who she is, her history and how she represents the ambiguous nature of post-transitional identity. Sophie is first described simply as a PhD student at Wits University. She is studying History and works as a research assistant to her father, who is also an academic (p. 77). Her ancestry is syncretic, hybridised and colourful. She is aware and proud of her entangled ancestry, unlike Zakira, who initially ignores her hybrid history and relies on social class as the defining feature of who she is. Sophie’s father, Professor Jasat, is of Cape Malay ancestry, which in itself is an example of hybridisation, as this is an amalgamation of entangled histories in itself (p. 112). Aumeerally (2017) explains that,
Cape Malay Muslims, who according to Kruger (2001: 112) consisted of a heterogeneous group that hailed from Indian coasts and the Indies archipelago, and only minimally from the Malay Peninsula, do not fit readily into the paradigm of a South Asian diaspora because of their complex and hybrid lineage (2017: 7).

Sophie’s father is an academic specialising in racial politics, described as “an expert in the histories of South Africa’s Coloured minorities: Cape Coloured, Cape Malay, Griqua, Chinese, Indian, Other Asian and Other Coloured” (p. 109). His profession recognises and embraces the complexity and impossibility of racial categorisation. He explains to Zakira that:

One must understand the world as a catch-all term invented by the apartheid government to cope with the anomalies left over from their binaristic meta-narratives (p. 109).

Sophie’s worldview has been shaped by her family’s history. The description of Sophie’s parents not only displays the complex and ambiguous overlaps of cultural ancestry and identity, but it also highlights the absurdity of racial classification during the apartheid era. Meeran’s elaboration of the character of Sophie’s mother, Aisha, then further supports the irrelevance of apartheid-Manichean logic. At this point, Meeran uses humour to disprove and ridicule the politics of racial categorisation and identity during apartheid. Aisha, a name associated with Islam, is a Lebanese Maronite (a sect of Christianity), who is “pale as a Latvian notary” (p. 110), had a hard time fitting into the South African racial categorisation policy. The complexity of her identity in South African terms is justified as follows:

Maronite and other Lebanese Christians were classified as white and assimilated quickly into white South Africa. Aisha, whose temporary residence permit sang out ‘WHITE’ would have to be reclassified [if she were to marry Professor Jasat] as a Lebanese Muslim and therefore Other Asian, a sub-category of Coloured (p. 112).

Motives behind racial classification, as seen in the extract above, were political strategies used to strengthen white dominance in South Africa under the apartheid regime. Aumeerally (2017), citing Kruger (2001), explains that,

some Muslims, particularly those from the trade diaspora, had initially sought to resignify themselves as ‘Arabs’ and even pass as whites, later generations aligned themselves with the anti-apartheid struggle and shed the desire for whiteness and
middle-class status to incorporate into a collective black identity that included Indians, Coloureds and Africans (Kruger in Aumeerally, 2017: 7).

On being told she had to undergo a pencil test to prove her race, Aisha, who is not South African and finds this request ridiculous, challenges the magistrate by asking him to administer the test with his fingers rather than a pencil. He then concludes “hierdie is blanke aan kleuring”. Aisha does not fit into any category according to the pencil test, demonstrating the absurdity of that test and what it represents. This example is one of many that show how Meeran uses humour as a means of positioning apartheid politics and history in a way that destabilises it, renders it absurd and ultimately calls for change.

Meeran also challenges gender norms and oppression through his portrayal of the Saracens, of which Sophie is founder. The name stems from the Islamic warriors who fought against the Christians in the Roman empire in what was considered a holy war. The term has changed over time, but in general denotes a group of religious and racially marked members, or ‘others’, contrasted with the European Crusaders (Szczepanski, “Who were the Saracens?”, 2008). This group allows the women agency. For instance, through her involvement in the group, Zakira’s position as a female Muslim becomes one of power rather than submission. The Saracens also represent the fight against oppression. The women in this group target physical spaces that represent oppression or injustice and vandalise them with their Saracen logo. As the leader, Sophie’s aim is to break down barriers of difference. As Zakira describes, “she had this way of making everything so complex that PLO, Hamas, Zionist, Syrian Baathist, Phalangist, Druze, Israel, Palestine turn into one big sludge” (p. 130). Sophie’s desire to blur boundaries and highlight spaces of oppression drives the groups’ activities. Read as a symbol in the larger context of South Africa, the Saracens represent the fight against national oppression in forms derived from the apartheid period. The use of these tactics, together with the undermining of the apartheid-era identity makers that Meeran uses in the first half of the novel, represents a rejection of the old, allowing for the opening up of spaces for new thought.

The women leave a physical as well as a symbolic mark on areas that map discrimination and oppression. The markings they leave draw attention to issues of injustice. For instance, the Saracens leave their mark on spaces in which some are heard while others are rendered voiceless, therefore bringing mechanisms of power into scrutiny. The Saracen symbol is first seen at the airport on aeroplane on which Zakir is aboard, bound for Palestine. Further examples

7 Translated as “This is in-between white and coloured”.

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of sites in which power relations are highlighted are the Union Buildings in Pretoria (p. 270) and the strip club called Hooligans — situated in a building owned by Zakira’s father, where women are trafficked from various parts of the world against their will and sexually exploited (p. 279). The Saracens expose the concept of the ‘other’, whereby difference is used to allow for discrimination. Her involvement in this female activist group grants Zakira agency as a woman and driver of social change, broadening her outlook and redefining both her perspective of others as well as her own identity.

1.3 The role of space and place in the making of identity in Saracen at the Gates

Meeran addresses the role of place and space as contributors to identity formation in Saracen at the Gates. He does this locally, within the space of Johannesburg, through Zakira’s journey of identity, as well as transnationally, through Zakir’s travels and how these reshape his identity.

Through Zakira, Meeran provides a detailed mapping of the city of Johannesburg throughout the novel. In the beginning, when Zakira still defines herself as a Curry Mafia Princess, the reader is introduced to the city of Johannesburg, as Zakira races through the city in her expensive M3 BMW, traveling through Rosebank, Midrand, Melville, Newtown and Sandton (pp. 1-10). These spaces are associated with her identity as marked by wealth and status, as they are frequent haunts of the Curry Mafia Princesses and, notably, places in which they believe they are normalised. Zakira narrates how she knows she is identified by others as a Curry Mafia Princess in these spaces, particularly by men no different from those of her immediate cultural group. She states, “one look at me: slithery hair, hawk-nose, big almond eyes, encased in R10 000 outfits and they this one is A: Muslim + B: Loaded = C: Untouchable. In other words, they identify me as a curry mafia princess without even knowing what that is” (p. 176). The places in which the curry mafia princesses choose to socialise are spaces of general wealth frequented by the middle to upper class. These are places that mark previous separation on grounds of race under apartheid. Meeran has revisited these sites as places of separation, yet in his novel it is social class and wealth, rather than race, that form the parameters of separation. Indeed, in Entanglement (2009), Sarah Nuttall discusses this phenomenon in her reference to ‘the literary city’ (p. 33). Drawing on theorists who have written on what city spaces represent in reading current culture, the common feature throughout the chapter is that the city is in a constant state of flux. Physical spaces that carry major historical events with them are redefined into new and different forms, thus observe the socio-
political trends surrounding them. Nuttall notes that “the city is a narrative structure that constantly re-presents itself” (2009:57).

While Zakira, as a Curry Mafia Princess, may socialise in the spaces such as Rosebank, it is the area of Fordsburg, in which lives, that largely shapes her identity at home. Fordsburg is a predominantly Muslim area, where the Cachalia family holds high social status in the religious community and where her father is considered the don of the Curry Mafia. The area is also a cosmopolitan hub for Muslims who have moved to South Africa from across the globe, who reside in Mayfair, next to Fordsburg. Zakira makes reference to these Muslims, referring to them as *kwerekweres*, a derogatory term for foreigners, who she says have infiltrated the area using the common grounds of Islam. Zakira’s description of Fordsburg square captures the cosmopolitanism of the area, referring to Chinese Muslims, Algerians, Somalians and Pakistanis (pp. 140-141):

I trundled towards Mayfair in my M3. […] Clogged with *kwerekwere* hawkers, mostly Muslim judging by their outfits. I wondered if these Nigerian Muslims and Zambies always wear *kurthas* and *burkhas* because they don’t want to be mistaken for ordinary *kwerekweres*? It must be a problem for them otherwise, being mixed up with Christian blacks. We curry mafia are always sceptical about whether these black Muslims are bona fide or not (p. 143).

This extract provides an example of space and place as being shapers of identity through markers of cultures and difference.

Yet as the novel progresses, Zakira moves across different spaces in the city. The complexity of city representations of space intersects with the making of identity and reconfigurations of such. For instance, there are numerous references to an old building in Selby owned by Zakira’s father. It is first mentioned in reference to ‘the French ladies’ that rented the space from Zakira’s father (p. 62). The ladies intrigue Zakira from the start, with her believing her father’s story that they work as translators. When Zakira’s father later asks her to deliver an eviction letter to these ladies (p. 85), Zakira is concerned for their welfare. The ease of eviction of these foreigners suggests the underlying power relations within a city, where those from poor, war-torn countries, who reside as refugees or illegal immigrants, are rendered voiceless and easily exploitable. Areas that were previously zoned as ‘white’ areas under the Group Areas Act during apartheid, such as Hillbrow, Yoeville and Rosentenville, have now become city spaces that represent xenophobia. Aided by Sophie and Zakira, the Saracens realise that the building
owned by Zakira’s father has been turned into a brothel, called Hooligans. Zakira’s sense of self and identity are destabilised, as her father is exposed as being the kingpin. The building in Selby now appears as a site for exploitation and oppression of women and therefore a target for the Saracen group to expose. By defacing the building, Zakira is indirectly standing up against her father for his involvement in the discrimination and oppression of women.

Detailing city streets and the routes Zakira takes with the Saracens, she states, “every time I complete a loop [around the city], Joburg got smaller” (p. 270). Writing on reimagined spaces in the post-apartheid era, Jennifer Robinson (2004) notes “the challenge […] is to find a view of the past through the lens of the post-apartheid present rather than through a ‘persistent apartheid optic’. The city here, as elsewhere, both fragments and brings together” (in Nuttall, 2009: 39). Zakira’s episodes of driving across and around Johannesburg connect spaces of difference, highlight the history held in these spaces, provoke questions of who governs these spaces at present, and imagine what they might resemble in the future. For instance, Zakira describes Hillbrow as follows:

I hunkered over the wheel as I drifted along Jorrisen Street, staring as much over my shoulder as at the street ahead, looking out for hijackers. The fief of the curry mafia does not spread over every craphole in Joburg, certainly not Hillbrow. The streets are filthy. The traffic lights are filthy, even the sky is filthy. […] I examined the shop windows as I slid by in my M3, trying to find more redeeming features. Sex shop cellphone joint seedy bar Pep Store sex shop cellphone joint Aids Clinic Shoprite seedier bar.

Zakira’s description, influenced by her upper-class perspective and lifestyle, suggests that spaces of inequality are common in South Africa. While connections are possible across such spaces in the present, as opposed to the enforced separation of areas in the past, the social barriers of a previously divided nation still linger, shown though such descriptions of the city. From this perspective, theories of integration or the ‘humanfoldedness’, suggested by Nuttall (2009: 1), can be scrutinised. On the one hand, the fact that Zakira, as she embraces her new identity, is willing to transcend areas of her comfort zone and social class, suggests a shift towards entanglement, where her movements across spaces of cultural difference suggest an attempt at bridging gaps of separation. On the other hand, while there are notable connections between different cultures in different spaces in Johannesburg, the description of areas such as Hillbrow, given from Zakira’s view, highlight the socio-economic gaps in the national structure.
of South Africa that the notion of entanglement tends to overlook. In other words, while Nuttall’s vision of entanglement is a positive imaginary of unity across difference, spaces in the city still represent separation through social class, for example. Similarly, although Olivier Moreillon and Alan Muller (2016) in “Half ’n Half: Mytho-Historical and Spatial Entanglements in Charlie Human’s Apocalypse Now Now and Kill Baxter” make use of Nuttall’s theory of entanglement as a platform for understanding cultural overlaps and spatio-temporal understandings of current culture, they also critique her ideas, noting that “while Nuttall foregrounds the (multi-)temporality of her notion of entanglement, she does not take explicit recourse to theories of space and place” (2016: 80). Despite such critiques, Nuttall’s concept of entanglement provides a useful theoretical frame for the reading of overlapping identities. It allows us to read Zakira’s movement across different social spaces as contributing to her shift in identity, particularly in that the purpose of these excursions through the city is to uncover areas of social inequality and draw the attention of the public eye through the Saracens’ physical graffiti. As Zakira and the Saracens travel through the city, Meeran raises awareness of the role of space and place, and what these represent in the process of identity formation.

Similarly, Zakir undergoes his own identity transformation, reflecting cultural entanglement and hybridity as well as elements of transnationalism. Transnationalism has been noted as a feature of the post-transitional; however, Frenkel and MacKenzie (2010) warn against the complexities that come with the notion of transnationalism. They note that:

As with most encompassing and thus unavoidable murky concepts, transnationalism is a contested concept:

While the prefix is indicative of an effort to represent cultural movement, along with economic and political processes, which strive towards a borderless, postnational world, the noun also reminds us of the polarizations which this project mobilises. On the one hand, transnationalism signals a movement towards the crossing and breaking open national boundaries, while on the other hand, it can be thought of as a way of naming the tensions between the transnational, and formations such as globalization and the nation-state, which, in the face of continued interrogation of national boundaries, has proven to be a tenacious construct (Frassinelli, Frenkel and Watson, in Frenkel & Mackenzie, 2010: 7).

Transnationalism in this study is read as a catalyst for the transition in identity seen through Zakir as a result of cultural overlaps in shared spaces across global contexts.
Zakir is depicted at the beginning of the novel as being the favourite child in the family because of his gender: his status as male is superior to his sister’s. While his sister undergoes a crisis and transformation in identity through her engagement with Sophie, Zakir follows a different path in redefining his identity. At the beginning of the novel, he has a limited perspective, defined by his socio-religious upbringing and the benefits he has as a male within his household. A study of Zakir’s identity is thus pertinent to the reading of Meeran’s novel as a study of cultural change, specifically relating to identity and how this is reconfigured in the post-transitional sphere.

Initially, Zakir lives a lifestyle of drug-taking and womanizing under the pretence of being a good Muslim son. After his father sees through this act, Zakir is sent off to Palestine to volunteer as an ambulance driver, with his father having hopes that this will “straighten the boy out” (p. 20). Upon his return, he briefly becomes an Islamic fundamentalist in search of Osama Bin Laden (p. 219). He then travels to Scandinavia in an attempt to join a successful boy band (p. 265). In this sense, Meeran uses Zakir as an illustration of the fluidity of identity, demonstrating the possibility of redefining one’s self, rather than being defined by traditional markers of identity. Through Zakir’s international travels, Meeran presents instances of how cultural differences intersect across borders. Zakir, who by the end of the book is in Norway, boarding a plane to Iceland, illustrates a global perspective on cultural entanglement and hybridity – especially through his phone call to his sister, where he describes his love interest:

“Her name is Aviva Georgis. She’s from Ethiopia. […] and don’t tell Mommy and Daddy, okay, but she’s Israeli. […] Her folks are from Ethiopia but she was born in Israel” (p. 343).

Once removed from his immediate surroundings and socio-religious community, Zakir metamorphosises, forming a new identity that reflects trends of post-transitional writing. As he physically crosses borders, his criteria of identity markers are debunked and reimagined in new forms. Zakir’s previous identity was rooted in Manichean concepts and discrimination against difference – for instance, Zakira describes Zakir’s rants during their adolescent years, as “so-so anti Jew-Christian-Hindu-African-White-Coloured that no adult could possibly acknowledge them” (p. 154). After a shift to a hybridised, culturally, racially and theistically complex identity, gained through his travels abroad, Zakir’s transnational identity is used to destabilise and ridicule traditional markers of identity from apartheid-era mentality.
What his chapter has traced, are the transitions and reconfigurations of identity markers in Zinaid Meeran’s *Saracen at the Gates*. The novel has been read as a metaphor for South African culture at present, whereby the structure of Meeran’s novel develops through a linear trajectory that reflects South Africa’s transition from apartheid to the post-transitional. The post-transitional years that followed on from apartheid carried with them binary structures of thought that governed identity through difference and separation. Society in these years demonstrated postcolonial Manicheanism, whereby difference was used to construct binaries in race, class, gender and religion. Similarly, at the start of the novel Zakira and Zakir’s identities are constructed through simplistic social categorizations, relying on an either-or rhetorical structure. However, once exposed to change, their identities shift. The chapter has analysed how Zakira’s identity is transformed through the catalyst of Sophie and the Saracens and how Zakir’s identity shifts from the rigid binary structure of apartheid logic to the post-transitional space through his transnational travels. The idea of reshaped identities in the novel is captured most aptly through Meeran’s dedication, in which he dedicates the novel to “all the gazelles, Saracens, hasheesheena and bandakoots out there. Those who have no race, gender, country or class” (2009: dedication). Through the reconfigurations of identity and the use of humour and satire, Meeran’s work is a noteworthy contribution to the study of contemporary South African Indian writing as post-transitional.
Chapter Two

Interiority and Agency in Shaida Kazie Ali’s Lessons in Husbandry

Like Zinaid Meeran’s Saracens at the Gate, Shaida Kazie Ali’s novel, Lessons in Husbandry (2012), can be located in the post-transitional moment of South African Indian writing. In particular, the novel delves into interiority of its characters and by means of this intimate connection seeks to explore questions of agency. Related to this, is the novel’s examination of otherness and attempts at transcending it, gender oppression and overlapping histories across place and space. Indeed, as in the second part of Meeran’s novel, Ali’s fictional project in Lessons in Husbandry is to explore the idea of hybrid identities in a post-transitional South African Indian milieu. This chapter begins with an analysis of interiority as a literary technique that juxtaposes ideas of public and private lives and spaces. Put another way, this chapter explores what it means to transcend private space in the current South African cultural moment. Theorists Kerry Bystrom and Sarah Nuttall (2013) have written extensively on the topic of interiority and intimate lives and spaces. For instance, in their “Introduction: Private Lives and Public Cultures in South Africa”, they suggest that “approaching the private from the perspective of inner lives, bodies and interior spaces, helps us begin to chart the distinct kinds of intimate exposures that surface in contemporary South African culture and the way they become entangled in public debate” (Bystrom & Nuttall, 2013: 310). Similarly, in Lessons in Husbandry it is through the interior and private journey of the protagonist, Malak, that she gains agency and the traditional barriers that define her private identity are challenged.

From this perspective, my discussion of Ali’s novel develops the analysis of gendered-oppression and how this influences the protagonist’s decision to rewrite the life that she desires. The novel’s exploration of Malak’s interiority prompts a consideration of alterity; in particular, the ways in which she can challenge her position as ‘other’ in relation to the patriarchal order that governs her cultural upbringing, but also in terms of race, religion and ethnicity. Furthermore, I focus on how Ali’s novel debunks purist views of social identity formation by describing syncretic ancestries and hybridised identities. Here, I assess the way in which Ali inserts anecdotes of personal ancestry in the Cape. This chapter, then, seeks to demonstrate the ways in which time and place overlap, through the intersection of the past and the present, and the importance of history in defining identity. What I propose and proceed to examine is the novel’s resistance of a simplistic view of identity by means of an elaborate vocabulary that turns on the concept of cultural hybridity. Finally, I discuss the recurring motifs of memory.
and water in Ali’s novel, particularly their significance for the novel’s central metaphor of fluidity and flux. Isabel Hofmeyr\textsuperscript{8} and Meg Samuelson\textsuperscript{9} have written extensively on the subject of ocean connections and what is represented in the bodies of water that are steeped in oppressive histories and creolised pasts. This chapter uses these observations to discuss the motifs, illustrating how water and memory tie together themes of change, temporal connections, and the public and the private.

2.1 Interiority and agency in Lessons in Husbandry

The concepts of interiority, intimacy and introspection occupy a prominent place in Ali’s novel: these concepts have been discussed by Meg Samuelson (2009, 2010), Bystrom and Nuttall (2013). In Nuttall’s more recent works, including “Surface, Depth and the Autobiographical Act: Text and Images” (2014) and “Intimate Lives, Interior Places” (2017), they underscore crucial aspects that govern social change. These theorists focus on what is reflected through the contrasts between the inner and outer lives of individuals; between what is hidden and what is exposed; and between appearance and reality. In the novel, the interplay between these conventional oppositions serves to loosen the rigid polarities of apartheid, where social acceptability played a key role in the preservation of artificial boundaries. Thus Ali’s novel, like Meeran’s, is an instance in which apartheid oppression and the idea of fixed identity prompt a re-evaluation of selfhood, so that identities and experiences that were hidden begin to surface. In her recent article, “Intimate Lives, Interior Places”, Sarah Nuttall (2017) elaborates on the root of the silencing of the idea of intimacy, and its link to apartheid. She notes that,

[The] highly-stylised understanding of intimacy has been dominant in Western philosophical traditions. The invocation of democracy posited the need to screen off personal identities and desires in order to pursue a disinterested common good through rational discourse. Here, intimacy has been . . . a cult object and an object of suspicion. During the twentieth century, it was embraced as an ideal, yet critiqued as the fulfilment of a dominant cultural ideology, a retreat form worldliness as well as a lazy accommodation to the strangeness of everyday life under late capitalism. A similar ambivalence had characterised modern South Africa in many respects, but with a

\textsuperscript{8} See Isabel Hofmeyr, in “South Africa and India” (2011) and “Indian Ocean Genres” (2011).
number of different historical inflections, the denigration of the private was a crucial
dimension of apartheid—and of the political struggle against it (2017: 19).

A study of Ali’s *Lessons in Husbandry* foregrounds the need to use intimacy as a tool for
reading underlying societal movements through a study of what happens “behind closed
doors”, within private spaces. Intimacy and interiority drive personal change, as demonstrated
in Ali’s novel, and, on a greater scale, can be used to read social change post-transition.

Introspection and interiority appear in various ways in Ali’s novel. The majority of the novel
takes the form of private conversation, or a type of soliloquy between Malak and her deceased
sister, Amal, as seen in the prologue: “Amal, this is the time of year when I miss you the most
of all, as the days grow warmer and our birthdays grow closer. Today the yearning feels new,
as though it’s a fresh sorrow” (p.11). Malak shares her inner-most thoughts with Amal and uses
these to write a memoir in the creative writing course that leads her on her interior journey.
The conversations with Amal are accompanied by vivid dreams, which too reflect the inner
self and private space. Malak says to Amal,

> I never dreamt of you until after my marriage, Amal. In the first dream, at least the first
dream that I remember, you were practising a magician’s act, suspended upside down
in a vertical glass coffin filled with water. Your hands and feet were manacled. You
twisted and turned, but we both knew there was no escape. You were dying before my
eyes (p. 57).

The act of writing a memoir is significant in that it bridges the private and the public spaces.
Moreover, Malak’s interior journey is motivated by the writing of a memoir about her life and
the impact of her sister’s disappearance and death. Through the process of writing, she re-
examines her life within the social realms and expectations that govern it. She is a “surrogate
wife” (p. 91), strongly obliged to marry her sister’s fiancé after Amal died, by both the
traditional socio-cultural environment in her Islamic community, as well as by her private
motivation of trying to feel closer to her sister. Malak describes the scene in which she accepts
the proposal of marriage to Taj, her sister’s fiancé, as follows:

> […] everything had become insane since your disappearance, Amal, so the idea of
marrying Taj seemed normal. We both loved you, we were both bereft. Maybe if we
were married we’d find a space to grieve for you together, forever, while the rest of the
world went on. It seemed so simple. Your bridal jewellery was made. Your turquoise
bridesmaids picked. Your honeymoon paid for and your marriage home brought. The perfect fairytale wedding was waiting for me, even if I was a changeling (p. 35).

At this point, Malak is not aware of the fact that Taj was responsible for her sister's death (p. 211).

Moreover, it is only through the process of writing her memoir that Malak begins to question the parameters that define her existence and challenge these, specifically through the realisation of the illegitimacy of her Islamic marriage in the South African legal system — a wedding at which she was not permitted to attend as a woman (p. 152). Malak’s private introspection reveals national and global issues of power and oppression, thus demonstrating how social issues can be addressed through the private being made public. Bystrom and Nuttall (2013) write that initially, in Rome, the ‘public’ was contrasted with ‘private, where the public was a space within boundaries, but ‘out in the open’ (2013: 309). However, while the public was defined in terms of buildings and open spaces, the public can also be read as a moral space with specific norms that govern acceptance or rejection. In contrast to the idea of public, Bystrom and Nuttall then define the private as follows: “The private, as the observer of the public, then means that which is inside the walls of the home, or that which is architecturally separate from the space of public life. The second lens pertains to the interior architecture of the self” (2013: 309). They cite the American cultural theorist, Michael Warner, who notes that, “the private is that which is ‘related to the individual, especially to inwardness, subject experience and the incommunicable’” (Warner in Bystrom & Nuttall. 2013: 309).

Ali’s novel extends the trope of public and private through the idea of having a creative writing group that focuses on memoirs. This group allows for a collective reading of the private and what it exposes about the implicit social context. Although the predominant focus in the novel is on Malak’s story, the novel is interspersed with memories and personal writings from the other women in the group. Memoirs connect to the idea of voicing unheard stories, as Alice, the leader of the writing group, explains: “memoirs entice readers with truths, whether they are factual accounts or the vaguest memories that you recreate from the pictures in your mind” (p. 13). At the beginning of the novel, when Malak joins the writing group, she immediately notices her differences from the other women before any commonalities. Malak says,

I am the youngest in this writing class by at least twenty years and the only woman who isn’t white. […] What can I say, I was born during the apartheid years. I can’t stop checking to see if I’m the token person of colour in the room. (p. 17)
Malak’s observation contextualises the socio-political landscape in which the novel is set, suggesting a paradoxical view where perceived separation is still evident in the post-transition, even in spaces in which there is an attempt to break down barriers of difference, such as in this writing group. Yet, despite these differences in race and economic background, the women in the writing group are connected through their private stories of trauma, loss and oppression, through which a sense of unity is formed. The novel weaves together the private stories of pain in which trauma and gender roles are connected. They are stories of women’s suffering in various forms – for example, Rakel’s story of her pregnant mother dead in her armchair when she was a child and later being separated from her family in Germany during the war (p. 51); Clarissa’s constant search for male attention, specifically from her father (p. 94); Lucy’s experience of giving birth to a stillborn baby (p. 128); Monica’s telling of losing her mother to cancer; and Malak’s story of the disappearance of her sister Amal and later discovery of her death (p. 216). The stories cross barriers of difference in race and social class. Here, connecting the private with the public in the form of memoir writing provides a platform from which these women can be heard. Agency is thus not only revealed in Malak’s story, but in the merging of multiple stories of the female voice across time and place.

Nuttall (2017) draws attention to the fact that intimacy, a phenomenon that may occur together with interiority, is a shared experience. She explains that,

intimate life, or intimacy, is never only about selfhood, self-exploration, or self-scrutiny. It always involves another – someone who, having been brought into the sphere of trust, can be talked to and is disposed of listening (2017:18).

The reading of extracts from their memoirs to one another in the writing group demonstrates such intimacy. It is thus significant that Malak, who usually depends on her Amal as her envisioned audience, only shares her memoir with the writing group at the end of the novel, once she has gained the confidence to be heard.

The novel is a continuous dialogue of intimate introspection through which Malak connects the points in her past to make sense of it, paving the way for change. Mapping connections across space and time is a concept pertinent to post-transitional writing, as Samuelson observes in “Scripting Connections: Reflections on the ‘Post-transitional’” (2010: 113). Malak’s trajectory allows for a reading of scripted connections in the post-transitional space. By examining her life as a ‘surrogate wife’ (p. 91), trapped in a loveless marriage, she makes connections that uncover her role as a woman in a socio-cultural environment that is dominated
by males. Her memories and the memories of other women uncover acts of gender-based violence, such as Amal’s death, and a systematic othering based on gender. Linking the histories and trauma of the past and allowing for their acknowledgement is pivotal in the formation of identity—all of which is developed through introspection and intimacy. Interior reflections, written as journal entries as part of the memoir, develop the role of interiority and intimacy, bringing together the private and the public. Lessons in Husbandry therefore focuses a lens on the notion of ‘home’ and what happens in such private spaces. In “Home, Family and Intimacy in Recent South African Fiction”, Carlie Coetzee explains that

‘home’ is not a room in which doors and windows are shut and the interior space claustrophobically barred; instead, this ordinariness is a self-conscious place from which to view and analyse the home: its suppressed histories and the missing links that need connecting up (2017: 410).

It is through such introspection that Malak is able to understand the gendered society, conceptualise her past and determine her current and future positionalities.

Lessons in Husbandry also assesses the nature of secrets within intimacy. Nuttall notes that “one way of approaching the contemporary lives of intimacy is by considering what a culture deems private or secret at any given time” (Nuttall, 2017: 29). She goes on to quote Don Kulick (2015), who suggests that, “‘Even private secrets of the most intimate kind are inevitably linked to some level of sociality and to living in a world together with others”’ (Kulick in Nuttall, 2017: 21). In the novel, Malak meets and falls in love with another man, Darya. Malak keeps this a secret, or private, to avoid societal judgement. However, the affair leads her to uncover the illegitimacy of her marriage to Taj. Malak finds out that Muslim marriages performed in mosques are symbolic but are not legally recognised. There are no digital records kept of them. She therefore concludes that “seeing as there are no computer records kept [of such marriages], someone who is married by Muslim rites can marry a different partner legally without the other person being aware of this” (p. 144). Malak has been made to believe, up until now, that she is a legitimately married woman in society as a Muslim woman. It is only once she wants to escape this marriage that her questioning of Islamic marriage rites uncovers the truth of the matter and she uses this knowledge to rewrite her story and finding happiness. Moreover, as children, Amal and Malak were taught about Islam from a male perspective, yet now Malak challenges these ideas. She says, “weren’t we told in Madressa that getting married fulfils half
our duties as Muslims? So surely marrying two men would mean satisfying one hundred percent of my obligations?" (p. 148)

The use of introspection and agency, as markers of change, can also be seen within the larger narrative of South African society. The deconstruction of barriers of separation in the post-transitional space circumvents the limited and binary thought of the apartheid and early post-apartheid eras, which were governed by a dichotomous structure of thought and feeling, positioning identity makers against each other in dualistic formations, such as white versus non-white, Muslim versus Christian, male versus female. The particular importance of breaking down the boundaries between the public and the private in a national context is explained in *A Rediscovery of the Ordinary* (2006), in which Njabulo Ndebele stresses that “if it is a new society we wish to bring about in South Africa, then that newness will be based on a direct concern with the way people actually live” (2006: 52). Although Bystrom (2013) states, that while pouring one’s energies into building a free country is in many ways the culmination of a dream, Ndebele insists that it “also carries a risk of losing or perpetuating the loss of intimacy shaped within individual homes and families” (in Nuttall. 2017: 19).

Coetzee (2017) notes that Njabulo Ndebele’s ideas are open to interpretation and different theorists contest the notion of what ‘the ordinary’ refers to. She notes that,

Rather than an escape into personal (that is, apolitical) domesticity and ordinariness, Ndebele’s paper is instead an activist agenda for transformation and for the cultivation of self-reflective scholarship and modes of living (2017: 409).

Writing on the post-transition, Miki Flockemann outlines interiority as a key feature of writing within the post-transitional movement, in “Little Perpetrators, Witness Bearers and the Young and the Brave: Towards a Post-transitional Aesthetics”. As identity is re-questioned and binaries of the past are debunked or repositioned, she notes that, “it is hardly surprising then that one of the most notable features of work produced since the transition to democracy is an inward turn” (2010: 23). Malak’s inward turn suggests the need for discussion regarding what it is that lies within our private lives as South Africans, and what this could suggest for our public spaces. Indeed, an examination of Malak’s intimate life at home and a rediscovery of self, read against her immediate cultural surroundings, reveals that private lives can be used a means of understanding public spaces and of writing social change.
2.2 The surrogate wife: transcending gender oppression

Gender oppression is a pertinent theme in *Lessons in Husbandry*. It is through Malak’s realisation of the extent of gender oppression that she has endured that provides her with the confidence to rewrite her story. In “Tradition and Transformation: One Never Knows” (1992), Flockemann addresses issues of alterity and layers of social categories. She states that the marginalisation of women within South African society occurs though markers of gender, race, religion and class (1992: 113). Flockemann argues for the need to transcend binary constructions of identity, pointing out that the binaries are not just about the racial categories of ‘black and white’, but about ‘them and us’ in terms of gender, class and nationality (p. 116). She therefore shifts the focus from racial taxonomies to additional binaries that result in oppression, such as male/female. She looks at how oppression through such binaries is exacerbated when the ‘other’, oppressed through gender, is then additionally oppressed through race, religion, and social class. Flockemann writes on the agency found through women’s writings and how these enable social change, seen here in Malak’s trajectory in Ali’s novel. While Malak’s personal story is unique, it is underpinned by narratives of gender oppression that are universal, such as male hegemonic narrative and female subalternity. In Ali’s novel an example of this is Malak’s wedding ceremony to Taj…one she was not permitted to attend:

I wasn’t present (literally or figuratively) for my wedding to Taj: Dad just went along to the local mosque, while I and my brittle body sat mummified in ethereal nebulous cloths, with tiers and scarves swathing my hair, my eyes shut but my face left open to the gaze of those keeping vigil with me. It was dad who must have said the words of acceptance, and when he came back, I was married (p. 152).

The study of gender oppression in Malak’s story reflects a systemic discrimination against females that is steeped in cultural norms and tradition. Indeed, in *Sister Outsiders: The Representation of Identity and Difference in Selected Writings by South African Indian Women* (2008), Devarakshanam Govinden observes that, “‘Tradition’ is so easily naturalised that we tend to forget that it has been created” (2008: 4).

Similarly, Ali’s novel scrutinises Islam, suggesting that it has been ‘recreated’ or manipulated by the male voice in a way that dishonours the original beliefs and values of the religion. Malak learns from her brother-in-law, Precious, an academic in the field of Islamic studies, that:

In previous centuries, women in Islam enjoyed a kind of legal status that women in other cultures were deprived of at the time. Islam was considered a radical religion
because of its recognition of women’s rights. […] so over the centuries something has been lost because of the way some men interpreted Qur’anic scripture to suit themselves. The Qur’an is for all Muslims. Women and men are equal in the eyes of Allah. […] [Women] have the right to divorce, to inherit, and to study… (p. 137).

Precious goes on to explain that, “[Muslim] women could contract their marriages and divorces. […] They were kept ignorant of the truth of polygyny and purdah” (p. 138). Polygamy appears as a recurring theme in Ali’s novel, as it is a key aspect that motivates her to rewrite her life. Near the beginning of the novel, in one of Malak’s soliloquies with her deceased sister, she muses: “Utah. I think of Mormons. Are they the guys, who are entitled to several wives, like Muslim men?” (p. 26). Further on in the novel, Malak writes a short story titled “Husbandry”, about the relationship between two men who share the same wife (pp. 179-183). This story functions as a metaphor for rewriting oppressive histories, particularly where the rules are defined by men. Malak’s fictional story of polyandry contests the norm of polygamy, a created social tradition. It is through her interrogations of Precious, with his modern, feminist interpretation of Islam, that Malak gains agency. Now knowing that polyandry was part of pre-Islamic Arabia (p. 140), and after reviewing the current patriarchal interpretations of a religion that has largely defined her upbringing, Malak contests the system by saying, “It seems to me that if polygamous marriages are recognised by our courts, under our equal rights legislation, then polyandry should be legal too” (p. 142). Here, Malak challenges patriarchal hegemonic discourse and chooses to transcend it by rewriting her life. In doing so, Malak re-evaluates her position as a woman—and as a woman trapped in a loveless, illegitimate marriage. This personal act is emblematic of societal change and reflects how public histories can emerge from private interrogations.

Yet, although Precious is a vital impetus in Malak’s personal transformation, he is also a controversial character: while Precious may have informed Malak about women’s rights and the misinterpretation of Islam to favour men, he is also a chauvinistic character who epitomises the objectification of women, seen through his plastic female sex-doll, named Jelabi (after an Indian sweetmeat or dessert). Precious selects every part of Jelabi’s body to his liking from a website called “Design a Bride”, including “the choice of the vagina attachment style—permanent or removable […] He pays and extra $40 for her to be waxed like a good Muslim girl” (p. 78). When he asks Malak to assist him in selecting the details of his mail-order bride, he explains to her “…it is a [web]site for building a woman”, to which Malak responds, “I didn’t know women could be built” (p. 77). Precious points out that his right to choose exactly
what he wants from a woman, which is not unlike the process of arranged marriage. Jelabi is a metaphor for the phallocentric modes of silencing and the concomitant reinvention of women in society: she will remain “cute and mute forever” (p. 80). Malak’s conversations with Precious expose the levels of gender oppression still prevalent in society today (or, in this reading, in post-transitional South Africa). Her anger manifests as a catalyst for change. Indeed, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in “Questions of Multi-culturalism and the Post-colonial Critic” (1985), writes, “Why not develop a certain degree of rage against the history that has written such an abject script for you that you are silenced? Then you begin to question what it is that silences you” (Spivak, in Lodge & Wood, Modern Criticism and Theory, 2008: 597). Through Malak’s interrogation of Precious, she is able to question what has silenced her and rage against it, as Spivak suggests, enabling change.

Taj, who makes Malak believe that she is infertile rather than confessing that he actually is, and objectifies Malak as a woman (pp. 211-214), is eventually exposed as being responsible for Amal’s death. Malak, through these discoveries, realises that she has been living within the limitations of discriminative thought. She challenges this system of oppression by marrying another man while still being ‘married’, albeit ‘illegitimately’ to another. Malak’s revelation of the personal and legal irrelevance of her marriage and her reaction serves as a metaphor for the rewriting of oppressive histories. Malak’s sense of agency and power is also notable through her desire to take the plastic sex-doll, Jelabi, from Precious. Malak keeps the doll as a reminder of the role it played in her journey toward freedom. She also empowers the doll by giving her the new function of being a ‘co-passenger’ for local women in her community who may need to drive alone at night. The doll now offers a sense of protection to women, which starkly contrasts with its previous status as a symbol of the exploitation of women (p. 216).

2.3 Hybridity, intertextuality and connections across time and space

Ali’s novel continuously gestures to the role of the past in one’s present and the role that memory plays in creating room for future readings of South African culture post-transition. For instance, Malak’s ancestry is hybrid: she sees ghosts of her ancestors around her each day, specifically the ghost of her great-grandmother. Her visions of and interactions with her deceased great-grandmother accentuate the idea of integrating her past hybrid histories with her present reality and embracing her diverse and complex ‘roots’. In one scene, when Malak recollects that as a child she was visited by the ghost of Oma and her cat, Mrs Truffles, she says,
The other reason I am not scared tonight is because Oma and Mrs Truffles are visiting. Oma is knitting one of her-and-purple socks with four knitting needles and Mrs Truffles washing herself…Mum doesn’t like me to talk about Oma or even Mrs Truffles, so when she comes in to give me a goodnight kiss I don’t tell her that they’re sitting on the edge of the bed, although Mrs Truffles is purring so loudly she sounds like the motorbike of the man who lives across the road and wakes us up far too early on a Saturday morning (p. 119).

The ghost of Oma and Malak’s conversations with her deceased sister allow for a reading of the past in the present, rather than being severed from it. This feature is notable in writings on the post-transitional. Severing South African culture from its apartheid past disregards the important markers of identity and culture that are present today. Ali’s reference to her ancestry and the recognition of such in her everyday life reflect what Ronit Frenkel and Craig MacKenzie note regarding history and transitional writing. In “Conceptualizing ‘Post Transitional’ South African Literature in English” (2010), they observe that,

history is often interrogated in the literature of the transitional years in the form of buried histories being excavated from a variety of perspectives to add to the growing body South African Stories (2010: 2).

In such writing, there is thus a shift towards an acceptance of the overlapping, enmeshed ancestries and histories that were misunderstood and disregarded during apartheid, through rigid processes of racial categorization. Adding to this idea, Sarah Nuttall quotes Glissant, who states that, “Diversion – turning away from the pain and difficulty of creolised beginnings – needs to be complemented by reversion – a return to the point of engagement, the point of difficulty” (Glissant, in Nuttall, Entanglement, 2009: 22). As aspects of the past linger on through various forms in Ali’s novel, the traumas and binaries of the past cannot be erased from the current state of South Africa: they will arise and intersect, informing and relying on each temporal space. This concept links to Nuttall’s point regarding the temporal aspect of entanglement. She quotes Achille Mbembe, who argues that, “the postcolony encloses multiple durées made up of discontinuities, reversals, inertias, and swings that overlay one another, interpenetrate one another: an entanglement” (Mbembe, in Nuttall, 2009: 4). The influence of the past can allow for a positive reading of identity and acceptance in the present.

The use of ghosts in the novel is also an aspect of the post-transitional. In “Spectral Citizenry: Reflections of the ‘Post-transitional’ in Contemporary South African Literature”, Nedine
Moonsamy quotes Avery Gordan as follows: “the ghost is primarily a symptom of what is missing. It gives notice not only to itself but also to what it represents. What it represents is usually a loss, sometimes of life, sometimes of a path not taken. From a certain vantage point the ghost also simultaneously represents a future possibility, a hope” (Gordan, in Moonsamy, 2014: 72-73). Malak’s great-grandmother came to South Africa from Holland, in Europe (p.129). She was part of a group of Europeans who relocated to South Africa in search of wealth offered by diamond mining, particularly in Kimberley. However, as noted by Ronit Frenkel in *Reconsiderations*, Europeans were not the only people who came to South Africa during this time; rather, there was an influx of foreigners from around the world, including from India in South Africa, after the indentured Indians arrived in Natal in 1870 (2010:11). It was in Kimberley that Oma met Malak’s great-grandfather, who was “fresh off the boat from Surat”, Gujarati Province in India (p. 86). Malak’s ancestry thus reflects the syncretism that informs identity in current South Africa. Her great-grandparents then moved back to India and later followed family to Cape Town (p. 87). Malak’s comfort, found in the visions of Oma, are symbolic of her entangled, hybridized history and the role that this plays in her identity. The overlapping histories, specifically originating from the Indian and Atlantic Oceans, went largely unacknowledged during apartheid, where identity rather pivoted on race on a limited and bifurcated axis of either/or, forcing all South Africans to be categorised into a specific racial group.

*Lessons in Husbandry*, as well as Ali’s first novel, *Not A Fairytale*, both emphasise the uncovering of hybridity and entanglement in terms of ancestry and identity in the field of South African Indian writing, particularly that written in the Cape, as this was a dominant trading point for sea-vessels and a key trading point for the Dutch East Indian Company. It was also the point at which slaves entered the country, thus it became a kaleidoscope of cultures, races and religions. Reference to such entangled histories can be seen in Malak’s recollection to Amal as she says: “remember Amal, how people in our community were always so quick to point out the whiteness of their ancestors?” (p. 130). This example demonstrates the role of race in ideas of belonging and identity formation, as well as cultural intersections and overlaps, which are historically mapped across the Indian and Atlantic oceans. The idea of hybridized African identities problematizes ideas of racial purity that stem from South Africa’s colonial past and the apartheid regime. Meg Samuelson captures this notion in “Rendering the Cape-as-port: Sea-mountain, Cape of Storms/Good Hope, Adamaster and Local-World Literacy Formations” (2016), stating a claim by Cronin that “Cape Town’s creole heritage productively
troubles the fetishisation of an ‘authentic, pure, rooted and timeless African identity’” (2016: 532). This realisation is present in Ali’s novels, presented through memories and intimate engagements through the protagonist’s retrospection.

Hybridity is further reflected in Lessons in Husbandry through the character of Darya, the man who becomes Malak’s legitimate husband. Darya comes from an equally hybridised ancestry, which crosses geographical boundaries, religions and ethnicities, in that he was born to a South African Muslim mother and a Christian father from Iraq (pp. 67-68). It should be noted that Darya emerges towards the end of Ali’s novel: as the novel is structured in a way that mimics Malak’s inner journey from being trapped by her circumstances to freedom, images of hybridisation only occur when Malak embraces her chosen identity. Darya symbolises the break from a bifurcated, Manichean outlook that encouraged racial and religious purity during apartheid. He is a celebration of hybridity and is proud of the different cultures and races that make up his being. He symbolises freedom as well as the ambivalences that come with syncretism in the post-transitional space. He is a key agent in Malak’s new-found agency, as he allows her to embrace who she is and sever her ties with the oppressive culture that has dominated her life up until this point.

In addition to the inclusion of symbols of the past, such as Oma, and through references to past overlapping histories, Ali makes use of intertextuality. This technique provides a further demonstration of overlapping temporalities and the impact these have on the present. Miki Flockemann comments on intertextuality as “one aspect characterising a putative post-transitional aesthetics” (2010: 29). Flockemann quotes West-Pavlov, who explains that, drawing on Kristeva’s notion of intertextuality as the transposition of an element of one signifying system to another, the presence of one text in another, West-Pavlov notes that for the critical reader this becomes an important instrument of theoretical analysis, while for writers it can be a significant act of ‘cultural intervention’— not just of debt, but of disturbance and conflict (West-Pavlov, in Flockemann, 2010: 29).

Intertextuality is seen in Lessons in Husbandry through the character Zuhra, who is a protagonist in Ali’s first novel, Not a Fairytale (2010). The use of intertextuality through the character of Zuhra is one of cultural intervention, in that reference to her in Ali’s debut novel portrays Zuhra as a figure of socio-cultural change. Not a Fairytale contrasts the stories of two South African Muslim sisters growing up in the Cape during Apartheid. The oldest sister, Salena, lives a miserable life within the rigid confines of a traditional Islamic family, as a
female, and within apartheid. She is discriminated against based on her gender and is a victim of gender-based violence, after she is married against her will for a high bride price, owing to her light skin tone. She lives a life defined by society and does not have a sense of individuality or agency to change her situation. In contrast, her sister, Zuhra, dreams of a different life – one of freedom as a woman of colour. She refuses to live the same life as her sister and rejects tradition. She leaves South Africa and becomes an academic and strident feminist. The novel is set in the early apartheid years, far removed from the post-transitional timeframe of Lessons in Husbandry. Ali’s intertextual references to Zuhra (known as ‘Cousin Zuhra’ in that she is the cousin of Malak’s mother) demonstrate the importance of acknowledging past histories and voices in the present. As a feminist and one who rewrote her own history, Zuhra is placed in the novel as a symbol of change and agency in transcending oppressive pasts. Zuhra encourages Malak’s mother to exhibit the memory quilts she makes as professional art. She is an inspiring female figure who demonstrates the need to delve into one’s past in order to rewrite oppressive histories. Ali states:

It was Cousin Zuhra who turned mum’s creative therapy into a career, who forced her to begin a quilting cottage industry. These days Zuhra’s a lecturer in feminist fairytale studies at the university of Florida. Zuhra got mum to create a quilt based on the re-imagined fairytales she’s been writing for her blog. Mum’s fairytale quilt looks as though it is lit from the inside. It shows a frog being swallowed, at the princess’s urging, by her spoilt cat, there’s Sleeping Beauty poisoning her narcissistic prince, there’s Cinderella running off towards a library rather than the dubious happily-ever-after, and various other figures from Zuhra’s tales (p. 47).

Not only does Zuhra contribute to the feminist undertones of Ali’s Lesson in Husbandry, but the inclusion of the character as an act of intertextuality strengthens the argument for hybrid and overlapping histories across time and space.

2.4 Symbolic imagery in Lessons in Husbandry

Ali’s novel can be studied through several significant motifs. The first of these motifs is that of memory. Memories appear interspersed in various forms throughout Lessons in Husbandry. Malak’s recollections of memories of her childhood and her sister, as well as her dreams of her, are scattered throughout the novel, indicating once again that the past plays a significant role in present identity. A tangible image connecting to the significance of memory is that of the memory quilts created by Malak’s mother. These quilts signify the role of memory in
healing, as Malak’s mother sews together memorabilia from girls that have since passed on. The first quilt she made was in memory of Amal:

Mum took up quilting and yours is the first one she made. She sewed it by hand, with the eye of a mathematician, drew pieces of satin, silk, cotton and muslin from your life into a story. The first square is the pink of your favourite baby blankie […] The last is made from the sleeping bag you used on your last camping trip with dad. In between, Amal, you’ll recognise your favourite black leather jacket, the yellow checks of a much-loathed school pinafore, the green of an embarrassing matric dance dress […] (p. 33).

After Amal’s quilt, Malak’s mother began making memory quilts for other mothers who had lost their daughters. The fact all these girls or women were victims of kidnapping and murder is significant in illustrating that gender-based violence and oppression are important themes in Ali’s novel. Malak’s mother develops an obsession with following missing people (in this case, missing girls or women) cases all over the world and contacts their mothers to offer consolation (pp. 23-24). This act bonds these women through the commonality of gender oppression and mistreatment across barriers of difference and borders the same way, which is similar to the way in which the women on Malak’s memoir writing course connect. The fact that the victims are women alludes to the systemic othering through gender, while also connecting temporalities of past with present as a mode of healing from trauma, both locally and globally.

This example illustrates the need to incorporate our past into our present as part of a progressive shift as a nation in South Africa, intertwining difference rather than using it as a barrier. As a quilt is made by stitching together pieces of different fabric to create a holistically beautiful item, the metaphor of ‘the [national] seam’ emerges here, described by Leon de Kock in *South Africa in the Global Imaginary* as,

The seam is not only the site of difference (as one might say of the more traditional ‘frontier’ metaphor), but it necessarily foregrounds the representational suture, the attempt to close the gap and to bring the incommensurate into alignment by the substitution, in the place of difference, of a myth, a motif, a figure, a trope (2004: 11).

While de Kock’s notion of the seam is used to read themes of frontiers and has been beneficial in the study of change in South African culture post-transition, Nuttall’s theory of entanglement is a more elaborate version of this, whereby she writes a future of ‘humanfoldedness’ where there is no seam to mark the point of difference between people and their pasts (Nuttall, 2009: 1). It should be noted again that Nuttall’s ideas of entanglement have been critiqued for
overlooking the present realities of South Africa, including the often bleak aspects that do not demonstrate social progress. In his review, “Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid, by Sarah Nuttall”, Mark Sanders critiques Nuttall’s Entanglement as a text specifically used to “to generate aspiration and desire” (2010: 94). He also makes the significant point that Nuttall’s Entanglement ignores the poverty and disease-stricken zones of South Africa, focusing solely on Johannesburg as her entangled space of study (2010: 94). Nevertheless, Nuttall’s work still allows for insightful analyses of cultural hybridity and the interweaving of past histories with present identities, justifying its pertinence in my discussion of the four novels in this study.

The second motif is the recurring image of water. Samuelson (2016), writing specifically on the Cape-as-port and thus the point of cultural intersections, notes that, “At the scene of its emergence into literary culture, the Cape is thus rendered as the setting of ambivalent identification and disavowal, and the point of conjuncture between three worlds: African, Atlantic Ocean and Indian Ocean” (2016: 526). Samuelson’s reference to the Atlantic and Indian oceans demonstrates the idea of water as embedded with cross-continental histories, stories and memories.

In the novel, water connects to ideas of memory, journeys and history – therefore space, history and place. In every dream that Malak has of her sister, there is “water, water everywhere.” (p. 184. Malak narrates,

That night I dreamt you and I were at the beach near Mum’s house. The water as usual was talkative, like it was unburdening itself to a long suffering friend. In my dream, Amal, you were floating on your back out to sea. I was on something soft, buoyant atop the waves, lying on my back, my legs in the water till midcalf. The bits of my body that were in the water were frozen. But the parts of me that were out of the water were feverish. There was something nibbling at my right foot and I sat up, peered down, waved the dark water aside, and saw a fish snacking on the dead skin of my heel […] Amal, look what I’ve found. You didn’t appear to hear me. You were moving out to sea on your back, your eyes open, your hair spilling around you, my sister-Ophelia. (p.98-99)

The dreams, however incoherent, depict a connection between Malak and her deceased sister through bodies of water, thus symbolising connections across time and place.
The ocean holds memories through its vastness and connections between places and liminal spaces, thus linking to ideas of home and belonging. The Indian and Atlantic Oceans represent the route of entangled histories between Africa and India, Europe and Asia, through slavery, indenture and globalization. This phenomenon has been studied by theorists such as Isabel Hofmeyr, Meg Samuelson and Dilip Menon, who focus on ‘the Global South’, referring to the Indian Ocean and connections between its countries in various forms. It is through spaces of water that we can embrace global connections and overlaying histories. As Samuelson notes, the post-transitional is about “the scripting of temporal connection rather than a sense of temporal discontinuity”, using the image of a river as an example (2010: 114). In Ali’s novel, water allows for such scripting of temporal connections, as it integrates past histories with present identities and the redefining of futurity. Tellingly, Malak’s new husband is an artist who only paints scenes of the ocean. His reasoning is that, “the sea is all about motion, about journeys, movement” (p. 124). The motif of water thus connects all aspects of Ali’s novel, connecting time, space and place.

Ali also makes reference to syncretic ancestries as evidence of cultural overlaps in the countries bordering the Indian Ocean, such as in her description of the arrival of Malak’s great-grandfather “fresh off the boat from Surat” (2012: 86). In “Indian Ocean Genres”, Isabel Hofmeyr writes on the Indian Ocean as a site for further cultural study. She sums up the historical and cultural collisions, drawing on the work of Engseng Ho (2004), who states that, “the Indian Ocean [is] an arena made analytically distinctive by the interaction of old trading diasporas (Hadramis, Gujaratis, Boras, Malays, etc.) with Western imperial formations (Portuguese, Dutch, British, US)” (p. 173). Hofmeyr goes on to clarify that the main focus here should be on “the intimate encounter of universalisms” rather than the colonizer versus colonized. (Hofmeyr, in Alvstad et al., 2011: 173).

Shaida Kazie Ali’s use of interiority and agency positions this novel as a valuable vessel for expressing ideas of newness. She demonstrates a shift from syllogistic, Manichean thought to one where boundaries are blurred and entanglement is embraced through Malak’s rewritten history. The journey is reflected through Malak’s painful existence in the first half of the novel, one defined by her otherness due to gender, creed and race, to one where she gains independence and agency, stepping into a realm of positive change and interiority, as Zurha did in Not a Fairytale (2009). She is no longer defined by her social surroundings; neither is she oppressed in a system where she has no voice. Her journey reflects social change and mimics South African society, where it is necessary to understand the past, framed by
boundaries and seams, in order to evolve into a space in which difference is no longer feared and where agency and belonging link directly to personal reflection and interiority.

This chapter has analysed Shaida Kazi Ali’s *Lessons in Husbandry* as a key contributor to two overlapping fields: South African Indian writing and post-transitional literature. The study of intimacy and interiority as a literary technique from which to read current cultural change has been the main focus. Through this, I have traced features of cultural entanglement and hybridized identity through a close reading of the text, as well as through its use of intertextuality and imagery. While chapter one and chapter two of this project have looked at features of hybridised identity and positive aspects of post-transitional writing through the lens of South African Indian writers, chapters three and four look more closely at the oversights of ambitious theories, such as Nuttall’s *Entanglement*, by scrutinizing the present. In the next chapter of this study, I will provide a close reading of Imraan Coovadia’s novel, *High Low In-between*, as a means of interrogating South African current culture in the present.
Chapter Three

Interrogating the Present in Imraan Coovadia’s High Low In-between

In this chapter, I discuss Imraan Coovadia’s *High Low In-between* (2009) as a critique of the present state of South African culture, by means of a more interrogative lens that focuses on the paradoxes and complexities of the post-transition. Shifting away from the optimistic tropes of hybridity, entanglement and cultural tolerance, seen in the first two chapters, this chapter draws on Coovadia’s novel’s concern with the bleak realities that haunt South Africa in the present. His novel therefore illustrates the concept of the post-transition as paradoxical. While aspects of hybridity and social change are evident in his novel, such as through the character of Estella, they are outweighed by the realities of a country where inequality is still the norm and where social change, some twenty years post-apartheid, is difficult to observe. As such, while Sarah Nuttall’s *Entanglement* (2009) is used to support the cultural tolerance and cultural overlapping demonstrated in the first two novels of this study as examples of positive ideals of national futurity, this chapter investigates criticisms of such ideals through the study of Coovadia’s *High Low In-between*. Contextualised through the era of the Thabo Mbeki-led government in the early 2000s, Coovadia’s novel could thus be said to explore the uncomfortable realities of South African from this point, but which still reflect in the country today. The novel therefore addresses cultural aspects of inequality and their underpinning motives, that Nuttall’s theories largely overlook.

What Coovadia’s novel seems to suggest is that South Africa, some twenty-four years post-apartheid, is still not an equal society, thus contradicting ideas of national unity. While Nuttall’s Entanglement suggests a shift towards tolerance and unity in South Africa, Coovadia begs questioning of this by exposing the lacunae in the country’s fallacious ideas of ‘rainbow nationalism’ and equality. Difference still divides more than it unifies and the country has not yet reached a point where there is enough evidence to support theories of cultural entanglement nationally.\(^{10}\)

While the novel’s focus on the display of inequality and separation outweigh its views of national progression, these are not entirely devoid. The novel therefore forms a paradoxical

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10 The word “nationally” is used here in critique of Nuttall’s theory of entanglement, which is based on the city of Johannesburg and, as Mark Sanders suggests, has been used as a synecdoche for reflecting South Africa nationally, which in reality, it does not (Sanders, “Review of *Entanglement: Literary and Cultural Reflections on Post-Apartheid, by Sarah Nuttall*”, 2010: 94).
reading of the post-transitional, in which different perspectives are drawn together. An example of this is seen through the character of Shakeer, who does not reside in South Africa, and his response to the South African present, exposing contrasting perspectives. At one point, with reference to inequality in South Africa, Shakeer exclaims: “How stifling it was, South Africa! How repetitive! […]” (p. 96). Yet he later comments on the ways in which South Africa has progressed in the sphere of cultural complexity. On noticing the country’s cultural diversity while at a party, he claims, “it was only in the last few years that such mixed parties had been coming to South Africa! How greatly the place had opened up!” (p. 110). He ends this observation with yet another paradox: “how remarkable, how trivial it was, to belong to all of mixed humanity!” (p. 110). Such variations of opinion are typical in Coovadia’s text, forming readings of ambivalence that mimic the post-transitional.

Ronit Frenkel notes that such “narratives of ambiguity reflect the central concerns of the transitional period where transformation is present but unformed as yet – a metamorphosis in process that contains both the past and future” (Frenkel, 2011:12). Similarly, High Low In-between is an ambiguous portrayal of current South African culture in the equally ambiguous and undecidable era of the post-transition. This chapter argues, therefore, for Coovadia’s novel as an exemplary model through which the post-transitional can be studied, thus supporting a closer scrutiny of South African Indian literature as a means of reading contemporary South Africa.

I begin this chapter with an analyse of how Coovadia repositions indexes of separation in the novel. Racial binaries of black/white or white/other that dominated the literary scene of protest literature in revolt against decades of racial oppression under apartheid rule, are challenged by Coovadia. High Low In-between does not portray an ambitious, futuristic society where cultures are embraced and entangled, as Sarah Nuttall’s Entanglement (2009) suggests. Rather, it repositions points of difference that reveal lacunae in society as sites for exploration. This section draws on Achille Mbembe’s “At the Centre of the Knot” (2012) and “Passage to Freedom: The Politics of Racial Reconciliation in South Africa” (2008). Furthermore, it considers Dilip Menon’s “Living Together Separately in South Africa” (2013).

Continuing this, I will explore the flawed ideas of ‘rainbow nationalism’ and democracy that Coovadia’s novel ridicules through his use of parody and satire. This trope contests ideas of cultural hybridity and national unity, seen in the previous chapters, thus allowing for the post-transitional to be read from a contrasting angle. Coovadia’s novel thematises what Van der
Vlies, in *Present Imperfect*, terms “the condition of unfulfilled expectation, provisional affiliation, and uncertain commitment to a shared project” (2017: 125). Van Der Vlies’s work (2017) will be used as the main theoretical support for this section.

From here, this chapter will develop an analysis of how temporality works together with a sense of warped reality, through the motif of ‘the looking glass’, and how this links to denialism. Nedine Moonsamy’s work will be used in this section, particularly her application of the Derridean idea of ‘contretemps’, to the post-transitional cultural arena in South Africa.

Lastly, through close textual analysis, this chapter will provide a reading of the post-transitional through the juxtaposition of the female characters in Coovadia’s novel. The interactions and contrasts between these figures provide insight into a complex, ambiguous culture on the brink of change. Read against each other, the female characters of Nafisa and Estella provide layered perspectives that integrate notions of time, race and history through the female voice. The contradicting female voices here portray perspectives of hope in the post-transition through Estella’s voice, while interspersing these with the limitations of the past, through the character of Nafisa.

In short, the sections of this chapter present an interrogation and re-evaluation of the post-transition, linking Coovadia’s complex ideas to a grander social situation that demands reflection from a different perspective than the previous chapters in this study. As part of the canon of South African Indian literature, Coovadia’s *High Low In-between* is an essential contribution from which issues that centralise in the present will be interrogated.

### 3.1 Indexes of separation: race, class and power relations

If one looks at the defining markers of the post-transition, ideas of hybridity, entanglement, interiority and agency form key features, which are prominent in the first two chapters of this study. These ideas, however, are not the only markers of this movement. In “Conceptualizing Post-transitional Writing in English” (2010), Ronit Frenkel and Craig MacKenzie suggest that the obsession with race, seen in early transition protest literature, has been replaced by indexes such as money and power as distinguishers of separation (2010: 3). In Coovadia’s *High Low In-between*, the social divide is seen largely through parameters of wealth and class, while race is repositioned as a less dominant aspect.

Ronit Frenkel investigates the position of race in the post-transitional space and in South African Indian fiction. She states that,
Race in South Africa is an inherently ambiguous construct, despite a history of imposed racial identities. Presently, this ambiguity is located in the tension between non-racialism, Black Consciousness and apartheid taxonomies that characterise contemporary South Africa where racism is interrogated but race is not. In reading South African Indian literature as a cultural history, the racial politics that continue to undergird South African culture are contested in a process of reformulation (Reconsiderations: South African Indian Fiction and the Making of Race in Postcolonial Culture, 2010: 6).

Coovadia’s novel addresses race as a relevant feature in South African culture without addressing the problem of racism, or having it dominate his writing. Rather, the character Nafisa notes that, “In the old South Africa, race had been politics. Now race was medicine. And medicine was race, medicine was politics” (p. 83). Nafisa, who is a doctor in KwaZulu-Natal, is the wife of Arif and the mother of Shakeer. In her observation above, we see an overlapping of various social dynamics prevalent in the post-transitional arena, such as power and wealth within politics.

Coovadia offers an alternative to reading the problematics of current culture in his novel, as he moves away from such ideas of ‘blackness’ and ‘whiteness’, and reconfigures binaries that present new cultural formations. Indeed, in Coovadia’s novel, race does not determine power and segregation – rather, social class and wealth do.

Wealth and power in Coovadia’s novel are directly linked to corruption and its national repercussions. This concern is reflected in the scandal of Arif’s murder, in which themes of power and national mismanagement by the country’s leadership are addressed. With reference to power-relations and leadership in South Africa during the early 2000s, the character, Jadwat in Coovadia’s novel notes that, “as we know by now, these people have no limits to their power and to their supposed wisdom [...].That is the lesson of the years between 2000 and today, and until we change the class basis of this leadership” (p. 138). These lines reveal the mechanisms with which Coovadia is concerned – particularly in the line, “until we change the class basis of this leadership”. In High Low In-Between, social class as a defining feature of identity and separation is made quite obvious in the claim that, “even in the new South Africa, many things are a question of class” (p. 162).

Class as an index of separation dominates over race, however, it does not replace the prevalence of race in South African culture in the post-transition. Rather, the novel reconfigures it in new
formations within the geopolitics of KwaZulu-Natal. Coovadia redefines the binaries of race and ethnicity in the novel, concentrating on Indian and black South Africans. The white character hardly features in Coovadia’s novel, besides Dr Gerson and Dr Mertzger, both of whom are not South African and, instead, represent the link between multinationalism and power relations in South Africa. Coovadia thus manages to challenge the idea of race as a distinguishing characteristic for separation in his novel, which is a notable trend that separates his post-transitional work from early post-apartheid protest literature, and one which features dominantly in contemporary South African Indian writing.

Indeed, what is typical in Coovadia’s text is that ideas of race are constructed and then deconstructed, while read against social class and power. One example is that Nafisa, who is a doctor, links the prevalence of HIV/AIDS to black South Africans, thus she constantly urges all black people around her, such as her domestic worker Estella, to get tested for the virus, yet ironically, she carries the virus herself.

The scene in which Millicent Dhlomo’s husband arrives at Nafisa’s house to demand payment for his wife’s funeral reflects another interesting interaction of race, class and power. Millicent Dhlomo was Nafisa’s patient who passed away from AIDS, while her husband is in denial of her having the virus in the first place. The scene is narrated as follows:

“I’m going inside now Sipho. Is there something you want? “The man’s posture tightened. He was angry. Nafisa could not tell where she went wrong with African men. Things often went wrong with them […] Nafisa saw that she could hardly be expected to sympathise with the grudge even if she understood its source. For she was on the wrong side of history. History and numbers, in Durban flowed against her. They flowed against the Indians in Durban. Under the old government, paradoxically, history and numbers seemed to flow in the opposite direction (p. 234).

In these lines, Nafisa positions herself as the victim in the political arena, suggesting that as an Indian in Durban in ‘the new South Africa’, she has no power. However, Sipho, who comes from a poor area in rural KwaZulu-Natal, has come to Nafisa to demand her wealth because she is a doctor and one of a higher social class. This renders Nafisa’s accusations that “history and numbers flowed against her” because of her race, problematic (p. 234). This extract forces the reader to question who holds the power in this situation. Such complex intersections of race, class and power reflect the convoluted and paradoxical attributes of South Africa as a post-transitional, ambivalent space.
The scene above, in which Sipo and Nafisa interact, is problematized further when we consider the history between black and Indian South Africans. Despite the fact that they were separate groups under the apartheid Group Areas Act, many so-called ‘non-whites’ chose to take on the racial classification term ‘black’ as a way of strengthening their opposition against the white apartheid government. Rehana Ebr-Vally details the homogenisation of racial groups as a form of strategic essentialism in *Kala Pani*, noting that “society is based on the group and not the individual” (2001: 169). Thus, despite previous unity based on race as non-whites, Coovadia looks at the portrayal of power relations between Indian and black South Africans at present. He does so by deconstructing prior unity in South Africa based on race between Indians and black people in the lines:

In February 1990, after Nelson Mandela walked out of Victor Verster, Arif had spoken to a hundred thousand in the square behind City Hall. Those hundred thousand, this army recruited across lines of race and class, had disappeared as completely as the builders of Great Zimbabwe (p. 234).

Social class, as a prominent point of separation in Coovadia’s novel, is seen in the geographical borders that separate the suburbs in which Nafisa and Arif live from the cosmopolitan inner-city hub, where Nafisa’s brother sells clothes (p. 48). Furthermore, it is seen when compared to the informal settlement on the outskirts of Durban where Estella lives (p. 210). Dilip Menon (2013) and Ivor Chipkin with Sarah Meny-Gibert (2013) have written on the spaces that South Africans live in and how these zones reflect the country’s current social dynamics. In Menon’s “Living Together Separately in South Africa” (2013) and Ivor Chipkin and Sarah Meny-Gibert’s “Introduction: New and Contemporary Spaces in South Africa” (2013), the notion of community is questioned through an analysis of areas of habitation. Menon poses his underlying question as follows: “for us in the global south, the exigent question is: what does living together in cities, marked now by the spectres of the market and capital, involve amidst inequality, violence and persistent habits of race?” (2013: 258). Menon posits the idea that a sense of genuine, democratic community is disabled by the zoned areas within South Africa, where people are separated physically by gates and security that cause a physical and emotional disconnection between members of society, as do other social issues such as crime, poverty, identity and belonging. With regards to gated communities, Menon (2013) affirms,

This sense of security [in organised gated communities] is premised on a discourse of violence outside the walls: muggings, break-ins, corrupt police, township violence and
a generally insurgent landscape. How do we conceive of this violence? Is it the norm, or is it the exception? (2013: 259)

An example of this contrast in spaces is seen when Nafisa, a doctor and upper-middle class citizen, leaves the comfort of suburbia to walk just a few meters into Durban city centre. She is noticeably uncomfortable and afraid in areas outside of her home and doctor’s rooms:

It was unusual to be outside in the midst of Durban. In common with the other doctors in the building, Nafisa did not often set foot on the street. It was too dangerous, too disordered, too African (p. 88).

Interestingly, Nafisa is described as walking through Durban city streets again at the end of the novel, only this time she has lost all her money and has joined the masses of the province’s HIV-positive population from which she so clearly separated herself previously (p. 238). Furthermore, her house may be repossessed and she is bankrupt, thus destabilising the barrier of wealth that she relied to separation distinguish herself and the working-class people around her. Her view of societal difference has been blurred. As she walks the streets, this time without fear, her observation expresses the intersections of space, history, race and power:

The new rich, the corporations and holding companies at the top. The new poor, the old poor at the bottom, perpetually altered the city according to their own methods. Nafisa couldn’t regret these alterations. She wasn’t nostalgic. The place had never belonged to her. The city had once been the property of the whites, and in particular the English. When their power had ended, in 1994, it had passed into the hands of nobody. Nobody was the true emperor of Africa (p. 238).

In *High Low In-between*, Coovadia has repositioned indexes of separation, specifically regarding race and social class. It demonstrates a repositioning of power relations. It is not devoid of inequalities and contrasting positionalities, but the maneuvering of binaries in the novel is different from the typical racialized forms produced by the country’s past.

### 3.2 Questioning ‘rainbow-nationalism’ and democracy

Coovadia’s *High Low in-between* portrays the post-transitional from a critical lens that forces questioning of the trope ‘the rainbow nation’ and democracy. While it does show progress in the country, it tends to signify a sense of disappointment regarding the state of the nation. In his critical analysis of early post-transitional South African texts as reflections of cultural trends, Van der Vlies (2017) writes at length about the sense of dejection that has resulted from
the unfulfilled promises of post-apartheid. Repeatedly throughout the chapters of his book, *Present Imperfect*, he mentions the “dysphoric effects of waiting” (2017: 53). He explains that, 

these are necessarily structurally conditioned by our negotiation of time-bound relationships, our orientation to a hopeful future that has become a present without fulfilling certain desires and to the past in relation to which one is not (or is not much) better off (2017: 53).

Van der Vlies refers to the term ‘disaffection’ as one that encapsulates this sense of hopelessness and inability to progress within the South African post-transitional sphere (2017: 53). In support of this observation and with reference to the present post-transition space, Coovadia repeats the lines “nothing had changed” (p. 73) in various formulations throughout the novel. He illustrates a view of the present that exposes the gaps in ‘the new South Africa’ post 1994. One example is seen through the character of Arif, who is murdered after contesting Thabo Mbeki’s denial of the existence of HIV and AIDS in Africa through his scientific research confirming the African strain of the virus. Arif is systematically silenced through political motives. Coovadia writes that, “Arif stood for all of us who have kept our eyes open and who have refused to be deceived by the superficial changes” (p. 59). Furthermore, democracy in the South African context is critiqued by Coovadia, seen here through the silencing of Arif in his attempts to expose the truth:

According to Arif this fact explained the disappointments of democracy. Democracy didn’t necessarily work. In the space between the people and the truth a thousand and one superstitions might be constructed. People would die on account of their superstitions. Yet, as far as he knew, not one man had sacrificed his life to determine the charge of the electron. It explained the last ten years of this country’s history (pp. 67-77).

A sense of hopelessness is evoked in Arif’s struggle to gain recognition for his scientific findings in the field of HIV research. His story epitomises the sense of disaffection within a nation that awaits the outcomes of the promises of a free and fair democratic rainbow nation, more than two decades post-apartheid. Readers of *High Low In-between* are left with this sense of disappointment in South Africa and are thus encouraged to examine the root of this emotion. Such questions illustrate the importance of Coovadia’s novel in interrogating the now and the unfulfilled expectations of South Africa, post 1994.
Van der Vlies’s observation of the present, in which the population appears to be “not much better off” (2017: 53) than before the transition, is further developed by Mbembe in his article, “Passage to Freedom: The Politics of Racial Reconciliation in South Africa” (2008). Mbembe acknowledges changes that have occurred in South Africa – at the time of writing, thirteen years post-apartheid – but draws the ultimate conclusion that this change is not enough and has not steered the country towards a truly equal, democratic state. Despite the fact that more years have passed since Mbembe’s article was written, his sentiments remain relevant today. Writing on current culture at the time, he notes a rise in the black middle and upper classes and a decline in segregation (2008: 5). However, what is more striking is that,

Black South Africans still command less than 5 percent of the national economy. Whites still occupy about 75 percent of top management posts in South Africa. Racial and gender imbalances in the distribution of wealth, income and opportunity are still the rule. Too many poor blacks are still not in a position to create something meaningful of their lives. The moment when South Africa will be able to recognise itself and be recognised as a truly non-racial community is still far away (2008: 6).

High Low In-between displays aspects of the present that illustrate how the notion of ‘transition’ has been experienced, as opposed to how it was intended to be. Mbembe’s observations allude to a sense of dissatisfaction that has amounted after the promise of ‘rainbow nationalism’. In his articles, “At the Centre of the Knot” (2012) and “Passage to Freedom” (2008), Mbembe comments on transformation and how this has been misinterpreted in such a way that it has resulted in a distorted image of the present. He discusses the prevalence of corruption, crime and disease as the results of the misreading of what equality and transformation mean. He addresses the rise of the minority black elite, the persistent white privilege, and an imbalance in wealth distribution and power relations. Coovadia reflects Mbembe’s ideas in the conversation between Nafisa and Jadwat: “In the past, this was not our country. It belonged to the Europeans and the multinationals. In the future it is not likely to be our country either” (p. 24). This observation has two important facets: firstly, it hints at the history of Indians in South Africa and, secondly, it demonstrates the disequilibrium in relations

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11 It should be noted here that although Van der Vlies’s *The Present Imperfect* (2017) was published almost ten years after Mbembe’s “Passage to Freedom” (2008), the primary texts in Van der Vlies’s works are all written in the early transitional years, or what he refers to as “the interregnum”, the same time at which Mbembe’s article appeared. They refer to the same temporality and centre on the same themes. The ideas presented by Van der Vlies and Mbembe both resonate in Coovadia’s *High Low In-between.*
of power in the present, with a suggestion that such might be the structure of power relations in the future too. Mbembe suggests that the current state of the nation stems from an incorrect interpretation of the concept of ‘equality’ in an attempt to achieve transformation, which has left South Africa far from achieving its intended democratic freedom. Mbembe notes that, “devoid of ethical consideration, the project of ‘transformation’ can be catastrophic in terms of its costs and consequences” (2008: 15).

Mbembe demands a reconsideration of equality as a concept, based on qualities of humanness rather than wealth and power. He notes that,

equality does not mean equal distribution of everything to everyone. It means instead the equal treatment of everyone, the granting of the same weight to everyone. (2008: 16)

He argues that there is a need for a national acknowledgement of equality as human beings, rather than a ‘tit-for-tat’ rhetoric that is disabling the nation. One of the many portrayals of the layers of complexity in the novel that centre on corruption, abuse of power and impact of the country’s history can be seen in the conversation between Shakeer and Officer Gumede, who is the police officer responsible for the investigation of Arif’s murder. Gumede asserts:

“The one thing I want to convey… just because the police force is now run by Africans, do not assume we are incompetent. One lesson we can take from our history is that many people, even black people, cannot stand to live under a black government. There are too many stereotypes of Africans afoot: that African’s plunder, African’s rape at the drop of a hat, Africans cannot be trusted to control our instincts. That is what our real struggle is against.”

[Shakeer responded] “I would have thought the real struggle is against murder. Incompetence doesn’t have a colour” (pp. 102-103).

This conversation connects to South Africa’s past and how this has impacted upon the present, suggesting a prevalence of crime, corruption and separation that oppose ‘rainbow nationalism’. Furthermore, it portrays Mbembe’s desire for equality and what this means in the complex setting of the South African present. It also positions South Africa within the continent of Africa and, subsequently, positions it internationally, which implies the idea of an international gaze and stereotypical views of Africans.
Coovadia exposes inequality through the positioning of indexes of separation in the complex plot of *High Low In-between* — all centred on ideas of power and social class that inevitably intersect with race, a concept deeply embedded in South Africa’s history. The rhetoric of Coovadia’s novel speaks to a history of colonisation and systematic othering and a present in which the country is trying to be recognised in the global arena. Through a study of the ambivalent features of Coovadia’s novel and the positioning of these within the South African body politic, a re-evaluation of the post-transitional is encouraged. The novel calls for scrutiny of the idea of the ‘rainbow nation’ at present – one in which the old problems persist against the backdrop of a positive futurity, and thus challenge the idea of democracy.

3.3 Temporality, denialism, and the notion of ‘the looking glass’

The ambiguities of Coovadia’s novel — the way in which the highs and lows of the country are drawn into one space, reflects the distorted realities of the present. He uses parody and satire to portray a warped sense of reality that seems to contradict ideas of freedom and democracy. The absurdity of the present is represented through the motif of the looking glass in the novel. Coovadia makes reference to ‘a looking-glass society’: “this looking-glass world, with its blank and impermeable prospect” (p. 141). This, essentially, is a world out of touch with reality. Describing *High Low In-between* in “Indian Ocean genres”, Isabel Hofmeyr notes that,

> the image of the looking glass is a strong motif in the novel: as a mirror; a form of self-deceiving vanity; as something through which one can fall into another reality (à la Alice); and as a glass-that-looks, an analogue for the camera, for windows, for the ‘airtight’ compartments of South African life (in Alvstad, Helgesson & Watson, *Literature, Geography, Translation*, 2001: 178).

I have read this motif as a representation of disfigured reality, which in Coovadia’s novel connects to two main ideas: warped temporality and denialism. The temporal aspect is read through the confusion of reading the present as an era in which what was promised to happen at the turn to democracy, (in the past), failed. Therefore, it portrays the destabilising effect of living with a promise of a bright future in mind, but experiencing the failure of this promise in its lived experience. This connects to the sense of disaffection or dejection felt by the South African nation regarding the unrealised promises of the democratic ‘rainbow nation’, referred to by Van der Vlies as “cruel optimism” or “blocked futurity” (2017: 17).
In “The Logic of the Looking Glass: Representations of Time and Temporality in *Agaat* and *High Low In-between*” (2015), Nedine Moonsamy further develops this concept by linking the motif of the looking glass in Coovadia’s novel to Derrida’s theory of contretemps. Through her reading of Coovadia’s *High Low In-between*, Moonsamy connects the idea of the looking glass to a reading of South African current culture as one that is distorted, as it is in Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking-Glass* (1998). She observes that,

> In *Through the Looking Glass*, Lewis Carroll narrates the story of Alice who enters the looking glass and reaches a world where everything functions in reverse – which is to say, contrary to expectation. Furthermore, during an exchange with the White Queen, Alice establishes that she now inhabits a world that is governed by a *Contretemps* and is greatly confused and disoriented by her looking glass experiences (2015: 2).

The paradoxical elements in Coovadia’s text link to temporality, in that the future-imagined in the past has failed, and thus to the distortion of a dream for the country. Indeed, as Moonsamy observes, the novel reflects Derrida’s contretemps, whereby his “formulation offers a paradoxical acknowledgement of the future that is both ruptured and restored in its very expression” (2015: 4). Moonsamy goes on to explain that,

> The ‘untimeliness’ of time, or dislocation in the present is, for Derrida, an expression of desiring a future that no longer seems possible (2015:4).

The distorted views that one might get when peering through a looking glass are used to symbolize the distortion of hope and promise of a better future given at the time of South Africa’s transition into democracy.

The second aspect of the motif of the looking glass in Coovadia’s novel is denialism—denial of reality. Denialism here refers to the overlooking of the bleak reality of the present and what has caused this. Appearance and reality are distorted, suggesting a disconnection from factual knowledge and a disfiguration of reality, as does the looking glass. Coovadia’s novel has several references to a warped sense of reality, such as in the following:

> Reality was only too happy to keep you at the furthest distance. Reality— its endless sequence of doors which led inwards—let you close only if you pushed past each door. It was a deliberate process, not something that just happened. It involved the will and, between two people, perhaps, a contest of wills to put down the illusions of one party (p. 12).
In the context of Coovadia’s novel, denialism is portrayed by former president Thabo Mbeki, who was heavily criticized for his lack of acknowledgement of the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In *High Low In-between*, Mbeki is described as “[...] the president who, apparently, wants to be a medicine man for the country, who doesn’t believe in logic and science, only in politics and magic” (p. 104). His denial that HIV leads to AIDS underpins the motif of denialism and warped reality, which is often alluded to in the looking-glass society that is presented in this novel. The fact that the novel does not ever actually name the disease builds onto this concept of denial. Instead, AIDS is referred to generally as ‘the disease’, with people who carry it named ‘the infected’, throughout.

The reasoning provided for the denial of a pandemic that, at this time, had killed more than 300 000 people in South Africa, links to a national obsession with and an unwarranted sensitivity toward race and political-correctness, captured in the following: “[ …] the government halted all tests of new vaccines and retrovirals. The Health Ministry argued that drug trials violated the dignity of black Africans” (p. 151). The denial of Arif’s finding of an African strain of the HIV virus — one which is scientifically proven and from which numerous people were already suffering — is motivated by the fact that it is seen as an attack on Africa and Africans. Supporting this, Coovadia states,

> Arif could never understand why the new government treated doctors and scientists as the enemy. It was our government. For them to turn around and attack him as a racist, because he isolated the local strain of the virus, gave Arif the shock of his life (p. 176).

Michael Chapman in “Postcolonial Problematics: A South African Case Study” states that,

> Mandela’s successor as state president, Thabo Mbeki, highlighted his own psychology of confusion in which, at one moment, he spoke of the measured ‘first-world’ technicist, at another as the African to whom HIV/AIDS, before it was a medical condition, was a conspiracy of the West against the third world” (2011: 65).

Facts are concealed here, opposing ideas of freedom and democracy. The connection to race here reflects the history of South Africa, as well as Africa as a whole, in the international political sphere. The reaction to Ariń’s findings results in a defensive push against the West. The act of denialism in this scenario is read as a metaphor for the denial of the promise of a free, democratic nation post-1994. The ludicrous justification behind the denial of the AIDS pandemic, links to the notion of distorted reality, as if seen through a looking glass.
Of the Health Minister in Mbeki’s cabinet, Manto Tshabalala Msimang, Coovadia says,

[ she ] promoted African dignity by passing suitcases of illegal money to Hansel Metzger at the Union Buildings. She ensured African dignity by drinking herself into a stupor by lunchtime on a working day. But dignity, dignity, dignity forbade counting the numbers of the dead (p. 151).

Coovadia states that the Health Minister’s argument was that, “[…] the idea that there was an African strain to the virus was defamatory of Africa” (p. 97). This comment reflects the underlying histories of western domination and connects to Mbeki’s questioning of the “applicability of scientific AIDS research to African conditions” (Barnard, The Cambridge Companion to Nelson Mandela 2014: xxix). The denial of the pandemic was built upon the idea that “to refuse to know was to maintain a hold over things” (p. 143), which is symbolized through the looking-glass motif, or ‘looking-glass logic’. Denialism was founded on a perceived need to promote an African national identity against western domination and Manichean oppression seen in colonisation and apartheid. Before his murder in the novel, Arif says to his wife, Nafisa,

the way this country works, they don’t fear losing an election. They don’t mind three hundred thousand deaths per year. Their one sensitivity is how they are portrayed in the international press. That’s Africa. They will go a long way to punish their former friends. That’s Africa too (p. 2).

The novel suggests that to accept Arif’s discovery of the African strain of the virus, which has led to thousands of deaths, and accept international aid, would be seen as a loss of power. It would be seen as failure in the international gaze, with racial underpinnings, and a step backwards in the political sphere in a country caught in the uncertainty of transition.

Coovadia uses the motif of the looking glass to connect the ambiguities and warped temporal realities of the present, post-transitional space with notions of denialism. It creates a sense of disillusionment that links to Van der Vlies’s interrogation of the present, whereby the reality of the present is cast in the shadow of the high expectations born in 1994.

**3.4 Reading the Post-transition through Coovadia’s female characters**

Coovadia is renowned for presenting strong female figures in his novels, thus enabling a strong female voice. The dominant female characters in High Low In-between are Nafisa and her domestic worker, Estella. The paradoxical undertones that encompass many parts of this novel
arise through the interactions and juxtaposition of these two characters. They have a complex relationship of co-dependency, which is multifarious in its symbolism from both personal and political perspectives. From a personal perspective and with regards to their professional relationship, we are told on the first page of the novel that, “if one was unhappy then so was the other. In this way Estella and Nafisa were, people said, like mother and daughter” (p. 9). To read their relationship in this manner neglects the more complex issues at hand, such as those involving power relations that, when interrogated, suggest conflicting dynamics across class, race, ethnicity and religion. In “The Domestic Worker's Place in the “Madam's” Space. The Construction of the Workspace in the Home of Muslim Madams”, Bonin and Dawood note further that “home presents a contradictory space as it is both the private space of the employer as well as the workspace of the domestic worker” (2013: 56). The relationship between Nafisa and Estella within the intimate space of the home provides a reading for the underpinning of societal, cultural and political paradoxes that Coovadia’s novel reveals.

Nafisa and Estella represent different epochs of South African history, which collide in interesting formations that allow for Coovadia’s novel to be read as a post-transitional text. The novel looks at the ambiguous aspects of living in a transitional space, where the history is still fairly recent, and the challenges in achieving equality are evident.

From a socio-political stance, Nafisa and Estella’s relationship represents the post-transitional sphere in that Nafisa, in her mindset and owing to her history, represents the old South Africa, whereas Estella represents the new. Their relationship therefore portrays layers of temporality that intersect in the present. Writing on Coovadia’s works, Carolin elaborates that Coovadia’s writing inscribes imaginative possibilities over the histories and discourses of apartheid and the transition into democracy in a way that renders multiple narrative temporalities and discourses legible simultaneously (Carolin in Frenkel, 2016: 8).

The generational gap, together with differences in race and class between Nafisa and Estella read in the post-transitional arena, uncovers cultural dynamics that add to the ambivalence of the now. An example is observed through the reaction Nafisa has to Estella’s red shoes. The red shoes are a motif that recur in the novel as a symbol of social change. The sight of these shoes makes Nafisa uncomfortable. The first introduction to the red shoes is near the beginning of the novel on page 13, as follows:
She knew about the pair of high-heeled Cuthbert’s shoes, rolled in a sheet of rose-pattern gift wrap, and stored on the shelf beside Estella’s bed […] they represented a fortnight’s wages. For some reason these shoes stay in Nafisa’s mind. They summarised some fact about Estella […]. She sensed that the girl had eluded her. Once upon a time the shoe – that red-throated Cuthbert’s shoe – would have been on the other foot.

As a character that represents the past, Nafisa feels threatened by the symbolic shift in power relations between her and Estella in the political narrative of South Africa— one that makes her feel she is losing control and being left behind as an older Indian woman. Nafisa cannot endure the thought of Estella having her own life with the freedom to spend her money on whatever she wishes. Nafisa eventually confronts Estella about owning the red pair of shoes, saying, “Do you have those shoes in your bag? As I have always said, our feet are the same size. You could have taken an old pair of mine — one I don’t use, mind you — and saved yourself the money to spend of something better. Nothing had changed” (p. 73).

The final line of this quotation alludes to Nafisa’s mindset. Her anxiety about losing her husband – and at this point, possibly her wealth – is heightened by her anxiety of being in a country post-transition, where change has taken place but not in the form that Nafisa expected. Indeed, “Estella was intact while she [Nafisa] was splintered” (p. 68). Their relationship exists in a tense and ambiguous present where the old and the new merge, awkwardly and paradoxically, reflecting the nature of the post-transition.

Moreover, while Nafisa desires to feel in control of Estella as her boss, the boundaries of their relationship are muddied in that she also feels she needs to take care of Estella’s personal life, as if she were a child. Bonnin and Dawood (2013), in their work regarding the interaction between Indian ‘madams’ and black domestic workers in Durban, note that “the ambiguities of gift giving and maternal feelings are contributors to power imbalances” (King, 2007 in Bonnin & Daewood, 2013: 57). Nafisa oversteps her role as an employee by presuming to care for her domestic worker beyond their contractual relationship. She projects unfair assumptions on Estella, motivated by Nafisa’s knowledge of statistics regarding HIV infection in the KwaZulu-Natal province. One of many examples in the novel that demonstrates Nafisa’s attempt to get Estella tested for HIV is provided here:

Estella, don’t you want me to do your bloods when I get back this evening? I can bring the injection. After all, you are a sexually active female in the most affected region on
the continent. There is no shame in finding out if you are infected. Quite the opposite, in fact. […] If something is wrong, we can put you on treatment” (2009: 69).

To which Estella asserts, “why do you think something is wrong? I have not complained about anything, Nafisa. It is not your right […]” (2009: 69).

Nafisa’s motives are selfish, as the role of ‘care-giver’ is used to satisfy her need to feel in control and dominant. Throughout the novel, Nafisa tries to get Estella to agree to test for HIV. She has no justifiable reason for doing so other than the fact that she acknowledges grave statistics regarding HIV in KwaZulu-Natal. She makes an assumption regarding Estella’s HIV status, based on stereotypical assumptions of her race and class, thus reducing Estella to a statistic. Their relationship is a power struggle, one that reflects South Africa’s past, present and future in a single zone.

Indeed, Nafisa tries to assert power over Estella in ways that render any niceties between them insincere. For instance, Nafisa sends Estella to the police station to be questioned as a suspect in the murder trial of Nafisa’s husband. Coovadia notes that the assumption that any type of crime or wrong-doing was an insider’s job is a typical behavior of middle-class South Africans in trying to assert power over those of lower social standing (p. 96). When her son asks her how Estella will get back from the police station, Nafisa tells him “she can walk”, despite the far distance, stating “Estella is used to [walking]. You forget how poor people live in this country” (p. 98). Nafisa’s remark here displays the discrepancies between groups of the population based on wealth and social standing, presenting inequality that persists post-1994. This is an example of the multiple and contrasting aspects of the post-transitional, as the inequality and separation seen here challenge notions of national unity and cultural entanglement in current South African culture.

In addition, we see a constant belittling of Estella throughout the novel based on her position as a young, black lady in KwaZulu-Natal. Nafisa’s comments are stereotypical and assumption-based, allowing her to ‘other’ Estella, thus perpetuating the sense of power that the older woman assumes she has over her employee. After first accusing Estella of spending too much time on the phone to her new boyfriend when Estella is actually calling to check on her sick daughter (of whom Nafisa is aware), she reaffirms her stereotypical views by retorting:

I know precisely how you act when a new man appears. […] Since we are on that subject…you cannot be too careful as an African woman, you have to be tested and
have your boyfriends tested before you sleep together. This is the one thing that will lead to your comeuppance. You’re crazy for men (p. 12).

Nafisa’s mindset is limited, relying on assumption instead of critical analysis of a situation. She presents a mentality that symbolises past—one of limitation, driven by categorisation.

In his novel, Coovadia illustrates the relationship between the Zulus and the Indians in Natal. They co-existed under indenture and colonisation by the British, followed by further racial subjugation under the apartheid regime, where they were separated into different racial categories and zoned into different living spaces under the Group Areas Act. Coovadia notes that although these two groups have lived side by side in Natal for centuries, their lives were entangled through proximity, yet distinctly apart in identity, and although governed by the same people, they “were deaf to each other” (p. 68). The stratifications of race and culture are evident, illustrating a society in the present that is still largely marked by difference and separation, thus presenting a contrasting perspective of the post-transition compare to ideas that are geared towards unity and cultural integration.

Although Coovadia alludes to the negative aspects of the post-transition, he also suggests an inevitable change that is waiting to happen, thus too adding to the paradoxical undertones of the novel and the post-transitional. This change is suggested through the character of Estella. The initial view is that, compared to Nafisa, Estella’s township life and position as a domestic worker shows the reality of consistent unequal wealth distribution in South Africa. As the novel progresses though, a role reversal is seen between these two female characters: “Estella belonged to the future, which, in turn, was her property. Either she or her children would inherit this future [while those of older generations were left behind]” (p. 163). This quote suggests a shift in power and represents national change. Through Estella, we see change through the youth of the country – through those “who will inherit the future” (p. 163) – and a suggestion of fruitful opportunities for them. It appears that Estella gains power while Nafisa, who represents ‘the old’ watches her power wane. This reversal is evident in the lines, “For what had Estella lost? Estella was intact while she, Nafisa, was splintered. Her life had been punctured” (p. 68).

Yet the idea that Estella represents the future is also problematised, adding to the ambivalence of the novel. It is also representative of the post-transition as an era of great complexity. Although Coovadia hints at the idea of change in South African culture through the youth, he does not romanticise this, as concepts like Nuttall’s *Entanglement* tend to. While Estella
represents change in society, the progress and evidence of this is slow, owing its corrupt setting. It is thus also through Estella that we see how the desire to progress is hindered by a system that is not yet equipped to allow for genuine progress to take place – or at least slows down change owing to the effects of the past.

While Estella may be young, bright and beautiful, she lives in impoverished conditions outside of the city in an informal settlement, is a single mother to a sick child, and works in a minimal-wage position as a domestic worker. Some twenty years post apartheid, with a promise of improved living conditions, social benefits and equal opportunities left unfulfilled, Estella forms part of the majority of the population in South Africa who are still waiting for such promises to be implemented. This embodies the dominant theme of Van der Vlies’s *Present Imperfect* (2017), which is a sense that while she holds potential for change, she lives in a period of dormancy, frustratingly waiting for change to be realised. Nevertheless, even if Estella has not been mobilised across class barriers yet, there is hope for those of her generation and generations to follow. Estella’s character is a metaphor for hope in the future – despite the dis-eased and ambivalent present.

While Estella suggests a hint of hope for the future, Nafisa represents the angst of South Africa between eras of change. Her outlook is negative, which is expressed by her trying to constantly comprehend reality. She feels lost and as if she losing control. Her known reality is rapidly becoming unknown. Here the motif of the looking glass becomes apparent again: “if one were to set a mirror before her, she would immediately shatter it. In this way, [Nafisa] typified the country. It resisted self-consciousness” (p. 99). Moonsamy’s application of Derrida’s contretemps is relevant in this regard too. She observes that as Nafisa’s life begins to spin out of control, her notion of time functions “in a backwards trajectory” (2015: 13). This, “in turn, […] signals her entry into the looking-glass world; ‘for she was Alice and has been Alice from the first breath she took’” (Coovadia, 2009 in Moonsamy, 2015: 13).

Viewing Estella as ‘other’ to her and keeping the social boundaries of difference intact, provides Nafisa with a sense of security. In Nafisa’s opinion, Estella is a young, black woman from impoverished society that is largely uneducated and affected by disease. In contrast, Nafisa prides herself on being an educated Indian doctor from the upper-middle class, whose patients, in her mind, generally belong to the same social category as Estella. Coovadia writes,
Nowadays the ratio was reversed. The pattern of disease was more racially pronounced than before. Eighty percent of [Nafisa’s] African patient’s tested positive. The corresponding figure was two percent for her Indian and a few white patients (p. 83).

Nafisa categorises people using statistics. However, statistical evidence is unhelpful and irrelevant when disabling stereotypes and barriers of separation in an attempt to gain national unity. Nafisa’s mind functions through the limited bifurcations of wealthy/poor, healthy/sick, Indian/black, powerful/helpless. This approach represents the past, governed by a Manichean outlook that has served its purpose in her construction of self and maintaining a sense of power, but which does not serve a purpose when initiating change.

At this point, Nafisa realises that a subtle switch in power relations between herself and Estella has occurred. Nafisa cannot maintain a position of superiority when she sees that the stereotypical assumptions she had of Estella no longer hold. She realizes that Estella is an independent woman who has her own life outside of her job. When Nafisa contracts HIV, she goes through a period of existing in a warped state of reality and denial, in ‘a looking-glass world’, delaying getting any form of treatment for herself. Her life has already become meaningless at this point. She cannot separate herself from others of different classes because she has lost most of her social standing. Coovadia debunks the stereotypes that Nafisa relied on for her sense of belonging and identity and writes this as a growing disorientation in her character. Confronting difference and realising that there is not much that separates her from those she felt superior to before, results in her bewilderment and demise.

In conclusion, this chapter has assessed aspects of post-transitional culture in South Africa from a conflicting perspective than the first two chapters in this study. It has honed in on the feeling of national disappointment and unfulfilled expectations that govern the present, in a country where inequality is still prevalent and disconnection overrides connection. It thus differs from the ambitious and hopeful futurity portrayed in Sarah Nuttall’s *Entanglement* (2009), which lacks a holistic and broader reading of the post-transition. Coovadia’s repositioning of markers of difference situate his novel as a key study in both the South African Indian literary canon and in the post-transitional. Race has been shifted to the background, while wealth and power have gained a more central focus. Coovadia’s novel reveals that reality can also be distorted or denied adequate address. The novel thus has the dizzying effect of simultaneously projecting national progression with regression, rendering it paradoxical, murky and ambiguous. I end
this chapter with a quote from the *Mail and Guardian* article “More Rebellious than Ever” (2010), in which Craig MacKenzie captures the essence of Coovadia’s text:

Coovadia’s subtle *High Low In-between* (2009), probably best captures the tenor of new South African fiction: it is not on this side or that, speaking on behalf of this group or that, espousing this ideology or that. It is on the new high that is South African lit, it plumbs the lows; it is also elusively, unclassifiably, in-between.
Chapter Four

Temporality and Belonging in Shubnum Khan’s *Onion Tears*

Introduction

Shubnum Khan’s 2011 novel, *Onion Tears*, completes this study of South African Indian contemporary fiction used as a lens to survey the post-transitional. Narrated across generations and through the alternating perspectives of three main protagonists, Khan’s novel provides a reading of the post-transitional in which time and the cultural epochs associated with these are drawn into one debate. This chapter explores the use of layered temporality as a post-transitional trend, providing a paradoxical and mosaiced reading of South African current culture from cross-generational South African Indian voices. This chapter also considers critiques of the post-transitional, drawing on Nedine Moonsamy’s temporal readings of the post-transitional cultural space, in her articles, “The Logic of the Looking Glass: Representations of Time and Temporality in *Agaat* and *High-Low In-between*” (2015), “Spectral Citizenry: Reflections of the ‘Post-transitional’ in Contemporary South African Literature” (2014), and “Death is an Other-Country: Grieving for Alterity in “Post Transitional” South African Literature” (2013). In these works, time is not linear or logical, but overlapping and layered. I provide an explanation of how Moonsamy suggests that the post-transitional be read alongside ideas of melancholia, in that it does not sever its connection from the past but rather integrates it with the present.

Furthermore, as the novel portrays the experiences of South African Indian women across temporal zones, the notion of Indian identity within the South African context is highlighted, characterised by themes of ambivalence and belonging. In this chapter, a study of the portrayal of South African Indian identity is offered by looking at the novel’s three interconnecting narrative voices that demonstrate differing links to India and Indian culture in the South African setting across generations. Writing on longing and belonging, Pamela Gupta cites Peter Van der Veer as follows:

Migration has ambiguities of its own, based on what I would call the dialectics of “belonging” and “longing”. The theme of belonging opposes rootedness to uprootedness, establishment to marginality. The theme of longing harps on the desire for change and movement, but relates this to the enigma of arrival, which brings a similar desire to return to what one has left. (Van der Veer, in Gupta, 2011: 90)
Thus, in this chapter I examine the ambiguities of identity and belonging by contrasting the experiences of Khadeeja, a first-generation South African Indian born during apartheid, with that of her daughter, Summaya, raised after apartheid. Khadeeja and Summaya are then read against the character of Aneesa, who is Summaya’s daughter and Khadeeja’s granddaughter. Respective affiliations with India as “the mother land” differ among these characters; thus I aim to uncover the complexities within the Indian diaspora and identity, read within the South African current cultural arena. The theoretical support used for this section is the work by Ashwin Desai, as well as additional theorists writing on belonging and identity in the South African Indian diaspora.

4.1 Haphazard temporality as a representation of the post-transition in Onion Tears

Theories of the post-transitional tend to have teleological underpinnings. Literature that forms part of post-transitional writing positions different political and cultural temporalities against each other, often with overlaps and unclear demarcations of eras and their influences on one another. Shubnum Khan’s Onion Tears provides a teleological representation of South African current culture that overlaps and integrates different cultural eras, or conceptual thought linked to these eras, through its three main characters. It thus forms a platform from which the debate regarding temporality and the post-transitional can be analysed. I argue that Khan’s novel illustrates a haphazard reading of time that is relevant in conceptualising current South African culture.

As the post-transitional is closely linked to temporality, the term has been critiqued in that the ‘post’ suggests a clear break or demarcation from what came before it, as seen in the works of Chris Thurman in “Places Elsewhere, Then and Now: Allegory ‘Before’ and ‘After’ South Africa’s Transition?” (2010), and Aghogho Akpome in “Towards a Reconceptualization of “(Post) Transitional” South African Cultural Expression” (2016). Nedine Moonsamy’s writings (2013, 2014, 2015), too, critique ‘post-transitional’ by providing an alternative reading of time. Chris Thurman asks,

How can there be such a thing as “post-transitional literature” (which would imply that we have completed a transition)? Aren’t we still in a process of transition from apartheid to something else? What is that something else? We have done away with legally enforced segregation, but we certainly cannot claim to be “beyond” apartheid. Ongoing social, racial and economic divisions are evidence that even terms such as “post-apartheid South Africa” are problematic (2010: 91).
Critiques of the post-transitional that seek to query the time demarcations suggested in the title are, in my view, over-emphasising semantics related to time in ‘post’. Such critique focuses on the temporal allusions of the title but overlooks the content that has been mapped as trends that encompass this sphere of literary conceptualisation. The ambiguities and paradoxes of literary works, and culture read through these, are so subtle that defining such a shift is challenging.

Indeed, Thurman does acknowledge Ronit Frenkel’s clarification that,

the prefix ‘post’ can be, and has been used to signal not so much a temporal as a conceptual shift (‘post-feminism’, for instance, does not indicate that feminism is moribund) [in South African literature and culture]. (2010: 91)

In Aghogho Akpome’s 2016 article, “Towards a Reconceptualization of ‘(Post)Transitional’ South African Current Expression”, he provides another useful suggestion of what the post-transition could represent. He refers to Ashraf Jamal’s notion of the concept, explaining that “the ‘post’ in ‘post-transitional’ [should be read] as a signifier, not of ‘negating or a surpassing,’ but of ‘a zone of activity’” (Jamal, in Akpome, 2016: 42). This “zone of activity” has a specific set of themes, such as a shift away from the racial fetishisation that dominated protest literature and a blurring of boundaries of separation between binaries of identification, such as past/present, black/white, rich/poor. Overlapping time is also a dominant concept, together what this represents in a reading of current culture, aptly captured in Khan’s novel through the narrative trans-generational voices.

In “Spectral Citizenry: Reflections of the ‘Post-transition’ in Contemporary South African Literature”, Nedine Moonsamy draws on theories of time by Jacques Derrida that refer to “the spectre” in *Spectres of Marx* (1994) and *Aporias* (1993)\(^\text{12}\) and combines these with Freud’s concepts in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917). What Moonsamy argues is that time is not linear\(^\text{13}\) and so linear time cannot be used to read current culture in South Africa, because past, present and future overlap and become blurred. She refers to Derrida’s ‘the spectre’ as representative of liminal space and time, where boundaries of separation are deconstructed.

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\(^{12}\) Nedine Moonsamy’s other work also reads the ‘post-transitional’ from a temporal ‘Derridian’ perspective. See “The Logic of the Looking Glass: Representations of Time and Temporality in *Agaat* and *High-Low In-between* (2015) and “Death is an Other - Country: Grieving for Alterity in ‘Post Transitional’ South African Literature” (2013).

\(^{13}\) This links to Derrida’s contretemps, used to frame her 2015 article (see Chapter Three).
Using the binaristic metaphor of ‘the living versus the dead’ to read ‘the past versus the present’ in current culture, she explains that,

the spectre, by its very nature, challenges the conceptual boundaries between the living and the dead, and so calls into question the equally superficial borders that are often placed between binary oppositions such as ‘self’ and ‘other’, the ‘past’ and ‘present’. In declaring the border non-existent, the spectre teaches us that there is no limit [or border of separation] (Moonsamy, 2014:70).

In Khan’s novel, time is distorted in that the stories of characters across three generations are all read together, suggesting that time, and the experience gained in this time, travel with us, permeating distinctions of past and present and bleeding into the future. Khan’s novel allows for a reading of how time in the cultural and political arena, read through her three protagonists, portrays current culture in the sense that the characters all influence one another. Their experiences and worldviews are shaped by each other and the separation suggested between generations across time is permeated, read in multidirectional ways in the presents. It is through this idea that Moonsamy connects Derrida’s ‘spectre’ with Freud’s mourning and melancholia. She states that, “according to Freud, ‘mourning’ is regularly the reaction to loss’ […] but ‘melancholia behaves like an open wound’ (2014: 70). Moonsamy therefore suggests that the post-transition should be read as ‘the spectre’, or the space between, and should be read from a perspective of melancholia, recognising that the past lingers in the present, informs the now and will move with us into the future. This concept is better understood through an analysis of the multiple narrative voices in Khan’s novel and what they represent in terms of overlapping cultural temporalities.

I will begin this analysis with the character of Khadeeja Balim. She is the matriarchal figure of the Balim family and keeps the family together. Although her worldview differs largely from her daughter’s (Summaya’s) and granddaughter’s (Aneesa’s), it carries with it a cultural history that impacts upon their notions of self. An example is evident in her love for Indian cuisine, which helps the transfer of Indian culture and tradition from one generation to other. Her cooking is described as follows:

the way the finger ran over a firm tomato, the way the tongue moved over a good amli sauce, the way someone exhaled after a good biryani provided Khadeeja with a pleasure she never found anywhere else in her life. […] People tasted her food and looked at the
small old woman in front of them with new eyes. They felt they knew her through the taste of her food. Her meals touched people. (p. 8)

Yet Khadeeja’s outlook differs from that of Summaya and Aneesa, relying upon the dualistic, Manichean thought that governed the apartheid era in which she grew up: “she couldn’t accept anyone who was different from her” (p. 94). She grew up during the apartheid era, in Bronkhorstspruit, an area designated for Indians through the Group Areas Act, where she was surrounded by people who shared the same (or similar) history, race, religion and culture. She is the daughter of migrant parents, passenger Indians who boarded a ship from India to South Africa in search of a better life. Here, the immigrants had to reimagine themselves in a new land, through racial, ethnic and gender oppression, and form a new identity that bridged where they came from with where they had arrived. Khadeeja is a symbol of a diaspora that had to negotiate ideas of identity and belonging within a new space. It is thus not surprising that her character views the world around ideas of them-versus-us (black vs white, Muslim vs Christian, for example). This outlook is evident in the following instance:

Her father always told them that no one was better than the other person. He said that Islam said every person was equal. She wanted to believe him but it was hard to do when all the evidence around you proved otherwise. Signs that read ‘Whites only’; (white people who called her coelie). Why, even her father has a separate entrance for black people. He said it was because the wit mense wouldn’t come into his shop if he didn’t.

But all this led Khadeeja to believe that white people were better than her… (p. 238)

This example illustrates the role that the racialised and Manichean environment that surrounded Khadeeja played in shaping her mentality and identity, also allowing for a temporal reading in which this character represents the past.

As a child of immigrants to South Africa, who boarded a ship and immediately regretted leaving India (p. 51), Khadeeja learns to hold her family together, often through her cooking, and preserves her Indian culture. She represents adaptation and survival. In Reconsiderations (2011), Ronit Frenkel refers to the biblical figure, Ruth, as a figure of adaptation and adjustment, reflected in female characters in migrant literature, such as in the work of Agnes

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14 The term refers to those who travelled to South Africa after indentured Indians. Passenger Indians chose to come to South Africa to set up merchandise stores, unlike those who arrived under indenture, exploitation and a level of coercion. See the Introduction to this study for more detail.
Sam (1989) and Jayapraga Reddy (1987). Ruth is the adaptable wife who follows her husband into new lands and, despite the difficulties, adapts to her new surroundings (Frenkel, 2011: 134). Although Khadeeja is born in South Africa and it was not her but rather her mother who followed her husband to a foreign land, she still endures difficulties in which her ability to adapt and prevail ensure her survival:

Haroon [Khadeeja’s (late) husband] worked as a part-time bookkeeper and in his spare time sat at home with the curtains drawn while he listened to the radio. […] After a few years they realised that their house could not run itself on the money he earned, so Khadeeja took a job at a clothing factory. She worked from eight to five in a dim factory where the thick hot air smothered her because there were no windows. She still had to come home to clean the house, cook and later bring up the children. Since Bronkhorstspruit had no schools for Indian children, Khadeeja had to tend to her brothers and sisters who came to live at her house in the week. They slept on floors, sofas, on top of tables and beneath them. When she wasn’t stitching, she was nursing a crying child. When she wasn’t doing that, she was attending to her complaining husband. […] She resented her husband for being the promise of a better life and failing. […] but most of all she resented the fatigue that knitted itself into her flesh. In time, it became a way of life and Khadeeja became used to hard work. Her bones grew harder shells, her muscles grew thicker tendons, her body adapted […] (pp. 6-7).

In addition to being discriminated against due to her ethnicity, race and religion under apartheid, she was further oppressed as a woman in a patriarchal community. The oppression and discrimination shaped her rigid mentality, which symbolises South Africa’s past. She is oppressed in an abusive marriage in which she is forced to find ways to survive. Regardless, she looks after her own siblings, her children, and her husband, while still having to work eight hours a day in an unventilated factory (p. 6). She soon realises that, although she does not have the power as an individual woman, and perhaps the mindset to contest this systematic oppression, she finds her own sense of agency within its boundaries. She realises that her talent for cooking is the key to keeping her husband happy and therefore makes her position within the abusive marriage more bearable, in that a happy husband makes for less physical abuse.

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15 See Jesus is Indian and Other Stories (1989).
Khadeeja also teaches her neighbour how to cook well as a means of helping her to survive domestic abuse in her marriage. After continuously hearing the abuse going on upstairs,

Khadeeja walked up the steps into the girls’ flat. She found her sitting in a crumpled heap on the kitchen floor. “Men” Khadeeja had started while pulling out a pot from the cupboard, “are dom. We women, we learn this quickly. […] But even if these men are very stupid, we are still stuck with them neh?” […] She filled a silver dish with water from the kitchen tap and soaked the lentils in it. “We are stuck with them, because what can we do? We never went to school, […] Abba got me married in two-twos”. She snapped her fingers. “We never learned to do much besides cook. […] Eve though we haven’t learnt anything like the men, we are also clever. Neh? […] A man’s head is in his stomach” (pp. 70-71).

Yet despite this adaptation, Khadeeja is still raised in a time characterised by separation and difference. Khadeeja thus develops a mentality based on difference and separation, prescribed by her socio-cultural surroundings as a Muslim South African Indian woman and the political surroundings as a female of colour under apartheid. Khadeeja views the world as binary, referring to any other culture as having their own ways, with an attitude of complacence. She carries this belief long beyond the end of apartheid, into a post-transitional timeframe in which two generations, her daughter and her granddaughter, share her common space and are influenced by her worldview. This situation is an example of Moonsamy’s suggestion of the past permeating the present “like an open wound” (2014: 70). Khadeeja does not consider the possibility of an entangled culture that tolerates otherness, like Summaya does. Khadeeja’s mindset is expressed through the line, “God made people different for a reason” (p. 94). She uses this statement as a means of justification for her inability to move beyond the realms of her limited perspectives. She consistently delivers stereotypes that underpin a narrow mindset based on binaries of ‘self’ and ‘other’. Her statements reveal racist idealisations, such as “black-people-only-know-how-to-dance” (p. 99) and “Paki’s will always be dirty to me” (p. 93). These statements are stereotypical, racist, apartheid-era ways of thinking, positioning Khadeeja as the representative of past temporality in Khan’s novel.

Khadeeja forms such judgments because she has been a victim of discrimination. Her dislike of white people is rooted in her position as the ‘racial other’ against them under apartheid. She recollects memories from her childhood from which this impression of white people stems:
Like husbands, there had been good [whites] and bad ones. The ones that had chased her sister and her down Klein Street with their dogs. For fun. The ones that called them *coelies*. It wasn’t so much the word. It was the pompous sort of sneer smeared across the lips. “Coelie, kom hier”. She remembered feeling like nothing. Like a little piece of nothing that was forgotten lying between the grass on some field that had no name. (p. 234)

Instead of creating a clear break between temporalities, Khan does not sever representations of the past (through Khadeeja) from the present. The integration of characters, read as representative of contrasting cultural epochs, demonstrates the overlap or entanglement of time as a key feature in post-transitional writing. Khan creates a multiple viewpoint narrative that overlaps experiences across time by dedicating each chapter to one of three protagonists and arranging these chapters haphazardly. Through this technique, time is somewhat warped and the past, as represented through Khadeeja, is read in connection with the present. The point here seems to be that identity is not separate from memory. The past participates in the creation of current culture, which Sarah Nuttall terms “temporal entanglements” (2009: 4-6). Histories overlap and are interwoven, suggesting that to understand current culture, one is required to look into the past as well as the future.

As such, Summaya becomes the voice in the novel of the shift in perspective and cultural developments at the end of apartheid. This was an era of protest and anger, which are characteristics that are evident in Summaya’s character. She pushes against the boundaries that pressure her to conform to the specific norms of the community in which she was raised. Summaya, unlike Khadeeja, does not quietly accept her situation. She stands up for herself in protest against the oppressive barriers and narrow mindsets that attempt to define her. She lives a life that allows for the change that will eventually be seen in her daughter, Aneesa, and generations to come.

Despite the temporal difference between Khadeeja and Summaya and the socio-political contexts, Summaya was expected to adhere to a specific life, governed by socio-religious norms within her Muslim community. She is thus judged for everything, from her “strange” eye colour to the way she chooses to be single in a culture where, “in the case of a young Indian girl, [make-it-or-break-it] meant whether she would marry and be happy for the rest of her life, or not get married and be unhappy for the rest of her life” (p. 127). Her brother, Naeem, is a dominant catalyst for the judgement Summaya receives. He “had never approved of anything
she did. He thought her ways wayward and unfathomable and inappropriate for a woman. He thought her loose and insolent. [When] he tried to ground her [,] she laughed in his face” (p. 198).

This expectation that Summaya act and live out a certain existence as a woman reflects the national construction of woman from an oriental and Islamic origin, which is created in opposition to the image of the Western woman. In Meyda Yeğenoğlu’s essay, “The Battle of the Veil: Women Between Orientalism and Nationalism” (in Lodge & Wood, 2008: 706), Yeğenoğlu contests the use of this Occident-Orient juxtaposition to define the identity of Islamic women. Her writing reflects the complexities of such comparisons. She draws upon ideas of Partha Chatterjee (1989), defining the idealised image of the modern oriental woman – the image Summaya is expected to uphold by her family and society. Chatterjee writes about the image of the nationalist woman, read in the timeframe of Edward Said’s *Orientalism*, as quoted by Yeğenoğlu as follows:

The nationalist image of a woman was deliberately separated from the degenerate condition of women in Western societies; she was culturally superior to the excessively Westernised women of wealthy families who had colonial connections. However, she was not vulgar, coarse, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, etc., like the lower-class women were. It was emphasized that she could achieve a healthy balance refined by modern Western methods of education and at the same time retaining her place at home safely. In this respect she was superior to the Western women who had achieved education mainly to compete with men in the outside world, but she was also superior to the traditional women who were oppressed by traditional culture. (Chatterjee in Yeğenoğlu, 2008: 706)

Growing up in South Africa as a third-generation South African Indian, in mostly the early post-apartheid era, Summaya is caught in a liminal space, pushing for change, yet doing so in a cultural time frame that restricts her from achieving such. The isolation she experiences and the oppression and victimisation she feels when she is betrayed by her cheating husband lead to a vehemence that reflects a national emotion at this time. In other words, although Summaya is raised in an era in which people are theoretically free, the atrocities of the apartheid regime and the resultant social barriers still influence society. Identity based on difference is still systematically in place, thus notions of segregation still dominate. A mindset of binary
perspectives, where belonging is found in one specific area with people who supposedly have the same histories, outweighs any attempt at cultural entanglement or hybridity.

Within this teleological context, Summaya is brave enough to challenge these notions through the way in which she chooses to live her life, which is met with disapproval from her mother, brother, and members of her community. Summaya’s years as a young adult at university show her sense of agency and how she moves beyond the stereotypes still present in her surroundings. An example of such is her inter-racial relationship with a white man at university:

[Summaya] knew it wouldn’t last because he was white and her mother would never have understood. And no matter how much she loved aggravating her mother, she still didn’t want to see her being ostracised by a community that would never accept an inter-racial relationship. (p. 21)

At her university, too, judgmental comments are made in reaction to her dating across racial barriers. She receives a reaction from the other Indian girls that reflects the general consensus against cultural hybridity in any form, underpinned by their social confines: “they said it was against her religion and her race and didn’t she have any shame?” (p. 22). Such statements reflect the state of the nation, just as the country moved from the apartheid regime to a new democracy. Although change had taken place in theory, in reality, the effects of such a controlling and separatist regime left people feeling unstable and clinging to what was known, i.e. ‘sameness and difference’ and ‘them-versus-us’. Summaya’s experience is defined by the in-between space between the end of apartheid and the post-transition, referred to throughout Van der Vlies’s Present Imperfect (2017). Summaya lives in-between what was promised to the nation and what was lived in reality. With her character read against Khadeeja’s and interspersed with the narrative by her daughter, Anees, Khan layers temporalities that encourage a ‘mosaic’ reading of current culture. Time here is distorted, non-linear and overlapping. It is thus representative of Nedine Moonsamy’s reference to Derrida’s contretemps,17 as suggested in Chapter Three of this study, as well as Derrida’s ‘spectre’, or liminal time, reading as ‘no distinct time’ at all but rather a space in which temporality is blurred into a representation of the post-transitional.18

Summaya represents the journey of South African culture towards a state of newness. She represents an era in which the shackles of the past still weighed down society and kept its

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17 See Moonsamy (2015).
18 See Moonsamy (2014).
citizens in positions prescribed by the apartheid regime. The change into the transition post 1994 brought with it much negativity and paranoia of what may become. Underpinning this fear was a culture of racism and otherness. Naeem, Summaya’s brother, displays this intolerance. His mindset represents an either-or mentality, where there are clear rules that govern real life (p. 198), to which Summaya argues, “life should not be about rules, plans and Right Ways and Wrong Ways. There are different trains for different people” (p. 199).

While her brother states that “this country is going to the dogs”, Summaya also has hope for a better South Africa in the future (p. 200). She saw the early post-apartheid as a temporary state of reaction against a long period of oppressive governance. She saw South Africa at the time as “a recovering patient that was using its illness as an excuse to behave recklessly” (p. 201). Khan’s integration of Summaya’s life, read against Khadeeja experience, overlaps different time periods, forcing a reconsideration of the present and how experience and teleology affect each other.

Summaya’s daughter, Aneesa, represents another conceptual shift in South African current culture. Integrated non-linearly throughout the novel in order to contribute to the layered temporality of the work, Aneesa’s experiences offer new perspectives that indicate newness in the post-transitional era. Social change is more evident in Aneesa’s time, yet her experiences still reflect the paradoxical elements of the post-transition, showing social change in some regards yet not in others. An example is Aneesa’s lack of understanding regarding difference based on race, as compared to her grandmother’s perspective. As a child in the post-transitional cultural space, Aneesa expresses perspectives that show how she is removed from the past, yet she is not wholly free or separate from it. Khadeeja spends every afternoon with her, exposing Aneesa to apartheid-era ideas defined by difference and separation, yet Aneesa is removed from the context, memory and experience upon which Khadeeja’s approach and belief are based. Aneesa queries her grandmother’s perspectives that seem illogical to her, such as interracial marriages. After complaining about a friend’s daughter’s interracial marriage, Khadeeja is met with questions and confusion by her granddaughter. The generational shifts and overlaps of time are seen in the following extract:

[Khadeeja] suddenly looked at Aneesa across the table. “You heard—no white boys!”

“Yes, only black boys for you, Aneesa dear,” Summaya added. And she turned to look her mother in the eyes. “Nani would love a black grandson. And Aneesa and him can dance and dance their whole life together, isn’t, Ma?”
“But Nani,” Aneesa interjected. “Why? Why can’t we marry whites or blacks?”

[...] Khadeeja looked perplexed. “Because we just can’t” (p. 263).

Through this extract, Aneesa is trying to make sense of the cultural concepts that underpinned both her grandmother’s apartheid-era mindset as well as her mother’s post-apartheid beliefs. She is thus influenced by past cultural epochs and forced to read them in the present, from her worldview, across time. Doing so affect the process of her identity formation, as her mother and grandmother are the main points of reference in her process of understanding the world around her. It is made clear here that any era in history is not detached from that which came before it. In her writings on the notion of entanglement, Sarah Nuttall describes the interdependency of prior histories in post-transitional writing. She notes that,

So often the story of post-apartheid has been read within the register of difference—frequently for good reason, but often, too, ignoring the intricate overlaps that mark the present and, at times, and in important ways, the past, as well. (Nuttall, Entanglement, 2008: 1)

As histories and cultures intersect, they collide with the present and have a significant influence in the current cultural sphere. Aneesa is emblematic of such intersecting histories, identities and perspectives. Aneesa thus needs to create her own understanding of the world as it is represented in the post-transitional, through its overlaps of temporality and the ambiguity and paradoxes that mark it. The temporal overlaps in Khan’s novel suggest markers of newness in the post-transitional sphere. Ronit Frenkel writes on newness in post-transitional South African Indian writing through the specific reference to Imraan Coovadia’s work, but considers Khan’s novel too. The notions of overlapping epochs of time and repositioning them into the present connect her ideas to Khan’s novel, whereby the intersections of characters across time create a type of cultural tapestry, or mosaic that represents current culture. In her article, “Imraan Coovadia’s Metonymic Aesthetics and the Idea of Newness in the South African Cultural Imaginary” (2016), Frenkel notes that Coovadia’s writing “reflects forms that are relevant to its history while progressively coding itself as new” (2016: 6). This concept is seen in Khan’s novel through its temporal repositionings that require a reading of the present through ideas of newness in the post-transitional space, informed by teleological overlaps.

Aneesa represents the conundrum of the present, as she suggests both hope for the future yet her story is told in a time full of contradictions. However, Aneesa also represents positive
attributes of post-transitional theory, such as Nuttall’s entanglement. This is seen through her incomprehensibility of difference as a dividing factor in society, such as those based on race and gender. In this sense, she suggests an imagined, hopeful future, or “the global imaginary”, to use the term coined by Leon de Kock\(^{19}\) and contextualised by Frenkel and MacKenzie in the article “Conceptualising ‘Post-Transitional’ South African Literature in English” as follows:

South Africa is a place marked by the overdetermination of racial taxonomies and a history of racial oppression, yet it is also a space that is iconic in what Leon de Kock calls the ‘global imaginary’, of how oppression can be overcome and differences bridged” (2010: 5).

Aneesa sees the world in simpler ways, without any first-hand experience of the societal prohibitions of the past. Moreover, Aneesa questions social norms. Her view of the world is not binary and does not see the need to place people into specific categories. Her sense of agency is evident despite her young age. While Summaya fought against the socially constructed prisons of difference, her daughter, a generation later, is not defined by such notions. Aneesa thus symbolises newness.

Yet contrasting this hopeful image of the future are the negative aspects of the present. While the reading of this novel illustrates progressive social movement towards change and integration, it is not devoid of the stark realities that were drawn upon in Chapter Three of this study. They live in a country in which cultures and differences overlap, but one in which social injustice, crime and corruption are rife. Khadeeja, representative of the old, and Aneesa, representative of the new, are united in an unforgettable trauma of an armed robbery in Khadeeja’s home, both of whom are physically attacked and emotionally scarred, left to continue their lives in fear. The scene is described as follows:

At exactly twelve-fifteen, Khadeeja Bibi Ballim knew something was wrong. Her eyes were still closed but she could sense a change in the room. After a tense moment she realised what it was: she couldn’t breathe. Her face felt warm and there was the smell of tobacco—but that didn’t make sense because her husband had been dead for years…but then Khadeeja Bibi Ballim made her second discovery for the night. There was a hand on her face […] A strange face stared back at her in the darkness. (pp. 317-18)

\(^{19}\) See De Kock. *South Africa in the Global Imaginary.* (2004)
Khan’s novel here portrays a present that shows the continuing effects of an unjust past. There is still separation, inequality and crime in the post-transition.

Furthermore, while Khan’s novel portrays the temporal overlaps and entangled histories that represent inspiring attributes of the post-transitional space, it also reads across segregated communities and habitations. It takes place in communities that are still largely (but not entirely) homogenised in terms of race. Bronkhorstspruit and Mayfair are still predominantly Muslim Indian areas. The novel involves the interactions between South African Indians, who are mostly Islamic, rather than an interaction across differences of race, ethnicity, religion and class. The novel therefore portrays Johannesburg as a society in which inequality is prevalent, difference is still geographically mapped to a large extent, and crime is rife.

Khan creates a temporal tapestry in her novel that provides for a holistic reading of the post-transition. It looks both at its progressive attributes as well as its faults. The novel thus portrays the ambiguities and irregularities of the present that typify post-transitional literature.

4.2 South African Indian identity (Indianness) and the notion of belonging

Khan’s novel illustrates issues of belonging that are typical of histories of migration that have resulted in the global diaspora. In his article, “Indian South Africans: (Be)-longing and the Postapartheid Search for Roots and the Imagined Family” (2018), Ashwin Desai writes on notions of identity and belonging amongst South African Indians, in which the term ‘diaspora’ is contested as an essentialist term that suggests a common experience amongst all diasporic Indians across the globe, when in fact their experiences and feelings regarding identity are vastly different. Desai quotes Anthropologist Thomas Blom Hansen (2003) on his critique of the term diaspora, who, he notes,

casts doubts on the utility of diaspora “as a descriptive category that says something meaningful about a group of people and their history…because it implies ‘diaspora’ to be a ‘total identity’, a condition that informs and structures many facets of life. This is plainly wrong.” Indians are divided by migratory experiences, region, religion, language, ethnicity, caste, and economic status, which are occluded by the homogenizing term ‘diaspora’ (Blom Hansen, in Desai, 2018: 12).

This observation is pertinent to South African Indians, in that their histories of arrival in South Africa have led to different experiences and emotional bonds with India as ‘the motherland’. In Khan’s *Onion Tears*, the character of Khadeeja reads in support of Desai’s observations of
Khadeeja constantly looks for ways to reconnect with India. This sense of patriotism is part of Khadeeja’s character, who wants to feel closer to the land of her origin, and thus is obsessed with Indian soap operas and Indian cuisine. Desai (2018) provides a backdrop for a reading of political ties between South Africa and India, which, after prior limitations were overcome, resulted in connections between the two countries. Desai notes that:

> during the 1980s, travel to India increased, and as the telecommunications industry took off, India was beamed straight into people’s lounges. Bollywood was shown in mainstream cinemas. The Indian cricket team toured in the aftermath of the fall of apartheid, while diplomatic missions nurtured new ties based on old histories. As democracy consolidated, there was a concomitant explosion of interest in tracing one’s roots, digging deep into archives and family albums to try and make a connection with India. (2018: 6)

In the novel, we are told that “[Khadeeja] loved her Indian soap operas and comedies [on Zee TV]. She felt it kept her closer to her beloved India” (p. 141) — a value her father instilled in her. Khadeeja depicts a strong sense of nostalgia for India and a desire to constantly be connected to her roots. In his article, “Cosmopolitan Criminality: Cultural Entanglements and Globalised Crime in Imraan Coovadia’s Green-Eyed Thieves”, Alan Muller (2016) mentions such nostalgia when referring to South African Indian fiction. He quotes Claudia Perner, who suggests that,

> migrant fiction frequently portrays processes of settling in, of (sometimes failed) assimilation and of nostalgia for a geographical point of origin. It negotiates the loss or absence of home as a dilemma or at least a challenge to its migrant characters (Perner in Muller, 2016: 51).

Khadeeja’s sense of Indianness is coupled with longing and nostalgia alluded to in Perner’s statement.

Summaya’s experience, on the other hand, shows a disconnection from India. She is South African Indian and she does not identify with being anything else. She does not demonstrate the longing and nostalgia for India that her mother does. When Summaya accompanies her mother on a trip to India, the ambiguities of belonging and identity are highlighted through their different emotions. Khadeeja feels an instant sense of belonging, while Summaya is met with a sense of confusion and contradiction regarding her identity. She defines the experience
as ‘jarring’; it “made her feel incomplete as a human being. And at the same time made her feel more whole than she had ever felt” (p. 240). This description sums up the ambiguous nature of belonging and identity in the South African Indian diaspora. Summaya goes on to describe that in India, “she found the lack of races strange” (p. 243). It is on this trip that she encounters the complexities of difference and what this means in the formation of identity. She sees people’s difference based on race (p. 246), as do many in South Africa, but it is in India that she realises that race does not determine difference. She realises that although she first describes everyone in India as “a brown blur” (p. 245), there is a vast difference of ethnicity, language, faith and culture amongst them. Thus, while her engagement with the constructions of identity and the complexities surrounding such is initially influenced by her past and upbringing in South Africa, her experiences in India affect her identity in South Africa, helping to broaden her mind and add to her cultural syncretism.

Khan projects the difference in perspectives, identity and experiences of belonging further by contrasting Summaya’s reaction to Indian media to Khadeeja’s. While Khadeeja is determined to value anything linked to India, Summaya despises it. An example of this is seen though Summaya’s reaction to the Indian television channel, Zee TV. Following on directly from the chapter in which Khadeeja’s love for Indian television is portrayed, Khan juxtaposes Summaya’s disapproval of it. The opening lines of the chapter read:

Summaya hated Zee TV. She hated that it was the global representation of her culture. A song-and-dance culture with heavily lined eyes, glossy lips and a clutter of colours. She refused to believe that current Indian television represented any culture of hers. […] She hated that Indian television perpetuated fairness as beauty. A mild apartheid. A mindset of colonialism that they had never let go of. (p. 146)

Summaya has an Indian identity that is defined across generations and geographic locations. The impact of assimilation within the multicultural setting of South Africa and the different eras of their generations, coupled with the political and personal histories of time, are the reasons for the differences in identity between Khadeeja and Summaya.

Khadeeja alienates herself as a foreigner in South Africa, regardless of the number of years that she has lived in the country. When she leaves Bronkhorstspruit after her husband’s death, she moves to Mayfair, an area renowned for having a predominantly Muslim Indian population in Johannesburg. Khadeeja’s sense of home is rooted in familiarity with Indian culture. In Meg Samuelson’s article, “Orienting the Cape: A ‘white’ Woman Writing Islam in South Africa”
(2012), she quotes Thabo Mbeki’s speech, “I am African” (1996), in which he refers to the complex underpinnings in the postcolony between the India and Atlantic ocean, from which point he observes that “…we [can] be both at home and be foreign” (Mbeki, in Samuelson, 2010: 366). This quote indicates Khadeeja’s position and attitude that is undergirded by ideas of belonging and South African Indian identity.

Indianness and South African Indian identities thus differ. Having a stronger affiliation towards India, as opposed to South Africa or vice versa, is largely dependent on the histories that resulted in migration to South Africa. In Afrindian Fiction: Diaspora, Race, and National Desire in South Africa (2008), Pallavi Rastogi captures the complexities of South African Indian identity. She notes that

South African Indians – though displaying what Emmanuel Nelson defines as a “shared diasporic sensibility….issues of identity, problems of history, confrontations with racism, intergenerational conflicts, difficulty in building new supportive communities” – are also actively engaged in the life of the nation, consciously identifying as South Africans first and as Indians next despite their relative anonymity in the national spectrum (2008: 5).

The complexities of South African Indian identity are further expressed in Lindy Stiebel’s article, “Sugar-coated Stories? Plantation Literature by Selected South African Indian Writers” (2016), in which she captures Ela Gandhi’s description of identity and belonging, suggesting that she refuses the pairing of “South African” with “Indian”. She notes

I’m a South African. A very proud South African . . . The Indianness comes in at the level of . . . culture . . . the way we eat . . . the kind of things we eat, the kind of things we . . . appreciate like music, drama, the language we speak . . . We only enrich our country by having all these different tastes and habits. What I’m basically saying is that is where the Indianness stops (Dhupelia-Mesthrie, in Stiebel, 2016: 13).

Khadeeja’s Indian identity and belonging differ from the two quotes above. She considers herself an outsider, or a foreigner in South Africa, despite being born in South Africa. She grew up being indoctrinated with Indian patriotism by her father. He ensured she never forgot India:

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20 The last line of this quotation, “…despite their relative anonymity in the national spectrum”, refers to Rastogi’s argument that Indians were excluded from national rhetoric that “unfolded across a black-white axis” (Rastogi, 2008: 3) and that the Indian experience, until recently, has gone largely unnoticed and unvoiced. It is only recently being due paid attention in the literary arena as a platform from which current culture in South Africa can be read.
“and she never forgot where her roots ran. She made curries. She wore *Punjabis*. She watched Indian films. She had a framed photo of the Taj Mahal in her bedroom […] She kept India alive in her own way” (p. 141). Her father and mother chose to come to South Africa in search of a better life, with the plan of establishing a small business selling everyday goods (p. 5). Unfortunately, they soon learnt the kind of treatment they would receive in a country governed by colonial and racialised regimes. Under apartheid law, when Khadeeja’s sister fell gravely ill with pneumonia and was not attended to timeously in the government hospital she was taken to and thus passes away, her father becomes more nostalgic for India than ever. He states: “what does the skin matter when you are sick? Tell me? […] Sometimes. Sometimes I think… maybe it was a bad idea to come here. *We were better off with our own people* (p. 51). The final line of this quotation suggests a feeling of isolation, a disassociation with South Africa and a longing for India. The scenario portrays the complexities of notions of South African Indian identity under apartheid. This is a distinct marker of difference in the experience and identities of Khadeeja, as opposed to those of Summaya and Aneesa.

Ashwin Desai (2018) elaborates on the impact of apartheid and Indian identity in South Africa. In his work, we see the intersection of time and space, together with race, and how these contextualise notions of belonging. Desai observes that under apartheid, South Africans had a distinct place. They had their own locations under the Group Areas Act and felt connected to other Indians in their communities. Through this homogenisation, there was a sense of belonging. In the post-apartheid space, these definitive boundaries started to corrode, as Desai notes:

> The fading rainbow in South Africa is likely a contributory factor to some wanting a ‘safety net’. There have been periodic outbursts of anti-Indian sentiments, which cause Indian South Africans to question their place in the South African body politic. (2018: 7)

This situation, Desai suggests, has led to Indians becoming nostalgic for India and seeking reconnections with it. Desai explains the debated view that Indians benefited from apartheid, quoting the Mazibuye African Forum who state that, “‘Indians, benefited through colonialism and apartheid’ and were not ‘African but…(as) Indians in the diaspora’” (*Daily News*, July 16, 2013 in Desai, 2018: 8). The hierarchy of racial categories during apartheid, as discussed in the previous chapter, places Indians below whites, leaving black people at the very bottom (Frenkel, 2011: 9). In this sense, the disparity between blacks and Indians was large in terms
of class and economic wealth, leading to the claim of Indians benefitting from this system. To sum up Desai’s observation here and to connect it to the notion of belonging and identity amongst Indian South Africans, Desai suggests that the rupturing of racial categorisations destabilised the sense of belonging of South African Indians in South Africa. As such, many traced back their roots in India and sought to visit family relations in search of belonging, as is the case with Khadeeja in Khan’s novel. However, Desai’s suggestion that Indians found a form of belonging during apartheid due to the homogenised racial category to which they belonged is problematic. Firstly, the homogenisation of all Indians as belonging to one group overlooks the essential ethnic differences within this group that further complicate an individual’s sense of identity. In *Kala Pani*, Rehana Ebr-Vally details the vast differences in language, religion, and social caste amongst Indians in South Africa who were assumed to form one homogenised racial category and how doing so confused notions of identity (2001: 87). Secondly, it draws on the bifurcated rhetoric of ‘them-versus-us’ or ‘either-or’ that informed separation based on race under apartheid, which the post-transitional seeks to overcome. The distinctions between such dualistic as opposed to hybrid and entangled notions of identity are portrayed in Khan’s novel through the contrasts between Khadeeja, Summaya and Aneesa – three generationally distinct characters that provide a complex reading of Indian identities and belonging across time.

Despite her Indian patriotism and separatist mindset, Khadeeja also demonstrates the impact of living within the South African multicultural context. For instance, Khadeeja mixes various South African languages in her everyday speech. An example is the way in which Khadeeja speaks to her domestic helper, Cynthia – “’kyk hier, boega mena’, Khadeeja would instruct in Afrikaans and Zulu (Although Cynthia spoke Xhosa)” (p. 34). Nevertheless, while she may demonstrate natural assimilations of language gained from living in a multicultural space, the boundaries of separation remain strongly erected between herself and any form of ‘otherness’ – a remnant of separatist apartheid mentality that Khadeeja embodies.

Both Summaya and her mother demonstrate the ambiguities and paradoxes associated with Indian diasporic identity in South Africa. Aneesa is a product of the post-transitional and experiences the same ambiguities as her mother and grandmother, yet she was born into an era where society was more open-minded about difference. Jaspal Singh writes about the South African Indian diaspora, with specific reference to the work of Ahmed Essop, and is relevant when applied to the characters in Khan’s novel. Singh quotes Ashcroft et al. in *The Postcolonial Studies Reader*, noting that:
[...] A fundamental ambivalence is embedded in the term *diaspora*. A dual ontology in which the diasporic subject is seen to look in two directions—toward an historical cultural identity on one hand. And the society of relocation on the other. In the diasporic subject then, we see in stark relief the hybrid and dual characteristics that are most often associated with postcolonial discourse (Ashcroft et al., in Singh, 2011: 48).

In conclusion, Khan’s novel has been used as a lens through which to read the post-transitional South African scene. It has dealt with two main features of post-transitional writing in the developing canon of South African Indian fiction: overlapping temporalities and the idea of belonging. The merging and overlapping of temporality as a means to demonstrate the South African post-transitional present has been studied through a close reading of the characters of Khadeeja, Summaya and Aneesa. In doing so, I have shown how Khan has challenged linear readings of current culture, suggesting that alternative positions of temporality be taken when reading the post-transitional, as Nedine Moonsamy suggests. Furthermore, this chapter has discussed issues of ambivalence found in post-transitional texts written by South African Indian authors, denoting ideas of belonging and Indian identity. Having contrasted Summaya’s lack of connection with and longing for India as ‘the motherland’ with the longing and need for connection experienced by Khadeeja, Khan has portrayed the paradoxical nature of identity in the murky space of the post-transition.
Conclusion

This study has addressed two inter-related focal points: South African Indian writing as an important part of the South African literary canon and the post-transitional as a current motif in the study of contemporary South African culture. Through the analyses of the novels chosen for this study, specifically of their paradoxical and ambiguous aspects, my contention is that contemporary South African Indian fiction reflects the post-transitional moment in South African culture and politics. I argue that it is through this acknowledgement that the relevance of South African Indian writing must be understood. This argument has been supported in this study through the close readings of four novels that depict the complexities of South African current culture, thus demonstrating that South African Indian voices and experiences are of paramount importance in studying the South African present, post-transition.

The impetus for this study was that South African Indian fiction held a limited and marginal voice in the South African literary arena and corpus. Although it has recently gained some attention in South African literary and cultural studies, the contention of my project is that this literature deserves further critical scholarly interest. Its elaborate insights into overlapping histories and the bridging of temporalities, the entanglement of identities demonstrated through the texts, and the way in which it encourages the questioning of South Africa in the present are all important grounds for the study of these texts.

In this study, the notion ‘South African Indian’ must be understood as my attempt to capture the intricate entanglements of multicultural ancestries, race, religions and ethnicities, read within the South African setting and complicated by the country’s politically racialised past. As I have shown in my study of the four texts, the vastness of this term and the complex layers of Indian identities that it defines, provide an important occasion for deconstructing the homogenising ideology that sought to keep it singular and static. South African Indian writing and cultural studies are thus positioned as a mode through which to read the broader context of South African current culture in the post-transition. The complexities of South African Indian identity and all the implications that this term encompasses are reflected in the four novels chosen for this study. For instance, the novels contain references to lineage that points to oceanic connections between Asia and Africa. They also demonstrate connections between South Africa and India through indentured labour, followed by the migration of passenger Indians who came to South Africa to set up small businesses (Frenkel, Reconsiderations, 2011:
My study has also shown that connections between South African Indian identity in post-transitional South Africa with indenture and the migration of passenger Indians are made in Meeran’s *Saracen at the Gates* (2009), Coovadia’s *High Low In-between* (2009) and Khan’s *Onion Tears* (2011). Indeed, Ali’s *Lessons in Husbandry* complicates the dynamic of South African Indian identity in that it is set in the Cape, thus adding a different historical dimension to the body of South African Indian writing. As Pallavi Rastogi notes, “Indian identity in South Africa does not originate in Durban from 1860 onwards but actually from the Cape [in the seventeenth century]” (2011: 20). Rastogi elaborates that ‘Cape Malay’ people were Indian and other Asian (Indonesian, Malaysian and Ceylonese) slaves who were sent to Table Bay from Dutch colonial areas (2011: 24), prior to the arrival of indentured labourers in Natal. I reiterate here that South African Indian is therefore a complex term that embodies differences in ethnicities, religions and languages that overlap. The proximity of the Cape Malay and Indian people, situated against further diversified races and ethnicities within South Africa’s shared spaces, means that the idea of a pure, singular perspective of a South African Indian cannot be sustained.

What my analysis has set forth is that the rich ancestral layering, enhanced by religion, race, gender and ethnicity, encompasses the ambiguities and muddled identity within post-transitional South Africa. The novels for this study have provided unique lenses that have allowed for a surveillance of South African culture at present and a scrutiny of the post-transitional. The novels encourage a re-examination of contemporary South Africa contrasted against the country’s past. As Frenkel and MacKenzie observe in “Conceptualizing ‘Post-transitional’ South African Literature in English”, the repositioning of binaristic identity markers such as black/white that previously governed apartheid and post-apartheid thought do not serve as a framework through which South Africa can be conceptualised (2010: 5).

Through the analysis of Meeran’s *Saracen at the Gates* (2009), a novel that exemplifies this concept of a multi-layered Indian identity, I have shown how it captures the tenor of the post-transition through its ambiguity and entangled identities that emerge from a reconfiguration of identity markers in a contemporary South African space. Meeran’s novel therefore extrapolates the concepts underlying Sarah Nuttall’s *Entanglement* (2009) through its focus on integration and the enmeshment of difference. However, race is not overlooked but, rather, repositioned. Furthermore, the use of other identity markers, such as gender affiliation, ethnicity and creed, draws attention to and critiques simplistic concepts surrounding identity and replaces these with ambiguous, more involved ideas. Strengthening the idea of cultural change and
transformation from apartheid-era mentality, Meeran’s novel develops in a way that depicts South Africa’s transition from apartheid to the post-transitional, specifically through the evolving mindsets of its protagonists. The novel reveals the intersection of and tensions between cultural difference and individual agency through which the protagonists are empowered.

Building onto ideas of empowerment and ownership of individual identity, Chapter Two has focussed on transgressing oppression through interiority and intimacy in Shaida Kazie Ali’s Lessons in Husbandry (2012). Indeed, Godwin Siundu observes a trend in Indian women’s stories, whereby the tendency toward the autobiographical or memoir serves as a way of voicing individual narratives within repressed historical ones (Siundu, 2011). This is the case with the protagonist in Ali’s novel. Through her memoir writing, Malak transgresses segregationist strictures that dominated South African thought post-apartheid. The novel highlights the use of interiority as a marker of post-transitional writing and a precursor for the acquisition of agency. Furthermore, it embraces entangled histories, specifically within the Cape. Typical of post-transitional writing, Ali’s novel unearths histories and merges previously hidden stories with present-day realities and identity. It therefore crosses zones of temporality, a concept that I have argued is essential in reading South Africa today.

I have argued that the post-transitional is challenging to define, as it accompanies a vast array of perspectives and defies any form of categorisation. The post-transitional is paradoxical, an aspect that the specific combination of novels chosen for this study capture. Chapters One and Two focussed on cultural hybridity, syncretism, interiority and agency as aspirational features seen in the post-transition – aspects that appear to suggest a progressive shift towards national unity from South Africa’s separatist past. While it is true that these aspects offer a sense of hope, they overlook the still largely segregated societies that exist quite separately within the country. However, through an analysis of research on the post-transitional that critiques concepts that suggest national unity, such as Nuttall’s Entanglement (2009), it is evident that there is a strong critical view that South Africa is far from achieving such. In his 2016 article, “Imraan Coovadia: The Essay and/as Transformation,” Chris Thurman, for instance, invokes Coovadia’s appraisal of South African current culture, which is reflected in High Low in-between. He quotes Coovadia as saying:

The South African novelist for whom there will be “no high or low subject matters”, who will hear the English of the minibus taxis as much as the Afrikaans of the farms
and the Zulu of the barracks and the parliament, who will see the refugee and the gay black woman and the mute and the orphan and the rich black man as precisely as the European liberal and the Indian doctor and the professor and the beggar, has yet to be born (Coovadia in Thurman, 2016: 77).

What Thurman is alluding to through his use of Coovadia’s quotation here is that the post-transition still entails separation, some twenty-five years after apartheid, and that ideas of cultural entanglement and tolerance of difference cannot overlook this reality. This study has made reference to Andre Van der Vlies’s argument in *Present Imperfect* (2017). His work examines the South African present from the perspective of national disappointment and disaffection within the timeframe from the beginning of the transition from apartheid to the present. Van der Vlies claims that the euphoria of the South African nation felt at the point of transition to democracy in April 1994 has dissipated and has been replaced with a lack of confidence in national leadership and a general sense of hopelessness that has emerged in the light of increasing corruption, crime and segregation (2017: vii).

Undergirding Van der Vlies’s *Present Imperfect* is the question of “how does contemporary literature […] engage with the aftermath of apartheid?” (2017: vii). Chapter Three has addressed this question through its study of Imraan Coovadia’s *High Low In-between* (2009). The inclusion of this specific novel has allowed for a critical reading of the post-transition through the lens of contemporary South African Indian fiction. What distinguishes this chapter from the first two in this study is its turn towards an exposure of the deeply discontinuous aspects of the present. This is not to say, however, that progressive aspects such as cultural hybridity and the embrace of difference are not evident. Chapters One and Two present this view; however, what they do not overtly address are the flaws and gaps in the concepts of hybridity, entanglement and overlapping histories and identities. I have endeavoured to reveal the connections between Coovadia’s critical approach, on the one hand, and the optimism of Meeran and Ali’s novels, on the other, in that, seen together, they dramatize the dialectic tension in the prefix ‘post’ as a marker of both the past and the present.

Temporality has been a dominant theme in this study, specifically regarding the layering of time, which I have argued the novels consider multidirectional. The integration of past, present and future is a key aspect of the post-transitional and has been elaborated in all the chapters of this study, especially with regard to *Onion Tears* (2012). Nedine Moonsamy’s proposition of an alternative reading of the post-transition through Derrida’s contretemps connects the third
and fourth chapters of this study. Khan’s novel, through its mosaic of temporality and intersection of multigenerational South African Indian voices through its narrative structure, depicts a chaotic reading of time that entangles past, present and future in one space, thus representing the post-transition. It addresses issues of South African Indian identity across time and space in the post-transitional present. Furthermore, it provides a broad reading of the present cultural sphere in South Africa by acknowledging the imbrications of history, time, race, gender, and creed in South Africa’s multicultural space. It therefore denotes the ambiguities and paradoxes of the post-transition, a recurring figure in all four novels. Through the shared experiences of its characters, Khan’s novel portrays both national change towards unity and acceptance as well as elements of segregation, prejudice and crime that still exist in the post-transitional space. In this sense, it is a novel in which the complexities of transition are manifest.

What I hope my study of the four novels has kept alive is the idea that the term post-transition defines a state of flux, rather than one of stability and realism: indeed, South African writing has continued to contest this term in various ways, but I have argued that it remains useful for precisely this reason. To this end, South African Indian writing has made and continues to make a significant contribution to the ways in which South African literature imagines post-apartheid.
**Bibliography**


