



AFRICA IN THE
INDIAN
IMAGINATION

Race and the Politics of Postcolonial Citation

ANTOINETTE BURTON

Foreword by

ISABEL HOFMEYR

Africa in the Indian Imagination

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Antoinette Burton

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For Phyllis Naidoo and Stuart Hall, Stuart Hall and Phyllis Naidoo
equally, differently, jointly

with appreciation for all I have learned from them
about politics, struggle, courage and heart

*Exploitation and domination of one nation over another can have
no place in a world striving to put an end to all wars.*

Mohandas K. Gandhi, Bombay 1945

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FOREWORD

ISABEL HOFMEYR

In its form, content, and making, this book is a portable experiment. Each essay is devoted to one novel or work of nonfiction and the volume convenes a speculative bookshelf comprising texts whose authors and characters rove widely—from Bombay to Durban; Goa to Ghana; Uganda to India. These itineraries crisscross previously colonized parts of the world creating a constellation of pathways in what we now call the global south, itself an experimental configuration whose outline and import are currently far from clear.

As the significance of the global south as a geopolitical force gains momentum, opinion on what it is or how it might be understood proliferate. Is it the post-American future toward which the debt-stricken West is inevitably evolving? Could it be the portent of what a sustainable future might look like? Or, is it in fact the future of capitalism itself, as postcolonial elites entrench themselves through enabling devastating forms of extractive labor while creating new multilateral power alignments like BRICS? Or, is this multilateralism in fact an anti- or perhaps semi-capitalist arrangement that could shift the gravity of world power southward? Others insist on the global south as the post-89 instantiation of the “third world,” where older traditions of anti-imperialism will be reprised in the new neoliberal order, making the global south the locus of radical global social movements. An aesthetic variation on this theme portrays the global

south as the space of creativity in, despite, and at times because of chaos, uncertainty, and volatility—the global south as artistic credo. A more melancholic version of this orientation characterizes the global south as the graveyard of grand schemes in which the ruins and remainders of master narratives—imperialism, anti-colonialism, socialism, apartheid, anti-apartheid—pile up, creating ideological rubbish dumps in which people must make their lives.

To make sense of the global south, we need modes of enquiry that encompass all these possibilities. There are a number of contemporary studies that attempt such a task. Ching Kwan Lee has undertaken detailed ethnographic work on Chinese investment enclaves in Zambia and Tanzania. Her pathbreaking work illustrates the divergent outcomes in both places and the differing sets of worker responses to the casualization of labor. Lee's work dismantles alarmist aggregate statistics about supposed Chinese neo-imperialism in Africa even as she demonstrates a painful story of "African socialism [meets] structural adjustment [meets] Chinese investment." As she notes, "Neither Chinese capital nor Africa is singular, and the dynamic of their encounters, raw in many ways . . . can be grasped only from within and across these Chinese enclaves."¹

Africa in the Indian Imagination enters a cognate domain of complexity: the historical archive of interactions between "Africa" and "India." The lattice of linkages between these two regions is old and deep—ancient monsoon-driven trade routes across the Indian Ocean; massive imperial flows of labor between the two regions; relationships of anti-colonial and anti-apartheid support and solidarity; and more recently a neoliberal wave of Indian investment in the continent.

These exchanges and interactions constitute important themes in Indian Ocean studies, a zone latticed with "lateral" non-Western interaction and hence a privileged vantage point from which to consider histories of the global south. One strand in this work has been to trace a long history of cosmopolitanism starting with the monsoon- and Muslim-shaped Indian Ocean, interrupted by the age of European

empires but resumed through the networks of anti-colonial solidarity that usher in the age of Bandung and notions of Afro-Asian solidarity.

As Burton indicates in her introduction, Indian Ocean studies is one of the historiographical fields in which she locates her work. Yet, as anyone who knows Burton's work, she is a "troubling" historian who disturbs, unsettles, and disrupts any comfort zone or too-easy notions of cosmopolitanism. Whether decentering empire in every possible way or demonstrating the contradictions of white imperial feminism and ideas of global sisterhood, she works with friction, probing the fault line, the contradiction, the limit.

Her project is to bring into view sites of Afro-Asian interaction (often little known, like the community of East African students in India, the result of a post-1947 bursary project started by India to give substance to the ideals of Bandung) while troubling any easy or redemptive accounts of such exchanges. Instead, this book works at the "jagged hyphen" of Afro-Asian solidarity, probing the knotted histories of two zones, tied together in imperial hierarchies of "brown" over "black." "Africa" has long been conscripted as an invisible boundary of Indian nationalism, the "uncivilized" foil to Indic civilization, the bottom tier in a hierarchy of civilizations.

This knotted boundary has largely been overlooked by third-worldist histories that stress fraternity above friction. Burton attempts to capture both in her frame: "Bandung needs to be re-imagined less as an emancipatory lesson than as a cautionary tale about the racial logics in postcolonial states from the moment of their inception: about the enduring power of 'blood and nation.'"² As a feminist historian, questions of gender and sexuality are critical in this process:

"a horizontal network of affiliations rooted in relationships between leaders in the new world of promising postcolonial men, untroubled by conflicts over race, space, women, family or politics." The over-arching intention is to produce histories of as much complexity as possible; to understand "racial difference and conflict as full-bodied dimensions of the postcolonial condition in all its worldly, combative variety, and that . . . resist conscription

by narratives of overcoming, salvation and redemption as well as of solidarity per se.”³

The method for exploring these themes is configural—the book assembles a series of texts each of which opens up a miniature world where “Africa” and “India” intersect: African-Indian interactions around the anti-apartheid struggle in Durban; the travelogue of Frank Moraes, editor of the *Times of India* of his itinerary through several African countries in 1960; a novel about East African students in Delhi. Any fictional text is itself a miniature configuration, convening a thick description of a world, offering simultaneous forms of insight into that world: psychic, sexual, emotional, semiotic, political, spatial—one could continue indefinitely. As both an acute historian and a gifted literary critic, Burton dissects these novels, listening to the possibilities they open up even while tracing the contradictions in which these become knotted. For her, novels are not simply reflections of the world, they are imaginary attempts to resolve contradictions, to use narrative to settle ambiguity. Her readings of the texts productively mine these fault lines, showing the limits of the ideological projects embodied in each text.

In taking this approach, Burton offers us an experimental method for writing robust histories of the global south, suggesting one set of dots for the reader to join, even as she invites us to think of others. It is a “troubling” and “trouble-making” history, a *tâtonnement*, a tentative and experimental approach to a topic whose complexity this book helps us appreciate.

Notes

- 1 Ching Kwan Lee, “Raw Encounters: Chinese Managers, African Workers and the Politics of Casualization in Africa’s Chinese Enclaves,” available at <http://www.sscnet.ucla.edu/soc/faculty/CKLee/RawEncounters.pdf>, p. 2.
- 2 *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.
- 3 *Ibid.*, pp. 7–8.

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Zack Poppel is the most careful and generous of readers, and his own projects have been a veritable inspiration. Debbie Hughes

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And now from citations to salutations. Phyllis and Stuart, Stuart and Phyllis: this book is dedicated to you with loving appreciation, in the hope that you recognize some dimensions of your shared and discrepant struggles, and forgive me for whatever mistakes I have made in seeking to understand them.

INTRODUCTION

CITING/SITING AFRICA IN THE INDIAN POSTCOLONIAL IMAGINATION

Race was much more than just a tool of Empire: it was (in the Kantian sense) one of the foundational categories of thought that made other perceptions possible.

From Ghosh and Chakrabarty, *A Correspondence on Provincializing Europe*, 2002¹

The apparatus is . . . always linked to certain limits of knowledge that arise from it and, to an equal degree, condition it.

Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge* (1980)²

Recent attention to the urgency of economic and political cooperation between the Indian government and African states—otherwise known as south-south globalization—suggests that the time has come for new histories of “Afro-Asian solidarity.” That term gained currency at the famous meeting of over two dozen Third World representatives in Bandung, Indonesia, in 1955 and refers to the story of affinities and exchanges between people of African and South Asian descent which both ensued from and predated that celebrated marker of postcolonial history. Since then, the term has enjoyed popularity as a metaphor for the fraternal connections between ex-colonial people in the wake of decolonization, when Africans and Indians (and others) joined forces to create a non-aligned movement in contradistinction to the two major superpowers, the USA and the USSR. Bandung and the

notion of Afro-Asian solidarity with which it is associated have become touchstones for understanding how postcolonial history unfolded in the Cold War world. Taken together, they are most often cited as the very foundation of postcolonial politics in a global frame.

And yet the term solidarity can be misleading. There is every indication that the terms of endearment between African and Indian communities were strained at best across the landscapes of decolonization. This was true for colonial-born Indians in Durban, for Kenyan students in Delhi and even for politicians like Jawaharlal Nehru and Kwame Nkrumah seeking to navigate the postcolonial world system after 1945. Wherever they shared space, real and imagined, Indians and Africans undoubtedly worked and played together; they also fought with and against each other, sometimes with fatal consequences. *Africa in the Indian Imagination* is an attempt to come to grips with the ins and outs of these relationships, in part by breaking with the redemptive narratives we have inherited from Bandung. Such narratives presume a transracial solidarity *and* a racial confraternity that are belied by the hyphen between Afro and Asian: a hyphen that compresses and elides even as it cuts a variety of ways, ranging from China to Africa to Indonesia, from Kwame Nkrumah to Abdul Nasser to Sukarno to Jawaharlal Nehru. This is especially true when it comes to the question of who was to be on top in the newly postcolonial scene: a pressing issue in a rapidly decolonizing world where racial hierarchies old and new remained consequential to the shape of the postcolonial world order in symbolic and material terms.

As scholars of the period are wont to remind us, there are good reasons for these histories of difference, resentment and suspicion in the Afro-Indian context, among them racialized capitalist relations, colonial-era racial hierarchies, and entrenched practices of racial endogamy.³ Indeed, the fate of postcolonial power entailed questions of interracial sexuality that were critical to, if not constitutive of, the very idea of Afro-Indian relationships (as they were of nationalist

aspirations) in fantasy and in reality. However easily they have tended to slip below the radar of historians and anthropologists, concerns about race mixing between Indians and Africans recast the “inferior” and “superior” bloodline script of colonialism. As they had been before the end of empire, brown-black friendships were danger zones as well as spaces of possibility in the wake of Bandung.⁴ How, exactly, we situate Afro-Asian solidarity in the age of Bandung—*how we cite it*—depends on how attentive we are to race, sex and the politics of citation mobilized by a variety of postcolonial writers and activists grappling with the lived experience of, and in, the jagged hyphen. The role of India and Indians in shaping that citationary apparatus and the work of Africa and Africans in shaping Indian postcolonial imaginaries are the chief subjects of this book.

What is a politics of citation? The writers I dwell on here—Ansuyah R. Singh, Francis Moraes, Chanakya Sen (pen name for Bhabani Sen Gupta) and Phyllis Naidoo—routinely call upon Africa and Africans to stake their claims about India or “Indian” politics in the post-1945 period. In so doing they figure Africa as a pillar of Indian identity: a buttress that gives definition to Indianness and that gives Indians, in turn, their local, regional, national, and global significance in the late 20th century world. Despite what we know about the ideological and material work of a tripartite racial system in the pre-postcolonial and post-imperial worlds of India-Africa, whites do not, in the main, enter the frame, and when they do it is not as a centerpiece but rather as an allusive reference. Whether they are working in Durban or Delhi, as journalists or novelists or activists, the writers here rely on Africans either to testify to the coherence of Indian identity in all its gendered, classed, racialized and sexualized dimensions, or to measure the progressive character of Indian political commitments; or both. This shared citationary practice—which takes various discursive forms but typically involves recurrent references to African history, African “personality,” African labor and even African

sodality—is not simply a recurrent incantation or a nod to a vague set of referents. It is a locative maneuver that serves as a racializing device, positioning Africans as black and Indians as brown, or at the very least as not-African and not-black.⁵ To borrow from the feminist theorist Sara Ahmed, it's a mode of representation that tends to racialize as it relegates, locating people of African descent both below Indians in civilizational terms and behind them in temporal terms.⁶ One effect of this citing/siting maneuver as the subjects of this book mobilize it is to materialize a set of power relations that are deliberately, insouciantly or accidentally vertical. As such, it enables us to see what we might call a top-down approach to Africa and Africans. It's a verticality that can obtain even when the authors desire, or aspire to, horizontal connections and solidarities.

With the partial exception of Naidoo's work, the presence of Africa and Africans in these writings helps to shore up and consolidate an Indian self dependent on a set of racial/izing hierarchies—a citational dynamic that points to a larger set of questions about the circulation of Africa, and of blackness, as a trope of the postcolonial Indian imagination. That Naidoo is from a family of indentured workers, and a communist, surely complicates her citational practice: like many other people of South Asian descent in South Africa of her generation, she expressly rejects polarizing, racialized identities.⁷ In South Africa more generally, merchants and “coolies” have had distinctively different relationships with Africans. Here as elsewhere, questions of caste are as indispensable to histories of race as they are to those of gender and sexuality, leaving a differential mark on Afro-Asian possibility depending on by whom and for whom they are articulated.⁸ As a grid, “brown over black” in Naidoo's Durban is particularly unstable, reminding us in salutary ways of the impediments to generalization across space and time: reminding us, in short, of the tension between the general case and the specific citation. As important, and because of the dynamism inherent in all systems of