

*Africa in the Indian Imagination: Race and the Politics of Post-Colonial Citation*

Antoinette Burton

184 pages, 2016, \$22.95 USD (paperback)

Duke University Press

Reviewed by Thembisa Waetjen, University of Johannesburg

I read Antoinette Burton's *Africa in the Indian Imagination* within a South African context. The book itself is oriented towards a broader geography and textual history of Afro-Indian connections, but with special focus on South Africa. The four essays drawn together here offer a provocative meditation on some of the relational terms that have shaped narrative formations of postcolonial identity. As her title suggests, the focus is on single-directional representation—Africans from the perspective of Indians. Burton applies her incisive, beautifully crafted exegesis to four texts – two novels, a travel narrative and an autobiography – authored by people of South Asian birth or ancestry, in different decades and from distinct geo-social positions. Collectively, these essays explore a “politics of citation,” by which the author specifically means the role that characterisations of Africa and Africans play in shaping contemporary Indian understandings of nationhood, family and self.

Burton employs this literary lens to challenge romanticized ideas about Afro-Asian fraternalism, forged during the Bandung Conference of 1955 and currently being reproduced by new elites through South-South initiatives, such as BRICS.<sup>1</sup> Experiences of British colonialism in both regions produced a powerful basis for mutual identification, garnered amidst the mid-century challenges of Cold-War developmentalism and drives for modernisation that informed newly independent states. The writers whom Burton discusses can all be seen (and saw themselves) as advocates of progressive, postcolonial solidarities. Yet what Burton points to in each case is a dynamic, well expressed through Sam Machia's book cover design. This cover depicts a map portraying the African continent and Indian sub-continent as identical in size, an “equality” achieved through India's sense of relative importance and achievement in relation to a diminished Africa.

The templates of British imperial rule, its ideologies of race and of civilizational hierarchies, can be understood to have shaped ways that Africa features in Indian writing. Still, as Burton more controversially shows, source material for the politics of citation may also claim origins within South Asian cultural politics of sexuality, gender and colour. Postcolonial nationalisms have generally been masculine and heteronormative, resting upon ideas about differentiated bodies, desires, intellectual and emotional proclivities, and defining both nation and citizen in ways that differentiate (as a fact of nature) those who act and those acted upon.

The themes of family, sexuality and transcontinental mobility come through clearly in the two novels Burton examines, although written and set in distinct temporal, geographical, and national contexts. Politics impinge upon the Indian family and its normative reproduction. Anusya Singh wrote *Behold the Earth Mourns* in 1960, the South African story of a transnational marriage between Srenika, the “colonial born” son of an Indian migrant, and his betrothed, Yagesvari, from Bombay. The love plot is entwined with popular protests against discriminatory law-making in the 1940s, particularly legislation restricting Indian urban residency and migration. Following the fortunes of the protagonists, readers are offered an account of the Ghetto Act of 1946 and introduced to the local Gandhian legacies of passive resistance. Yet within this otherwise Indian story there are Africans too. For example, there is Serete, who works for Srenika’s family business but who is also identified as a comrade in struggles against governmental injustices. Serete is given a clear voice to outline these injustices and to explain their geographical breadth and historical depth. Yet, as Burton argues, as much as his presence demonstrates affective ties of brown and black, it is also a crucial citational element within a process of narrative boundary-making. Serete is a brother in struggle, but one who is acutely aware of the distinct challenges and circumstances faced respectively by indigenous and diasporic populations under white rule. Burton’s point is that Srenika’s and Yagesvari’s story of thwarted love becomes a moment of Indian political identity-making, one that ultimately situates African actors at the fringes of an endeavour which emerges as “Indian.”

Chapter three explores the novel *The Morning After*, by Indian author Chanakya Sen, published in 1973. The story is written as a critique of India’s modernisation programmes championed by Nehru’s developmental state of the 1950s and 60s. In this story, Ugandan student, Solomon Kuchiro, beneficiary of one such programme, resides in Delhi with his middle-class host family, the Sharmas. In the character of Shukdev, head of household and a civil servant, Sen portrays the idealistic paternalism of the Indian post-colonial state, opening his home and offering his nation as a model for what Africa might emulate. Here, Solomon’s independent thinking intrudes on this benevolent fantasy, and his sexual attractions to daughter Sheila trouble the family further, raising difficult issues about blackness and miscegenation. These portrayals of caricatured anxieties and interests are mobilized in critical appraisal of the hierarchies that beset African and Indian participants in a horizontal outreach. Burton considers the ambivalence of Sen’s portrayals, demonstrating the novel to be “at once a vehicle for and indictment of the abortive hopes for this particular experiment in cultural diplomacy designed to personify Afro-Asian solidarity” (115).

While leveraging this critique, Burton is not looking to dismiss or deny meaningful postcolonial collaborations. Her aim, instead, is to generate discussion about how Afro-Asian relations are born also from “friction” and from struggles “between, among and against” (19). But it seems that Burton is also advocating for a more personal reckoning

of individual agency. For example, the late South African activist Phyllis Naidoo, whose autobiographical writing is the subject of her final chapter, is pronounced powerless to “exceed the strictures of racial hierarchy... that helped produce her as a historical subject, a political subject, even and perhaps most especially when she ardently aspires to do so” (158). Burton suggests that “non-racialism” in South Africa be considered “humbly, provisionally, aspirationally rather than as a *fait accompli*” (158). Her plea seems unnecessary since most South Africans today would consider non-racialism an ongoing process. Indeed, solidarities forged within the “non-racial” struggles have largely lost favour in South Africa, with many retreating to race-identified “communities.” For many, comradeship between the likes of Nelson Mandela and Ahmed Kathrada appear idealised, elite and politically inexpedient, and the mood around racial contestations has become tense.

I admire Burton’s determination to examine and also challenge constructions of meaning that smooth over such tensions. Yet I wonder if her approach might not also contribute to a kind of fatalism. Does the very craft and nuance of Burton’s analysis raise a politically moral bar that none can seemingly meet? In what sense, and among whom, can it generate discussion? Would the implied invitation for a book titled *India in the African Imagination* be useful to take up, or would it confirm “ugly feelings” (19)? Might the fleshing (flushing?) out of citations from texts authored by progressives silence those seeking to challenge social injustice? Burton offers a scalpel to the individual critic, but it should not be used to undercut solidarities we badly need.

A few years ago, my colleague and I produced an amateur video of interviews in Chatsworth, Durban, a township created for “Indians” and now open to all. One informant, a widow of Indian Hindu ancestry who had converted to Islam after marrying a Muslim, discussed her relationship with her neighbour, a Zulu-speaking African woman her own age, raising her three grandchildren after their mother had died of AIDS. Our informant’s body language and speech expressed her discomfort in the knowledge that Indian-African relations was a risky topic. She declared, firmly: “African and Indian, they *can* get along...we’re like sisters, that’s how we are living” (Waetjen and Goolam). We showed the clip to a visiting group of (as it happened, American) university students and their reaction distressed me. It was moralistic, smug dismissal. The students explained that professions of “sisterhood” signalled a defensive denial of difference, even subterranean racism. They cited feminist theory learned at their home universities.

Burton’s call for humility is perhaps best placed beside that of Hannah Arendt. Arendt, too, rejected theories of hate that identified its political roots only in extremism and overt power, insisting that banal complicities also reproduce injustice. Yet, it seems important also to insist that we can, in ways that matter, stand together against the ongoing production of injustice and inequality. And we should look for—and encourage our students to be alert to—instances when hyphens, and the identities separated by them, are less revealing than

the bridges being created. Burton's book raises some of the key and messy questions of our time, and presses us to talk about them.

#### Notes

1. Association of emerging economies that include Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

#### Works Cited

Waetjen, Thembisa and Goolam Vahed. *Chatsworth Mosaic: Voices of Women from a Diverse Township*. South Africa Netherlands Research Programme on Alternatives in Development. 2013. Film, 42 min.