DURBAN DIALOGUES DISSECTED

An Analysis of Ashwin Singh's Plays

Edited by Felicity Hand

List of Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used throughout the text for quotations from Ashwin Singh's plays.

H	<i>To House</i>
SS	<i>Spice 'n' Stuff</i>
Sh	<i>Shooting</i>
RL	<i>Reoca Light</i>
D	<i>Duped</i>
BBB	<i>Beyond the Big Bangs</i>
Sw	<i>Swing</i>
IG	<i>Into the Grey</i>

Note on Terminology

We have chosen not to unify the authors' use of the term *black* so readers are encouraged to think beyond straightforward definitions. Each author uses the term in his or her own way and spells it with either a capital B or a small letter b. Likewise, authors have opted for capital or lower case letters for other ethnicities, such as white or coloured, in accordance with their specific purpose.

Afterword

How to Swing the Game of Life in South Africa

Pallavi Rastogi

I first met Ashwin Singh in 2005 when I visited South Africa to interview the fiction writers I discuss in my book, *Afrindian Fictions: Diaspora, Race, and National Desire in South Africa* (2008). Indian South African writing was a relatively unrecognized body of work then. But it was well on its way to make its mark as a distinct field of writing with its own thematic concerns and formal conventions. At that point, fiction dominated Indian South African literature. Yet, at least one fiction-writer, who had turned his hand at drama, also towered over the world of Indian South African literature. Ronnie Govender shot to prominence with his play, *The Lahnee's Pleasure* (1980), which articulated many of the themes associated with Indian South African writing: the century-long displacement of the community through indenture, Indians as the “middle men” or the buffer zone between black and white South Africans, the blank space that was “Indianness,” still needing to be filled with a self-recorded history, the fraught allegiances with other non-white communities in the apartheid and post-apartheid era, and, above all, the hard-won *full* participatory citizenship for Indians in South Africa.

I interviewed Govender, Ahmed Essop, Aziz Hassim, Deena Padayachee, and Praba Moodley for my book. Writers of immense talent and tremendous courage, their work was infused with a political agenda—a term I do not use pejoratively here—to assert national belonging in South Africa and to show the community’s long participation in the Struggle for freedom. After talking to these authors, and, of course, reading their work carefully, I could already tell that my book was making a predetermined argument about the themes prevalent in the Indian South African writing coming of age in the early twenty-first century. While Ashwin’s plays were also a template for mapping the key themes of Indian South African literature, the genre of drama, as well as his own unique creative sensibility, opened a new window of understanding into Indian South African culture.

I interacted with Ashwin in Durban at length in 2005. I knew he wrote plays and performed stand-up comedy. I had never read his work till he sent me his earliest plays, *Duped* and *To House*. As someone inherently partial to fiction, I have never enjoyed reading plays as much as I enjoyed reading Ashwin’s work. The futuristic sci-fi setting of *Duped*, telescoping into outer space and simultaneously microscoping into crucial questions about Indians in South Africa, was formal innovation not seen often in Indian South African literature. Most of the work I was

reading and writing about was set in the post-apartheid present of the new South Africa or restlessly returned to the indentured or passenger routes of migration to retrace the foundational fateful journeys that led Indians to the continent, such as Imraan Coovadia's *The Wedding* (2001) and Praba Moodley's *The Heart Knows No Colour* (2004). Even dramatist Rajesh Gopie's *Coolie Odyssey* (2002) used theatre as a platform to understand the history of Indian arrival in South Africa. *Duped*, however, evoked the past, present, and the future of South Africa, mocked the false solidarity in the new South Africa, even creating characters with chips of manufactured racial tolerance inserted in them. And in the background, the ANC government, with its celestial rhetoric of the Rainbow Nation, mercilessly reinforced the divisions that apartheid perpetrated, concealing the menace of racial division under the "still different but one nation" discourse of Rainbowism. As sociologist Ashwin Desai says, "the emergence of the 'Rainbow Nation' signalled for many the beginning of new things. However, under the rubric of the rainbow it became apparent that the past was imposing itself on the present. For those who envisaged the loosening of their ethnic clothing they soon found it sticking more closely to their bodies as the political settlement unfolded" (in Rastogi, 2008: 15). Both *Duped* and *To House*, either directly or obliquely, critique the reinforcement of ethnic identity, aligning their themes closely to other Indian South African writing, even as the plays themselves enacted formal departures from the creative conventions of the time.

I lost touch with Ashwin in the next few years but when we established contact again, it came as no surprise that his career as a playwright, as a brave new voice in South African theatre, that went *Beyond the Big Bangs*—readers familiar with Ashwin's work will recognize the reference to the title of one of his plays—to a really explosive launch on the South African stage. Ashwin was writing prolifically, publishing widely, and his plays were being performed across the world. I was able to catch up with most of his other work and see for myself how the raw talent displayed in his earlier work had matured into a nuanced literary voice that was still characterized by his hallmark crackling prose and witty, even wicked, humour. Ashwin continued to be interested in the political life of his country and his community though. The end of apartheid led to an inevitable disillusionment with the new political dispensation, which was reflected in the cultural products of the new nation, including Indian South African literature. Yet, formal literary experimentation blossomed into infinite variety. Ashwin had demonstrated an interest in experimenting with literary form even earlier with *Duped*, abandoning the heavy realism or historical return that characterized most of Indian South African literature at the turn of the century. He was always already ahead of his time.

Ashwin is also essentially a Durban writer. The city infuses his words, the ways his characters interact with each other, the emotional intensity they display, and the language they use. Durban infuses Ashwin's work with its specific complexities.

How to Swing the Game of Life in South Africa

Yet, Ashwin is not a local writer: he is a generous and expansive humanist whose plays speak to everyone.

Focus on *Swing*

The rest of this Afterword focuses on *Swing* (2015) to show how a play that still maintains an interest in the themes characterizing Indian South African literature in the early twenty-first century is also preoccupied with the new themes concerning the Indian community a decade later, at a crucial time for diasporics and immigrants all over the world. As Shantal Singh states in her introductory preface to *Durban Dialogues: Then and Now*, “despite a progressive constitution South Africa remains a society divided on race, culture, and class issues” (2017: 14). *Swing* stages these divisions of race, culture, and class to consider some of the most difficult questions about South African identity today.

The stage directions of *Swing* are simple. Two long lines are cut across the stage, representing the tram line and the service line of a tennis court. The stark backdrop is elaborated with a painting or a projection of Samantha, the lead actress, rocking on a swing with Ram, her father; another projection shows her in “warrior mode on the tennis court” (Sw 101). Two actors play the roles of Samantha and her father, who is her tennis coach, as well as the other characters in the play. Samantha is not just seeking glory in the tennis court for herself. She is also playing for her father, who has transferred his hopes of sporting success on to her, and the Indian community. In this sense, Samantha shows how the success of the individual members of a marginalized community honours—or shames—that community itself.

Yet, Samantha also represents the new generation of all South Africans, born in the post-apartheid period, where life, and its amenities, come easy. Even though Samantha’s father, Ram, constantly tells her stories of the daily privations and humiliations under apartheid, his tortured tales do not have much of an impact on his daughter. The first scene thus swings between Samantha’s prowess at tennis and her father’s dreams and aspirations for a truly free South Africa where race will no longer hold talent back. To be allowed to date Nikita, Samantha’s “coloured mother”, Ram had to swing his cricket bat to win a game against Nikita’s family. True to its title, the play swings between past memories and present events, pessimism and optimism, the cricket bat and the tennis racket.

Swing also enacts the conflict between the coloured and the Indian communities who are unable to transcend their differences, despite occupying the middle role on the black and white spectrum of race relations in South Africa. The body of the coloured-Indian child, here Samantha, becomes the battleground on which this conflict is fought. *Swing* reflects on how the friction between demographically minor communities such as Indians and Coloureds interfere with the coalition-

building that could bestow both groups with more political and cultural power. Cricket and tennis are metaphors here. The game the characters play is the game of life.

Racial difference, therefore, enters the game of life too, even in the new South Africa. Samantha's mother takes a nursing offer in Dubai, telling her:

I am not going to move forward here... You know they call us black when it suits their agenda... then we're Indian and Coloured when that agenda suddenly changes... and on it goes like that. You won't understand now. Hopefully you won't have to experience that... although I doubt our young leaders will turn out very different. (Sw 117)

In *Afrindian Fictions*, I had observed that non-black authors asserted their place in South Africa under the new dispensation even as they critiqued the post-apartheid government for failing to nurture the most minor of its minorities: Ahmed Essop's *The Third Prophecy* (2004), which derides the new government for its inability to provide safe harbour to Muslims, is an early example of Indian disaffection in the Rainbow Nation. Yet, *Swing* refuses to give in to the despair of national failure. The play balances a mordant critique of the racial politics of post-apartheid South Africa with a robust optimism for its future.

The very title of the play opens a window into the lives of the characters. Ram relentlessly pushes Samantha into training as a tennis champion. This will sound familiar to every Indian, whose upwardly aspirational parents forced tutors in biology, science, and maths upon them to live the professionally respectable lives their parents wanted to lead. Yet, Ram wants nothing more for his daughter than to be the face of tennis in South Africa, rather than a doctor, nurse, lawyer, or engineer: those professions that Indian parents think are dedicated to their children. *Swing* beautifully complicates how parental ambitions change over time in *what* Indian parents want for their children but not *how* they want what they want for their children.

Samantha's and Ram's aspirations for tennis supremacy are torn asunder with the ascendancy of her rival, an underprivileged young black woman. As Samantha tells the journalist interviewing her,

As my story was unfolding, there was another, much bigger event happening. I was scaling the KZN hilltops... but Lerato Sibisi, the pride of Kwamashu, was soaring above the Himalayas ... She switched so easily between English and isiZulu... she seemed so simple and passionate about sport and her country... it felt like she was the epitome of the Rainbow Nation. (Sw 122-123)

If South Africa is seeking a national symbol for tennis, it has been found in Lerato Sibisi. *Swing* leaves it to the viewer/reader to conclude whether Samantha loses a championship game to Lerato because her tennis is not good enough. Or, if she succumbs to a cultural defeat in her realization that a player who is half-Indian

How to Swing the Game of Life in South Africa

and half-coloured, and also coached by an Indian father, can never represent the “Rainbowism” of the Rainbow Nation. The reference to the Himalayas, an Indian mountain-range, however, confuses the divisions between Samantha and Lerato, showing how Indian South Africans can climb the mountains of KZN just as black South Africans can conquer the Himalayas. South Africans are so intertwined that even the geography of their place of origin is open to the Other. *Swing* uses sport, especially the historical whiteness of tennis, to make a political point about how non-white communities fight with each other to obtain accomplishment in terms of the white world and to step into the places vacated by white champions. The play also challenges stereotypes about the academically accomplished Asian minority, focusing instead on the dreams and aspirations of a young Indian girl to become the Miss Rainbow Nation of the tennis world.

Yet, Samantha’s inability, psychological or otherwise, also has a pre-history that the play interrogates in collective terms, not only through Samantha and her father but also through the successes and failures of the Indian community in South Africa. In his cricketing days, Ram is challenged to a match by his white supervisor, Rob van Vuuren with these taunting words: “You think you are something special, coolie. You think you have got the gift? You hitting a white bowler? If I used a cricket ball and really turned it on, you’d be dead (Sw 127). In a racially hierarchical society, even white people often discriminated against other white people. Ram realizes van Vuuren’s fury is that of an Afrikaner who is unlikely to be selected to play for an all British county team (Sw 128). In going back in time to the apartheid-period, *Swing* connects Samantha’s inability to become the Miss Rainbow Nation of the tennis world, Ram’s thwarted career as an Indian cricketer during apartheid-era South Africa, and van Vuuren’s frustration as an Afrikaner never selected to play for Natal. While race is certainly not a game, a game is race in this play.

The play’s turn to the past also shows the collective solidarity between non-whites during the apartheid period. Ram notices that “some of my black and Indian colleagues were looking at me eagerly—they wanted me to do this for them too [defeat van Vuuren at cricket]” (Sw 128). After Ram stands his ground on the cricket field, both literally and metaphorically, Van Vuuren arrives at his bar and tells Ram that he was

lucky. He said I’d never make it playing competitively. Week-in and week-out with real cricketers. I mean, I know that he was saying those things coz I’d hurt his pride...and a part of me wanted to beat up his arse...*I felt like I was beating up his apartheid* (Sw 129, emphasis added)

Ram transfers his rage over apartheid into his ambition for his daughter in tennis: if he cannot beat apartheid, he can at least beat its legacy of racial thinking that still prevails in the post-apartheid era.

Even though the past infringes heavily on the present, Samantha represents the future: a new horizon not only based on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) model of forgiveness but also on a recognition that systems with majoritarian rule rarely allow minorities to excel outside of their comfort zones. This is especially true of Indians in South Africa, and elsewhere in the Indian diaspora, where young Indian people are pressured into safe, well-paying careers, and where personal happiness in professional life rarely matters. Samantha is still inspired by her father's courage to play against his nemesis in a big match: "to do that in the terrible time of our history...I was proud of him. And I knew that I had to be brave now. And to believe in myself" (Sw 130).

Since this is an Ashwin Singh play, readers should not expect the next scene to switch to Samantha winning all her serves, lobbying each ball back to her opponent no matter how out of reach it is, and defeating Lerato in straight sets. Singh is a cynic but never a despairing one: his writing always contains slivers of possibility that thrill, encourage, and uplift. Samantha loses to Lerato outright and when her father encourages her to continue playing, she firmly refuses, saying she needs time to reflect on her future.

The next scene opens with Samantha once again playing her arch-rival who is attending the University of California, Berkeley on a full scholarship. Samantha has enrolled herself in the local university and is immersed in studying to become a clinical psychologist. The evening before their match, the two women meet in the locker rooms where Lerato has stormed in after a tantrum at her coach. Samantha holds Lerato and listens to her, all the while thinking: "I thought in a less viciously competitive world...a world where performance identities were less significant...we might have been like sisters...and she agreed" (Sw 133). The two women embark on a night out on the town where Samantha eats and drinks recklessly. The gastronomical revelry, which no athlete in their right mind would partake on the eve of a crucial match, is aided and abetted by Lerato. She speaks to Samantha in honeyed tones that could come straight out of the speeches in the early days of Independence when the whole nation was drunk on the false promises of the Rainbow Nation and of Independence:

But win or lose, we must stand together as sisters...as women...black women representing all the hopes of our generation who just want to do something meaningful with their lives. We must hold the trophy aloft together and say, 'Let's play together South Africa. It doesn't matter who wins or loses. Let's be a united nation...a proud nation. (Sw 134)

At first, Samantha is inclined to ascribe the cause of her increasing physical unease at Lerato whose persuasive powers she describes as "utterly intoxicating" (Sw 134). Once she realizes that Lerato could have been "tampering with her food"(Sw 136), she is filled with the same rebellious rage that caused her father to nearly punch van Vuuren. But, again, this is an Ashwin Singh play. The only

How to Swing the Game of Life in South Africa

punches that are thrown are verbal. Samantha merely contemplates violence; she never commits violence, following which Lerato pulverizes her, yet again, in the South African Open match.

Samantha's father is aghast not only at the way that Lerato sabotages Samantha's chances to win the game but also at the way the media builds up Lerato as the singular icon of South African women's tennis:

And I kept hearing that biased commentator praising Lerato. She was the first Black tennis player to do this...and the first black athlete to do that...and I thought the moron is unaware that by so over- emphasizing her race he is doing her a disservice. But then I thought he was not even acknowledging Samantha Gopal-Johnson in any way...is she not black also...has she not achieved despite growing up in a poor neighbourhood...Is she not from a previously disadvantaged community...Is there a hierarchy of Blackness? And I saw her stumble. And I thought you cheating bastards. You took away her chance to compete. You removed fairness from the equation. (Sw 137)

If Samantha's father was only criticizing Lerato, it would be easy to see him as complicit, as were many Indians, in perpetuating the racist discourse of black people winning undeserved accomplishments in the new South Africa. Ram is railing against the *commentator*, and not against Lerato, against the system and not the individual. The commentator represents South African sporting, public, and political culture. Instead of disputing Lerato's talent, Ram questions gradations of oppression instead. Why are some people less "Black" than others? How much does economic destitution matter when compared to race, especially in post-apartheid South Africa? Juxtaposing the match between Samantha and Lerato with Ram's "friendly" cricket playoff with van Vuuren further complicates a simplistic analysis of Indian racism towards what they see as undeserved black success. van Vuuren claims that Ram will never be able to enter the big league, with the white English players. Himself an Afrikaner, excluded even on the basis of language, van Vuuren too never made it into the tea-drinking, back-slapping, "good shot, I say, old chap" culture that characterized white cricket culture. In pairing Samantha and Lerato with Ram and van Vuuren, *Swing* presents sports as an allegory of nation: both apartheid and post-apartheid era South Africa sought to define who can symbolize the country by keeping its Others out.

Ram finally persuades his daughter to participate in a rematch with Lerato. Not because he wants her to become the female face of South African tennis but because he wants her to play against her most formidable opponent on equal terms:

I just want an equal bounce...I can still feel the aura...you came to this earth to do something special. I can feel it as strongly as ever. Maybe it will be in the tennis field. Maybe as a psychologist...or perhaps as a humanitarian. But I feel that the decisive moments are getting closer and a new cycle is about to begin.

So tomorrow...just go out there and give it your best shot. And we'll applaud you. (Sw 138)

All Ram longs for is an equal bounce, on a cricket pitch or in a tennis court, where players are players and not symbols or allegories of their race. More importantly, he realizes that he cannot push his daughter into pursuing the dreams he failed to achieve. He knows she has a special purpose in the world, which she will fulfil on court or off court. As a parent, he is able to finally launch his child into the universe of self-realization *on her own terms*. Even more significantly, Samantha has graduated magna cum laude with a Masters in Psychology by this time in the play. The choice of subject is not accidental here. Psychology prepares her to understand a world in which she may not always win and also to understand that loss is not always defeat.

Samantha, thus, acquires the wisdom of her father well before he does: "I've often wondered if Lerato is obsessed with winning...pursuing the American dream rather than be guided by African ideals...But I know that the only reason I should get onto court is for the love of tennis" (138). She then recites her mother's words to Ram: "Forget who you are playing. Go back to that swing...and sway again...play without fear...and without doubt. Be free. And when you see the ball...just swing" (138). These words release Samantha from the captivity in which winning has held her for so long. The play ends with a tantalizingly incomplete match between Samantha and Lerato. Ram's fantasies may come true here. Samantha has won five straight games and is about to serve for point, game, and set (Sw 139):

Samantha serves powerfully and receives a soft return

Voice-over: "Oh. That one has sat up nicely for her. Will she take a swing at it"?

Samantha Swings Beautifully...

If this was a generic feel-good play, Samantha would win decisively, her success displayed prominently on stage and page. In an Ashwin Singh play, the ending is more ambiguous, still subtly tracing tensions between Indian and Black South Africans even as Samantha acquires peace with winning or losing. The *in-media-res* ending opens spaces for other interpretations on the ending of the play. Instead of describing Samantha's game as inspirational, the voice-over (again, the representative of the national collective) merely claims that she is putting up "quite a fight" against a "slightly below par" Lerato (Sw 139). The voice-over refuses to assign Samantha superior skill, even if only in this particular match, and suggests instead that Lerato is the better player who is simply playing a little worse than her opponent. *Swing* does not reveal how the game will turn out. Lerato may well make a comeback. But the play is an exhortation to swing at every curveball, sending it across the net-like obstacles that are part of Indian life in South Africa. *Swing* shows the diversity of form and theme in Ashwin Singh's work even as the crucial issues it raises about Indian identity in South Africa form a continuous chain with the rest of his oeuvre.

How to Swing the Game of Life in South Africa

Bibliography

- Coovadia, Imraan. 2001. *The Wedding*. New York: Picador.
- Gopie, Rajesh. 2002. *Coolie Odyssey*. Unpublished play, first performed 2002.
- Govender, Ronnie. 1980. *The Lahnee's Pleasure*, Johannesburg: Ravan Press. Republished 2008. Johannesburg: Jacana.
- Moodley, Praba. 2004. *The Heart Knows No Colour*. Cape Town: Kwela Books.
- Rastogi, Pallavi. 2008. *Afrindian Fictions: Diaspora, Race, and National Desire in South Africa*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.
- Singh, Ashwin. 2017. *Durban Dialogues Then and Now*. Twickenham, UK: Aurora Metro Books.