



Contribution of Indian Diaspora in Struggle against Apartheid through Theatre: A Study of *We 3 Kings* Pranav Joshipura

Indian diaspora in South Africa is one of the oldest, largest and most structured one. Even before the official arrival of Indian indentures on Natal Coast in 1860, many Indian existed in South Africa. However, the story of Indian indenture in South Africa from 1860 through 1994, the end of apartheid rule, is very interesting and complex at the same time. The contribution of the Indian community to South Africa is immense in almost all fields of life. However, to address to the subject of the preent seminar, the question that rises obviously is that what is the role of South African Indians towards the development of South Africa?

Development, in fact, is not always limited only to promoting trade and FDI, create business, encourage entrepreneurship and transfer to new knowledge and skills. These, however, are sure signs of contribution to the host country. But development, as in the case of South Africa, is also about fighting against racial segregation, standing up against violation of human rights, protesting against injustice, raising voice demanding equality for all, and, rather most importantly, defying all sorts of social, political, cultural and economical oppression of one over the other! The history of apartheid struggle in South Africa from 1948 through 1994 speaks volumes about positive contribution of the Indian community while standing along with the native blacks and sharing responsibilities in the resistance. Many Indians contributed significantly

and rose high in rank and position within the ANC and the government of the 'rainbow' nation in the post-apartheid scenario.

Many writers of Indian origin in South Africa too participated in the struggle by artistically raising issue of injustice. Theatre is one such medium which provided voice to the otherwise voiceless. Writers like Ronnie Govender, Kessie Govender, Kriben Pillay, Muthal Naidoo, etc. depicted social and cultural resistance in their plays. Many plays and writers were banned and even exiled by the apartheid government. However, that did not deter writers from expressing their dissent over violation of human freedom.

Muthal Naidoo is one such fearless playwright who penned the government's antipathic attitude towards non-whites. Her plays are a curious mixture of multi-colour caste representing problems arising out of multicultural existence. Her play *The Masterplan* was banned in 1983 for publically opposing the government's action.

This paper intends to discuss Muthal Naidoo's play *We Three Kings*, written in 1982, exposing the government's false claims of exercising democracy by announcing the election of South African Indian Council (SAIC) which were actually held on 4th November 1981. The SAIC was the government-maintained body representing the Indian community at the proposed Tri-Cameral Parliament. However, before we proceed

discussing the play, it is required to understand why was the otherwise insensitive government compelled to talk of democracy, however false it may be! History has answers to all these. Let's travel back a little bit.

Soweto uprising in 1976 resulted in the police firing over unarmed students. The photograph of fatally wounded Hector Pieterse was published all over the world. This invited severe criticism from the world community, the UN and human rights organizations. This event was coupled with the brutal murder of Steve Biko, the leader of the Black Consciousness Movement. The UN immediately asked the apartheid government in South Africa to stop abuse of power and to observe human rights. In 1976, from 22nd through 26th May, the World Conference for Action against Apartheid was held at Lagos. This conference was organized by the UN, Organization of African Unity, and Federal Republic of Africa. Leaders at the Conference surely condemned violence of human rights and lack of democracy in South Africa. Meanwhile, in December 1980, the African National Congress signed historic Geneva Protocol which was meant to treat the soldiers as combatants of the enemy. During all these, Umkhonto we Sizwe (MK), the armed wing of the ANC, became very aggressive towards achieving freedom for South Africa.

However, probably the most significant event to happen during this time was the collapse of two ideologies the world was divided into, viz., capitalism and communism, signalling the end of the long-impending Cold War. South Africa had turned into the battleground for capitalism, represented by apartheid government, and communism, the ANC. With the collapse of these ideologies, the strategic significance of South Africa also decreased. Meanwhile, Mikhail Gorbachev's 'glasnost' and 'perestroika' were increasingly finding favour by world communities.

All these collectively mounted tremendous pressure over the South African apartheid government to stop abuse of democracy. To respond to mounting international criticism, Prime Minister Botha introduced Tri-Cameral Parliament

system which proposed to accommodate the Indians and the coloured groups while leaving the native blacks out of it! Moreover, these two representations had no power towards policy making as they were very less in number. The whites enjoyed naked majority over the other two groups together. So, was this a democracy or merely a show-off of it? The Indian community had realized this, just like the coloured and the blacks. There was tremendous opposition from all the quarters of non-white section. However, the apartheid government continued with their grand design of Tri-Cameral Parliament elections. Before that, they had to organise the South African Indian Council elections. The play under discussion *We Three Kings* is in fact an exposé of the government's lies and pretensions over success of the SAIC elections. After having studied the background of the play, let us now discuss the play.

We Three Indians is a two-act farce on the SAIC election. About 110 Indian organizations, including the Natal Indian Congress, the Transvaal Indian Congress, and other social, political, cultural, sports and academic organizations had established the Anti-SAIC committee and had announced boycott of the SAIC elections. Since the majority of Indians opposed the elections, the government had two problems to face. One, finding candidates to contest elections, and two, luring voters to consider this election as successful. Of course, there were some opportunists like Amichand Rajbansi, referred as Ramchand in this play, who did contest and represented the SAIC in the Tri-Cameral Parliament. However, most of the candidates won unopposed. Only at a very few places there was a contest.

This play *We Three Kings* shows how the government desperately struggled to find candidates and how it helped candidates in illegally and unethically voting.

The story is created around three hobos – Singh, Patel and Moon. They are street dwellers, are drunkards, parasites, tramps and good-for-nothing characters. They live simply because death does not approach them, otherwise theirs can hardly be called a living. When the play opens, the three are

found living in “*a drunken stupor*” (Naidoo 59) in a “*side street off Grey Street in Durban*” (59). As they do nothing, it is hard for them to earn a “dop” and “chow” (59) decently. They resort to all sorts of cheating, looting, begging, etc. practices merely to survive. For them, survival for every day is more important than anything and whatever action they are indulged in the play is guided by their instinct for survival. Hopeless as they are, their condition is also hopeless. Their situation can be considered as existential and absurd at the same time.

A white policeman Whitely identifies the three hobos as suitable candidates for the SAIC elections. He supports, protects and encourages them to contest elections! But why should the government encourage such useless fellows? Merely because there was a great opposition and the government badly needed someone who can at least file nominations. But why should the hobos contest? Do they know anything about the SAIC and elections and the Tricameral Parliament? No. They even do not need to know. They are interested only in R1000 a month their winning shall fetch “for doing nothing” (45). And now they are ready, they are eager to prove their worth in their best possible ways. They stop a young woman walking in the street carrying a basket with “*a tin of beans*” (67) and “*a long green Indian vegetable*” (67). They consider the tin as “bombs” (68) and the long Indian vegetable as “AK47” (68)! Whitely is convinced that they are good-for-nothing and is happy as they are the right kind of persons to contest elections.

But how shall the three hobos deposit R400 towards filing nomination? On Whitely’s suggestion, they rob people of money, clothes, etc. They even pickpocket. Here is the Radio Announcement about their activities:

One man on his way to the bank states that he was robbed by three tramps who took his money, all his clothes, even his false teeth, and left him naked in the street. (71)

They had hidden blessings from the government to do whatever they can in order to raise money. The government tried to do “everything in their power to trace the gang” (71) but so far remained unsuccessful. Once having enough money and decent clothes, they appear again for filing nomination. They were unaware about the fact that filing nomination does not mean winning elections. They demanded R1000 from the electoral office Whitely thinking that it is their right now to earn R1000 a month! What an ignorance! Whitely guides them what should they do to win elections. The most important is to become popular. So, the government organizes a TV show where the three hobos are interviewed by a white host and an Anti-SAIC activist is also present. The host, obviously Whitely, hands them a list of questions along with answers which they are not even able to read. They find it difficult to pronounce words like “constitution” (81), “agitators” (83), “grievances” (83), etc. The white TV host does not give enough space to the Anti-SAIC member. However, she forcibly interrupts a conversation and starts loudly canvassing the Anti-SAIC ideology. Unsure of what to do now on a live TV show, Singh goes behind her and “*knocks her out*” (83) with a blow. The opposition is thus silenced by force, brute physical force.

Singh and Patel win unopposed as most candidates. Moon has two other candidates in his constituency Nelasia. One is a “retired school teacher” (78) and the other is a “business man” (76). The three hobos fright the retired principal by making a threatening call proclaiming them to be Anti-SAIC workers. But the other one can’t be dispensed with that easily. So now there is going to be a close contest between Moon and Kader, the businessman. As most Indians were to stay away from elections, the three hobos tempt pensioners and factory workers with a “nice ride ... a nice dop” (85). However, Kader even offered them “biryani chow” (85) in addition to the former two. So, a contest between the two, in terms of who can stoop to the lowest!

On the election day, Moon could garner thirty voters, five less than his opponent. He was sure to lose as the election day was about to end.

Meanwhile, Kader visits the hobos' camp and asks Singh and Patel to help him become the Chairman of SAIC. When Singh and Patel learn about the Chairman of the SAIC earning R1000 more, they vow to defeat him. Both hide in a bush and reappear dressed as women with "*Singh wearing a hat with a veil to hide his moustache and Patel as a Muslim*" (91). Both cast bogus votes. There is an Anti-SAIC worker who protests but the police officer Whitely allows all this to happen. Once again Singh and Patel farcically appear as Gujarati women while fighting for trousers and pulling each other's dress down. The Anti-SAIC worker knows that the same men have appeared in different costumes as women. Unable to protest beyond a certain limit, the worker sarcastically comments: "That lady forgot to shave this morning" (94). What else can this be save blatant misuse of power? Sensing that the Anti-SAIC worker might create problems, Whitely takes her to the police station, accusing her for carrying a banned book, viz., Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, which in fact was not banned! Now there is no one to oppose this unethical practice. Moon wins, albeit this way. Singh is declared the Chairman of the SAIC. The play ends with the three hobos singing aloud

Our Whitely, our Saviour!
Our Whitely, our Saviour!
Our Whitely, our Saviour! (95)

This is a symbolic suggestion of submitting to the white power. Whitely considers this election successful as 65 people voted out of 66,430 registered voters, saying it is "a 10% poll" (88). The government too claimed after actual elections that 10.5% voted, whereas the Anti-SAIC claimed that merely 6.5% Indians turned out to vote! Who succeeded?

Amichand Rajbansi referred to in this play as Singh actually became the Chairman of the SAIC and was declared a minister without portfolio in the Tricameral Parliament. The Indian representation was named as the House of Delegates. However, a few years later Amichand was stripped off all his powers for the charge of misusing his office. His real character surfaced soon.

The play *We Three Kings* is a farce which exposes farcical election which the government otherwise claimed as successful. Muthal Naidoo, the playwright, just like other South African Indian playwrights artistically protested against injustice, abuse of power and violation of human rights. This, in fact, has been the characteristic of Indian theatre in South Africa during apartheid. Theatre rather looks like a protest theatre, protesting against social, political, economic, cultural, and human rights violations. And, in that sense, this theatre is also existentialist in tone as after the apartheid regime, none talk about these plays. They rest on shelves feeling contended for the duty that was required of them when time commended.

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