THE GREY STREET LITERARY TRAIL

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Today I’m going to talk about the Grey Street Literary Trail, which is still in development. The Grey Street area is called the Casbah in some of the texts and I’ve used these terms interchangeable. Constructing a Grey Street Literary Trail is more difficult than I originally imagined. For starters, while we do have four Grey Street writers on our literary map, it is not a literary area per se and it has not produced a consistent and sustained literary output. Secondly, the area is closely associated with the history of the Indian population in South Africa and the Resistance Struggle. Both these topics dominate any discussion of cultural tourism experiences and, in fact, most of the Grey Street texts themselves. Thus it would be impossible (and unfair) to try to construct a purely literary trail that fails to give prominence to the history of the place.

**Literary Trail**

This will be the third in the series of literary trails produced by the project. The first two – the Rider Haggard trail and Alan Paton’s Pietermaritzburg– deal with dead white men. However, this can be justified by the fact that Rider Haggard is a well-known author with a large international following and the trail is linked to one of KwaZulu-Natal’s biggest tourist attractions – the battlefields of the Anglo-Zulu wars – while Alan Paton, as our website statistics prove, is world-renowned and relevant to this day. The Grey Street Trail is thus the first specifically local trail. It is also based on ‘area’ and this is a legacy of the apartheid era of clustering racial groups in separate areas. So what then, is the purpose of a literary trail? Firstly, a literary trail is meant to pay homage to writers or texts. The writers dealt with in this trail are celebrated in their own fields but not that well-known outside of the academic and Indian communities. Secondly, the trail links specific places, writers and texts and constructs a sequential trail from these. Robinson and Anderson write in their book *Literature and Tourism* that “the tourist trail gives order (often an artificial order) to a sequence of locations, which are selected for inclusion in the trail because together they will make sense, form a whole” (2003:9). While most trails focus on the homes of writers, their private space (this is apparent when
looking at both the Haggard and Paton trails), the Grey Street trail is more about public spaces – the shops, arcades, markets and meeting places. As such, it is paying tribute to a place, or the memory of a place, that is conjured up in the selected writers work. Furthermore, it is a moment in history that is no more and this, rather than specific literary places, is potentially what makes this trail distinctive.

Grey Street, or more specifically Victoria Street Market, does exist currently as a cultural tourism node and is included on many day tours of Durban run by local tour-operators. However, it is being marketed as a bindis, bargains, spices and souvenirs destination with little cultural, historical or political background and definitely no literary aspect.

**Writers**

Four Grey Street writers live on the KZN literary map. These are Aziz Hassim, Phyllis Naidoo, Dr Goonum and Fatima Meer. A recent addition to the Grey Street literary scene is Mariam Akabor who has just published *Flat 9*. There are other writers and texts associated with the area but due to spatial constraints they cannot be included in the trail. Not yet on our map but an important local and international figure is Mahatma Gandhi. While not being a literary figure as such, he did ‘write’ so could conceivably be included in a literary trail. From a purely tourism aspect, it would be advantageous to include such a famous figure in our trail and I have tracked down two Gandhi sites in the Grey Street boundaries. I will elaborate on this later. Another famous resident and struggle hero is Archbishop Dennis Hurley who was based at the Emmanuel Cathedral located in the middle of the Casbah. Hurley is linked to the anti-apartheid struggle and the sitting of the Cathedral as a refuge is an important consideration. Of the main writers, all lived in Grey Street at some stage in their lives and all wrote about their time in Grey Street.
Phyllis Naidoo was a member of the Natal Indian Congress and the South African Communist Party. She was banned in 1966 and her husband sent to prison on Robben Island. Naidoo was instrumental in finding employment for ex-Robben Island prisoners, quite often in her own law firm. At one stage she had Jacob Zuma and four other ex-political prisoners working for her. In 1977 Naidoo went into exile, firstly in Lesotho then Zimbabwe, only to return in 1990. She writes mainly political non-fiction concerned with recording the history of the struggle. Her latest publication, and the one most relevant to the trail, is *Footsteps in Grey Street* which is a series of vignettes of the people she knew from her time in Grey Street.

Dr Goonum worked as a doctor in Grey Street but is remembered more for her political activity. Together with Doctors Dadoo and Naicker, she led the 1946 Indian Passive Resistance Campaign against the anti-Indian Land Act, which would forcibly remove Indians from their homes and place them in ghettos. The resistance campaign not only fought for Indian rights, it also helped Indian women become more liberal. Dr Goonum was imprisoned many times for her political beliefs and forced into exile in 1977. She returned in 1990 when she published her autobiography, *Coolie Doctor*. Her stories vividly capture life in the Indian community in Durban and the inherent racism in South Africa. During one of her house-visits a white child remarked “oh mummy, the coolie doctor is here”, a name she then used for the title of her book.

Fatima Meer was born in Grey Street and was an anti-apartheid campaigner and founding member of the Federation of South African Women that spearheaded the historic women's march to the Union Buildings which occurred in 1956. She was banned by the National Party, later detained, survived an assignation attempt and went on to establish and work with a number of NGOs. Meer has published more than forty books, mostly non-fiction dealing with socio-economic issues, history and autobiography.
Aziz Hassim spent most of his formative years fraternising on the streets of the Casbah. In an interview he states that “the area had a kind of romance and bittersweet lifestyle during the fifties and sixties, which lives on only in the minds of those that inhabited it at the time” (2001). Hassim's debut novel, *The Lotus People*, won the 2001 Sanlam Literary Award and spans the events of this era. His book is not an autobiography but is based on the Grey Street of his youth and is a “product of the environment he lived in during those days”.

Mariam Akabor is a young writer who is a graduate of the UKZN creative writing program. She wrote *Flat 9* from her own experiences of living in Grey Street in a dilapidated block of flats. The sense of community amongst the inhabitants of this block echoes the sense of community that Hassim evokes in his novel showing that the old Grey Street still exists in small pockets in the area.

Out of these five writers, three are regarded as political rather than literary figures. Of the texts, *Flat 9* is a collection of short stories while *The Lotus People* is the only novel. Even then, *The Lotus People* is written in a social realism style with Hassim mixing historical and political fact with fiction. Interestingly, both Meer and Goonum feature as characters in Hassim’s book. The dense, historical fiction of *Lotus People* means that this text is potentially the vehicle through which the trail might be constructed as the other texts are historical biographies and autobiographies.

**Grey Street: History**

The history of Grey Street is intricately tied to the history of the Indian population in South Africa. Indentured Indian labourers were first brought out by the British in the 1860s to work the newly established sugarcane plantations in Natal. Indian traders, mainly from the Gujarat area, migrated to South Africa at the same time. As mentioned earlier, the most famous Indian immigrant was the young lawyer, Gandhi, who arrived in 1893 and worked for 21 years in
Natal. His approach to political leadership was to have a strong influence on the African National Congress years later. Today, Durban has the largest Asian population in sub-Saharan Africa. Trade with India has become a large part of the local economy. Grey Street exists as the Indian business and residential sector of the Durban city centre and the educational and the cultural heart of KwaZulu-Natal Indian community as a whole.

According to the Group Areas Act the boundaries of the Casbah were Commercial Road in the south, Derby Street in the north, Field Street in the east, and Brook and Cross Street in the west. In *Lotus People*, Hassim explains how the different streets in the Casbah performed different functions. The eastern part of Victoria Street held the theatre, with the west being reserved for the markets and grocery stores. Grey Street was a clothing Mecca, with the latest fashions from London and the States skilfully recreated by local craftsmen. Queen Street had the barbers on one side with the hardware and timber shops on the other, while Pine Street was the territory of the tailors. Prince Edward Street housed the sari houses and jewellers with tea-rooms selling sweetmeats interspersed around the area. If you go down to these streets today, you will find that the area is still, to a degree, divided up into these specific segments. However, it is nowhere near as structured as described in Hassim’s novel and the old shops now compete with an influx of cheap Chinese import shops.

The gangs of Grey Street feature prominently in Hassim’s work. At the time, there were a number of gangs operating in the area. These included the Crimson League, The Salot gang and the Young Generations. Photographer and historian Omar Badsha recounts a colourful story about a gangster called Sheephead Daddy who ran a stall at Victoria Street market and is rumored to have cut sheep’s heads by day and people’s heads by night. Gangs dominated their specific regions and provided a type of substitute government for the residents of their turf who were seldom harassed by gang members. Hassim makes the point that the gangs were politically conscious young men whose heroes where
the struggle leaders. They themselves were respected and seen by some as resistance-fighters. Unfortunately, mugging and shoplifting are now an issue in Grey Street and the gangs operating there today are no longer as friendly as they once were.

Professor Brian Kearney states that Grey Street is given a particular Indian architectural character by the “colonnades over pavements, narrow lanes leading to courtyards behind and the fondness shown for the flamboyant and curvilinear architecture of the 1920s and 1930s” (www.sahistory.org.za) Hassim agrees, writing that:

in the late forties Grey Street, and the roads bisecting it, were a miniature replica of a major city in India. Rows of neat double-storied buildings, consisting of stores on the ground floor and residential flats above, stretched from one end of the road to the other. Occasionally, in between the colonial styled structures, was the odd cottage with mock Grecian columns and sash windows. (Hassim 2002:165-166)

The Grey Street recreated in the selected texts is, in essence, a lost community. Many of the main figures have moved away from the area and it no longer has the feel of the close-knit community described in the texts. The Casbah was “a vibrant and energetic community that was representative of the second and third generations of the early settlers”. (Hassim 2002:165-166) This community was a sanctuary to the people who lived there and these Grey Street texts show an Indian identity that is more layered than the stereotype projected by the white community who did not see the different languages, religious communities, customs and other subtleties of the Indian community. However, its time has passed. In Lotus People, Hassim writes:

The street's changing…Look around you. There was a time you could spot half a dozen scotens with one sweep of your eyes. Not anymore. And the cinemas - the Vic, the Royal, the Avalon - all
no more than a memory. What happened to Dhanjees Fruiterers, Victoria Furniture Mart, Kapitans, that noisy Royal Tinsmith Company… hell buddy, I could go on forever. (Hassim 2002:525)

**Grey Street: Politics**

The Grey Street writers and the texts they produce have political undertones, and in some cases, strong overtones. Nicol Street Square, or as it became known Red Square, was an important site for political rallies and speakers. *Lotus People* spells out this political environment:

> life in the Casbah was about politics too. Children were weaned on it, as children elsewhere were weaned on mother’s milk. It was the logical outcome of the policies of repression, the common denominator around which their lives revolved. There was no other area of under one square mile that could equal it for the intensity of its emotions and its pursuit of justice. (2002:103)

In 1946, the Apartheid government instituted the Asiatic Land Tenure and Indian Representation Act whereby Indians were to be segregated forcefully into ‘Group Areas’. Dr Goonum’s family home was expropriated by the government and bulldozed to make way for white housing. After being arrested for her political activity, Goonum makes the following speech:

> I plead guilty and ask the court to impose the maximum sentence permitted by law. ... I was protesting against that oppressive and pernicious law recently enacted against my people who had no part in framing it. The Act spells disaster, ruin and a state of semi-serfdom to our people who contributed greatly to the prosperity of this country. South Africa we are reminded frequently, is a democratic country…. I am here to vindicate this interpretation of democracy.

**Sites**

From my research so far, a few sites stand out as necessary stops on a Grey Street Trail.
1. The Juma Mosque is a prominent feature of Grey Street. Situated at the corner of Grey and Queen Street, it is the largest mosque in the Southern Hemisphere, with a floor area of 975 square metres and the capacity to take an assembly of 4500 worshippers. This is a logical stop on any trail of Grey Street and the mosque runs tours of its buildings. Hassim describes it in *The Lotus People* as “the magnificent and architecturally famous Jumma Mosque, with its minarets and many domes … it was a natural landmark for both the local residents and the out of town visitors.” (Hassim 2002:166)

2. Victoria Street Market was built during the late 1980's and is a recreation of sorts of the original Victoria Street Market. More of a general ‘oriental’-inspired shopping centre, it contains a wide variety of small shops selling clothes, curios, bags, spices and trinkets from Africa and the East. It is included on all city-tours of Durban and is very tourist-friendly. While not authentic in any real way, it is interesting, central and safe and would have to be included on a Grey Street Trail. Across the road is the fish market and just outside its doors is a small muti-market selling skulls, skins and other parts of animals, which should appeal to those tourists wanting ‘exotic Africa’. The markets of Grey Street are central to the lives of the surrounding community and this could be an important vehicle to emphasize this.

3. Madressa Arcade was built in 1927. This is where Yahya’s, a character from *Lotus People*, first shop was situated. The arcade is lined with fifty or so little shops with stairs leading to flats above. Fabric hangs from the outside of some shops while boxes full of various bric-a-brac spill out onto the street. For me, this arcade conjures up images of what the Grey Street described in *Lotus People* was really like and would be an important stop on the trail. Hassim is pictured walking down this arcade on the back cover of his book so perhaps he too feels that this is a remnant of the area he writes about.
4. Red Square is an important venue in Grey Street texts for the mass rallies and political speeches organized there in resistance to the apartheid government. Fatima Meer writes in *Passive Resistance* that after a particularly violent attack by white youths on the people gathered in the square, Dr Naicker is concerned about the safety of the women asked them to leave. But the women were defiant stating:

> We are in it now and we shall face it to the bitter end… We have heard of what has happened, but this makes us all the more determined to carry on, and we shall carry on. If sacrifice we must, then sacrifice we shall …

Unfortunately, the square is now the Nichol Street Parkade. There is, however, importance attached, for literary tourists, to being in the same place even though it is much altered. Mike Robinson, at last year’s colloquium, highlighted this fact in regards to the Catherine Cookson literary tour in England:

> coaches stop by a roundabout in the middle of the road and the tourist are told that this was no. 15 Gas Street where Tilly Trotter lived. There’s nothing there now. It’s just a roundabout. But if you look at the people, they’re saying: “Oh, that’s interesting, that’s fascinating.”

5. The Emmanuel Cathedral is situated in the heart of Grey Street. The building is a landmark in Durban and was once a centre of intense political activity in the mid-1980’s. The late archbishop Denis Hurley, served at the Cathedral for 60 years. He was a champion of human rights, known especially for his contribution to the struggle against apartheid. The Cathedral, although not connected to the Indian history of the area, would be a significant stop on the trail with Hurley’s political activities linked to those of the other struggle icons of the area.

6. As a more lighthearted, non-literary stop on the trail, we could include a search for the origin of the Bunny Chow, Durban’s famous bread-bowl curries.
The rumour that they were first made in Grey Street could be true. The Indian shopkeepers were known as *banias* and therefore, the phrase Bunny Chow could mean food from the shopkeepers. A candidate for the place where it was invented is Kapitans Vegetarian Restaurant, which operated at 154 Grey Street between 1912 and 1992.

7. The Congress Hall, bought by Gandhi and where the Natal Indian Congress held its meetings, was located at the corner of Grey Street and Commercial Road. Now a low-rise office-block, the building is close to Madressa Arcade and the Cathedral.

8. Another Gandhi site is located at 95 Prince Edward Street. This was a building purchased by Gandhi on behalf of the Natal Indian Congress. Sadly, it is now a parking lot which is strangely still administrated by the Mahatma Gandhi Foundation.

**Challenges**

The Grey Street Literary Trail poses some interesting challenges. Firstly, we are not dealing with well-known literary figures or texts. Both Rider Haggard and Alan Paton come with ready-made audiences. Only a small percentage of tourists would be interested in tracking down Red Square, A.K. Mansions or Madressa Arcade so it will be necessary to create interest through and from the trail. Secondly, a number of the buildings and sites don’t exist anymore. Red Square is now a parking garage, the Prince Edward Gandhi building is a parking lot, and, except for a few locations, most of Grey Street has changed dramatically from the place described in, for example, *Lotus People*. Lastly, crime is a very real problem. We need to know that the sites we send tourists to are relatively safe and easy to find. So, the dilemma is then, do we make a trail that is true to the book and send people to potentially dangerous sites or to parking lots that once were important places, or do we construct a literary
tourism experience centered around the already established tourist attractions of the area?

**Conclusion**
As a literary area, Grey Street is comparable to Sophiatown and District Six – all three were vibrant multicultural areas existing in defiance of the apartheid policies. Sophiatown and District Six have, however, been mythologized because they were destroyed by the state and so exist purely in the national consciousness as symbols of the struggle. A literary trail of the Grey Street area needs to add a depth of understanding of both cultural and political history for the tourist. In order to do this, we need to construct a nostalgic recreation of the area from the selected texts. Grey Street doesn’t exist as this place any more, except in small pockets such as Madressa Arcade or AK Mansions, but the memory of the area is a catalyst for projects on both Indian history in South African and struggle history. The literature about and of the area is aware of this and a Grey Street Literary Trail needs to take this into account and work to mould these factors into a tourism experience that serves to educate as it entertains.

Thank-you.
References


