

Grey Street Writers

.....KZN
Literary
Trails.....



Aziz Hassim



Phyllis Naidoo



Dr. Goonam



Fatima Meer



Imraan Coovadia

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THIS TRAIL FEATURES **Aziz Hassim**, **Phyllis Naidoo**, **Dr Goonam** and **Fatima Meer** who all lived in Grey Street during the apartheid era. Recent additions to the Grey Street literary scene are **Mariam Akabor**, author of *Flat 9*, **Ravi Govender**, whose collection *Down Memory Lane* features stories of 'old' Durban, and **Imraan Coovadia** who wrote *The Wedding*. Not known as a writer primarily but an important local and international figure is Mahatma Gandhi who had links to Grey Street. Another famous resident is Archbishop Denis Hurley who was based at the Emmanuel Cathedral located in the middle of the Casbah. Hurley was linked to the anti-apartheid struggle as was the Cathedral as a place of refuge.

PHYLLIS NAIDOO (1928 -) was a member of the Natal Indian Congress and the South African Communist Party. She writes mainly political non-fiction concerned with recording the history of the struggle. Her publication most relevant to the trail is *Footprints in Grey Street*, a series of vignettes of the people she knew from her time in Grey Street.

DR GOONAM (1906 - 1999) worked as a doctor in Grey Street but is remembered 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. In 1990 she published her autobiography, *Coolie Doctor*. Her stories vividly capture life in the Indian community in Durban. 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 (1928 -) 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 in 1956. Meer has published more than forty books, mostly non-fiction dealing with socio-economic issues, history and autobiography, (see *Mandela: Higher Than Hope*).

AZIZ HASSIM (1935 -) spent 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". Hassim's debut novel, *The Lotus People*, won the 2001 Sanlam Literary Award and is to be filmed.

MARIAM AKABOR (1984 -) 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 evoked in his novel showing that the 'old' Grey Street still exists in small pockets in the area.

RAVI GOVENDER hosts a talk show on the radio station Loco FM. *Down Memory Lane* is a collection of 35 stories from his column of the same name in the *Post* newspaper, spanning life in Durban from the late 1800s to the 1960s and focused largely on Durban's Indian history.

IMRAAN COOVADIA (1970 -) was born in Durban and currently resides in New York, where he is Assistant Professor in the English Department at Adelphi University. His debut novel, *The Wedding*, was shortlisted for the 2002 *Sunday Times* Fiction Award, Ama-Boeke Prize (2003), and Dublin International Literary Award (2005). He is also the author of *Green-eyed Thieves*.

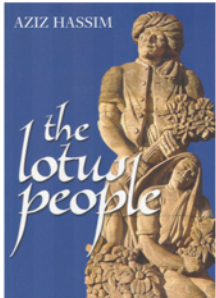
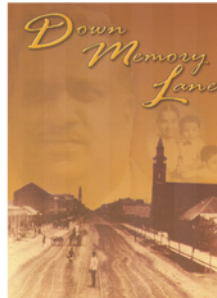
History

GREY STREET IS 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. Today, Durban has the largest Asian population in sub-Saharan Africa and trade with India has become a large part of the local economy. Recently renamed Dr Yusuf Dadoo Street in honour of the anti-apartheid activist, 'Grey Street' exists today as the old Indian business and residential area of Durban and the cultural heart of KwaZulu-Natal's Indian community.

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). The boundaries of 'Grey Street' are Commercial Road in the south, Derby Street in the north, Field Street in the east, and Brook and Cross Street in the west. In *The Lotus People*, Aziz Hassim explains how the different streets in the 1950s and 60s



Ravi Govender



Places to Visit



Dr. Goonam (seated) with Dr. Yusuf Dadoo at a protest rally in Red Square.



Emmanuel Cathedral.

reserved for the markets and grocery stores. Grey Street itself was a clothing centre, with the latest fashions from London skillfully 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 shops and jewellers with tea-rooms selling sweetmeats scattered throughout the area. The area is still, to a degree, divided up into these specific segments though the old shops now compete with an influx of cheap Chinese imports.

All the Grey Street writers featured, unsurprisingly, produced works with political overtones. Nicol Street Square, or 'Red Square', became an important site for political rallies and speakers. 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. Goonam's family home was expropriated by the government and bulldozed to make way for white housing. After being arrested for her political activity, Goonam made 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.

Today many of the main 'Grey Street' figures have moved away or died; and it no longer has the feel of the close-knit community described in the texts. In *The 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 Dhanjee Fruitcris, Victoria Furniture Mart, Kapitans, that noisy Royal Tinsmith Company... bell buddy, I could go on forever.*

As a historic literary region, Grey Street is comparable to Sophiatown in Gauteng and District Six in Cape Town - all three were vibrant multicultural areas existing in defiance of the apartheid policies. Sophiatown and District Six were destroyed by the state and so exist purely in the national consciousness as symbols of the struggle. Grey Street, luckily, can still be visited.

1. RED SQUARE was an important venue for mass rallies organized 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 and asks them to leave. But the women are 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..." The square is now the Nicol Street Parkade.

2. 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.

3. MADRESSA ARCADE was built in 1927. This is where Yahya's, a character from *The Lotus People*, first shop was situated. The arcade is lined with fifty or so little shops with stairs leading to flats above. This arcade conjures up images of what the Grey Street of the 1950s and 60s was like. Ravi Govender writes that taken "out



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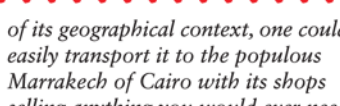
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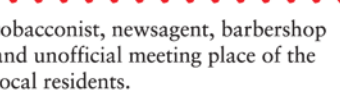
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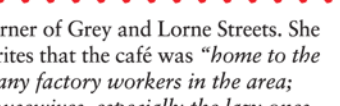
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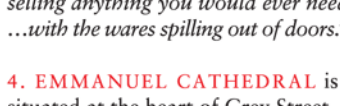
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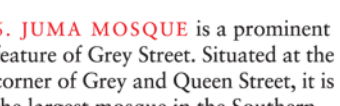
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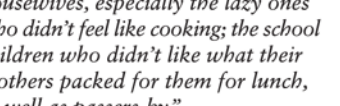
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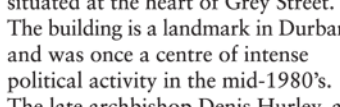
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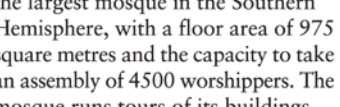
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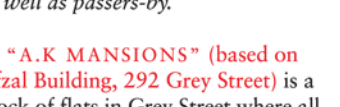
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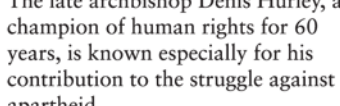
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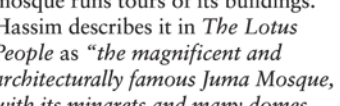
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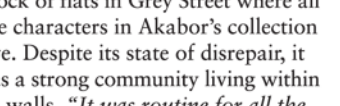
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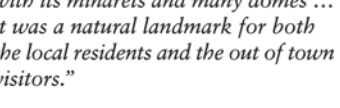
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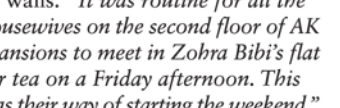
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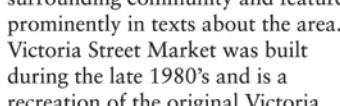
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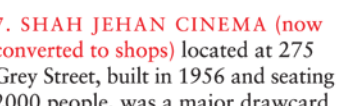
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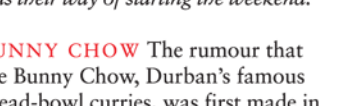
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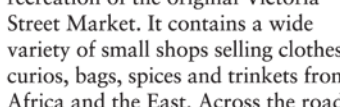
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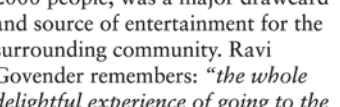
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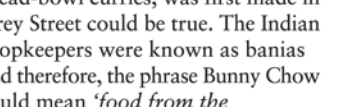
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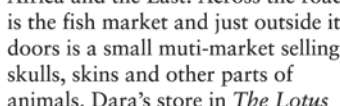
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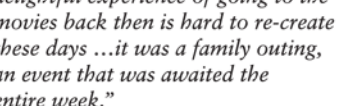
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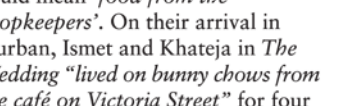
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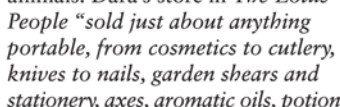
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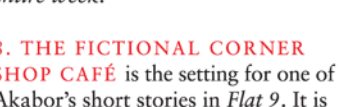
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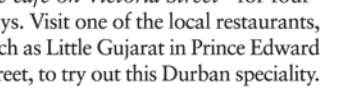
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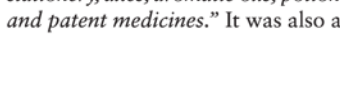
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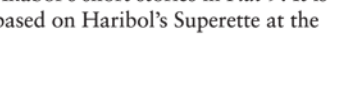
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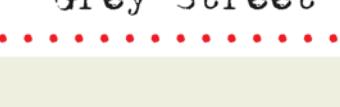
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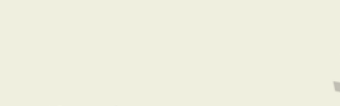
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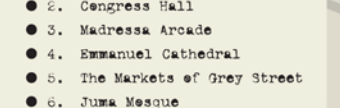
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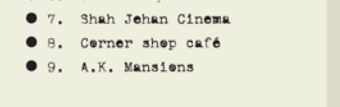
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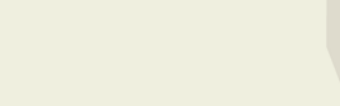
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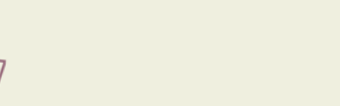
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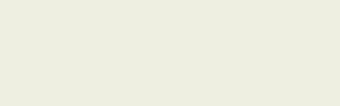
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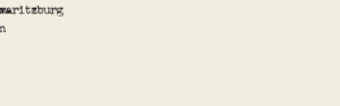
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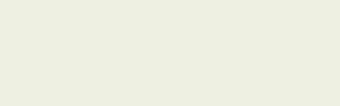
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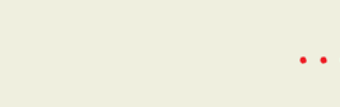
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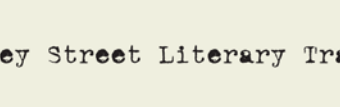
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