

Master of Creative Writing
Vasanti Unka

THESIS:
Somewhat Indian

EXEGESIS:
Our memories talk back at us

A thesis and exegesis submitted to
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of Master of Creative Writing

Primary supervisor: JAMES GEORGE
Centre for Creative Writing
School of Language and Culture, 2021



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INTRODUCTION TO THE EXEGESIS:

Our memories talk back at us

This exegesis examines how literary autoethnography as an evocative and creatively written catalogue of lived experiences can convey a societal inquiry that invites personal connection.

The exegesis reflects on the creative process of the thesis *Somewhat Indian*, discussing motivation, style, and themes while referring to postcolonial literary influences in the thesis' development.

SECTION 1: ABOUT THE THESIS *SOMEWHAT INDIAN*

i) Background

The thesis *Somewhat Indian* could be subtitled “Being Aotearoan-Indian”, as it gives an insider’s account of the lives of Aotearoa-Indians. The thesis recalls my own and that of my market gardening family’s experiences while living and growing up in the small town of Pukekohe with its buried history of racism.

In the town, before I was born, a group of farmers set up The New Zealand White League. The League’s aim was to “advocate for a White New Zealand policy” (New Zealand Herald, 1928). Until the 1960s, the local barber refused Indian, Chinese, and Māori clients, while the local hotel bar and the local movie theatre were racially segregated.

This piece of history sets the background scene, as the thesis examines my family’s evolving culture, our experience of assimilating into a Pākehā-dominated society and the history of the land around us. While childhood memories are retold, the thesis travels forwards in time to my experiences as an adult building a career as a children’s book author and illustrator.

The thesis speaks of the historical background of early Indian immigrants to Aotearoa and the lives of other Aotearoa-Indian people while exploring wider issues that are prevalent in Aotearoa’s multicultural landscape. As a literary autoethnographic text, the thesis connects my autobiographical, personal accounts to the cultural, historical, social and political environment (Bochner & Ellis, 2020).

The thesis is structured as an amalgamation of stories, fragmented narratives, and lyrical-prose. The writing is mainly based in mimesis as the reader is drawn into my world, through an exploration of creative, language-based processes, such as reflexivity, constraint, aesthetic power, imagery, truth-telling, insight, and lyrical form as means to convey social inquiry (2009, Prendergast, M. et al).

ii) Motivation

With the written truth of lived experiences, I felt I could “tell stories that invited others to think and feel” in a way that would lead a reader to personally connect (Bocher & Ellis, 2016 p.57). I wanted to bring awareness to the ostracism of Indians in Aotearoa and undermine assumptions of Orientalism. I aimed to give voice to a group of people who, although active participants in the building of Aotearoa, have remained invisible to the wider public.

Many people I meet are amazed when I mention the number of years (a century) that my family has lived in Aotearoa. Most people are unaware of the history of Indian settlement in Aotearoa. Indians are absent from Aotearoa’s nation-building rhetoric and historic narratives. The few books about Indians in Aotearoa have mostly been written by Pākehā historians. There is no existing autobiographical text by an Aotearoa-Indian. To me, this is appalling, especially when you consider how long Indians have lived in Aotearoa.

Because of the nature of colonisation, our nation’s narrative has mostly been written by and is central to Pākehā. The advancement of Māori cultural viewpoints has been a slow and recent progression. Although I would never negate the need to address issues between Māori and Pākehā as having the utmost priority, I feel that due to the slowness of Pākehā awareness, I am faced constantly with Pākehā realisation being centered solely around a bicultural Aotearoa. As Tauīwi—in brown skin—I feel unwelcome and pointedly nonexistent.

In her recently published memoir, *This Pākehā Life: an Unsettled Memoir* (2020), Alison Jones interrogates her white privilege within Aotearoa. She writes with sincerity about her unease about the unequal treatment of Māori. She is honest enough to conclude with this sentiment: “My position was not—and is not—a confident one.” I am glad that many people like her are waking up to the reality of their privilege and its consequences in a colonised land.

Truthfully, though, I found it painful to read her memoir. Although this was far from her intention. Her book, while allowing me to see white privilege clearly, the difference between her life and mine struck me profoundly. She is of a similar age to me and grew up in Aotearoa in the same era. Her parents were immigrants

from England, who arrived in Aotearoa much later than mine. However, the assurance with which she has navigated life and the doors that have been always open for her present a very different experience than mine.

In comparison, I am reminded of the doors that were figuratively slammed in my face because of the colour of my skin and because of the sound of my name—career doors and societal doors.

In this era of globalisation, an openness to new cultures should be flourishing, yet, as postcolonial theorist Arjun Appadurai argues, an “anxiety of incompleteness” forms in the minds of the majorities. Minority groups are a reminder to them of “the small gap which lies between their condition as majorities and the horizon of an unsullied national whole, a pure and untainted national ethnos” (2006 p.8). For example, we can guarantee politicians will play the xenophobic card during every national election.

In 2010, on national television, host Paul Henry asked then Prime Minister John Key, about who he might appoint to replace Governor-General Sir Anand Satyanand, as his five-year term was soon to end. “Is he even a New Zealander?” Henry asked. Henry continued, “Are you going to choose a New Zealander who looks and sounds like a New Zealander this time?” (Tait, 2010).

Anand Satyanand, who has brown skin, was born and raised in Auckland. His Indian parents immigrated to Aotearoa from Fiji in 1927, almost 20 years before John Key’s mother arrived in Aotearoa from England. Yet John Key’s citizenship would never be questioned.

Due to public pressure, Henry eventually quit and in more recent years, there has been a clampdown on open racism (Human Rights Commission, 2021). Yet, of course, racism in Aotearoa still exists. Recently, movie director Taika Waititi fronted an anti-racist campaign for teachers in Aotearoa to use in schools. The campaign was a result of a survey that found racist attitudes were still a huge problem for school-aged children and affected their learning (Gerritson, 2021).

Psychologists have discovered that children’s racial attitudes and early prejudices are reflective of pervading racial attitudes entrenched within larger society. Children unconsciously take in society’s racial bias, and they appear less influenced by their

parents' direct ethnic socialisation when it differs from society's attitudes. By the age of five, children generally not only attribute positive distinctions to the majority race, but also negative distinctions to minority races (Quintana, 2007 pp.17–39).

As Asian immigration to Aotearoa has increased, racism towards Indians has also increased. The general public is unaware of the magnitude of racism here. Respondents from a 2010 Human Rights Commission survey thought there were too many migrants in Aotearoa (95% of respondents were of European ethnicity). However, they felt more favourable towards British, Irish, European, and South African than Chinese, Indian, and other Asian and Pacific migrants (Malatest International, 2021).

Evidence suggests that negative emotions arising from discrimination can adversely affect psychological well-being. These negative emotions can also lead to biological dysregulation and contribute to chronic illness. According to a leading Harvard researcher Professor David Williams, when a person experiences discrimination during the day—either overtly or as more insidious, coded micro-aggressions—there will be a lack of blood pressure decline during the night (Williams, et al., 2019).

A recent 2020 review of research into the effects of racism on health confirms that in Aotearoa experience of racial or ethnic discrimination is linked to poorer health outcomes (Talamaivao et al., 2020). A report taken from multiple cross-sectional national surveys collected within Aotearoa over a ten-year period from 2002 to 2012 reveals Asian participants experienced the highest amounts of racism, followed by Māori and Pacific peoples, with Europeans reporting the least experience of racism (Harris et al., 2018).

This is not surprising in a colonised land, where the ingrained effects of colonisation have not fully been addressed. In 1895, Joseph Chamberlain, the British Secretary of State for the Colonies, proclaimed, “I believe that the British race is the greatest of governing races the world has ever seen.” (Huttenback, 1973, as cited in Leckie, 2021, p.44) Such was the rhetoric that Aotearoa was built on.

This attitude prevailed throughout the twentieth century in Aotearoa. Prime Minister William Massey stated that the 1920 Immigration Restriction Amendment Act was “the result of a deep-seated sentiment on the part of a huge majority of the people of this country that this Dominion shall be what is often called a “white” New Zealand.” (Beaglehole, 2015)

In examining Aotearoa’s white immigration policies, Nigel Murphy explains that the national identity of New Zealanders was formed on ideas of whiteness and an empire as a means to bring together a disparate community. “The identity was to be white, British, and imperial. Racial superiority, imperialism, purity, and race fitness became central elements in New Zealand’s identity.” (Murphy, 2009, pp. 56–88)

Not long after the Christchurch mosque attacks in March 2019, Dame Anne Salmond shared her opinion in the *New Zealand Herald*, “After this terrible tragedy, let’s be honest, for once. White supremacy is a part of us, a dark power in the land. In its soft version, it looks bland and reasonable ... After Māori, the indigenous people of this country, this sense of white superiority spills out over “other” groups — Pasifika, Asian people, and now Muslims in Christchurch. Many of these people have been sworn at, punched and jostled, treated as aliens who have no place among us.” (Salmond, 2019. para.1–5)

In Aotearoa, we are good at sweeping the negative aspects of our society under the carpet. And that is why I felt a personal account of the life of one who has lived all her years in Aotearoa, inside an Indian skin, would be beneficial. Rather than writing about my experience as a cathartic practice for myself, I wanted to convey a message about our society through an examination of my own life.

iii) On evocative autoethnography

According to autoethnography writer and teacher Carolyn Ellis, autoethnography is a form of research, where the researcher uses self-reflection to write about and analyse personal experiences as a means of understanding the society around them (2004). Ellis suggests, “Narrative is the way we remember the past, turn life into language, and disclose to ourselves and others the truth of our experiences.” As my aim was to interrogate and critique the society I grew up in, I felt the “truth of my experiences” would be fundamental to the writing of the thesis (Ellis, 2004, p. 126).

As an approach to writing, a literary autoethnography can provide compelling reading as it opens a window for an intimate peek into another’s personal life. It is also a means to scrutinise society, cultural beliefs and experiences. (Blume & Reus, 2009). Rather than being an exercise in navel gazing, the point of the practice is to extrapolate from oneself to wider society.

Writing evocatively enabled me to communicate deeply personal experiences that could invite reflection from a reader. My language choices were deliberate and purposeful. At times allowing a space to read between the lines, to invite deeper contemplation, as the reader emotionally “re-lives” the events along with me. Social science researcher Andrew Sparkes writes about autoethnography: “I attempt to take you as the reader into the intimacies of my world. I hope to do this in such a way that you are stimulated to reflect upon your own life in relation to mine” (1996, p. 467).

Evocative autoethnography is a growing practice in research because it allows readers to connect with an autoethnographer’s own life. In this way, a reader can reflect on and empathise with the narrative presented. A personal narrative inquiry, with its search for self-knowledge and identity through reflexivity, can prompt revelations. When used for research, the written narrative can offer previously unknown insights that can be analysed for existential themes (Moustakas, 1994, pp. 43–67).

Because of a paucity of empirical evidence specific to Aotearoa-Indians— it has been too easy for media and social commentators to contain Indians within the category of ‘Asian.’ As a response, this thesis offers a form of data logging that can be used as qualitative evidence. In the thesis’ conceptual reference frames, focalisations, the structure, and the stylisations used, a key driver was to evoke real lives, as a vehicle to find insight into experience in a different way than more formal—and non-literary—research. It is one of the aims of this thesis and exegesis to use narrativised personal memory and collective recollection to free the text’s central cultural being from the colonial eye.

For example, many feminist writers now advocate for research that starts with one’s own experience so that it is free of a male point of view, that could be dominating or competitive (Ellis, 2004). This approach is used in other fields, such as the medical profession to challenge existing power relations without fear of retribution (Denshire, 2013)

To write the thesis, the first step entailed digging into my storehouse of memories. In recent studies, psychologists have ascertained that recalling memories does not simply rely on the world we experience externally. Memories are strongly influenced by our internal states. So, by recalling a memory, we are prone to retrieve the emotions we felt at the time. (Dodgson, 2017).

For the sake of authentic storytelling, delving into the past and writing my story became, for me, a highly emotional journey at times. For the sake of writing with honesty I felt this was necessary. To write with impact, these emotions needed to be peeled open; they needed to be presented in their raw state:

She sank into her chair. She was shrinking. Back to primary school playground games. There, she had always been cast in minor roles. She was the necessary accomplice, accessory, extra. Being different, being brown, feeling less. Not equal. (p.16).

However, voicing the truth of my own reality posed a problem in that my reality is difficult to separate from the viewpoint of alterity. Psychiatrist and philosopher, Frantz Fanon has been influential in the fields of postcolonial and critical race theories. His work *Black Skin, White Masks* from 1952, examines the psychological effects of colonialism. Fanon looks at how a different schema exists for a person of colour. He writes about the “historical-racial schema” that exists in the mindset of the coloniser. People of colour are not seen beyond their flesh colour. This is “othering”. To illustrate, Fanon uses an example from his own childhood: when another child, who is white, describes him as black, it literally blackens him. He claims he was unaware of his skin colour until that point. Suddenly, he bears the sum of historical connotations—the stereotypes. (cited in Drabinski, 2019).

A comment by comedian Richard Pryor (1977) has always resonated with me: “I was a kid until I was eight. Then I became a Negro.” For people of colour, our self-identity—how we see ourselves—is always overshadowed by how we are viewed from the outside.

As a recurring theme in postcolonial texts, the problem of self-identity for people of colour is persistent. As we search for our real selves, we come face to face with our “other”. In the thesis, my state of reality comes under question. My identity has been overridden, belittled, and altered by a society that often cannot see past the colour of my skin. I struggle to reconcile issues of my own identity and intersecting cultures. Throughout the thesis, this reconciliation process does not have a linear trajectory; it is changeable.

Sociologists undertake autoethnographic research with the understanding that social life is messy, uncertain and emotional (Adams et al., 2015). In my writing, I did not expect to formulate concrete ideas or advocate life affirmations. This could not be an *Eat, Pray, Love* kind of memoir. In writing an autoethnographic narrative, there can be no simple plot because of the nature of life. Hayden White expounds, “Narrativization becomes a problem only when we wish to give to real events the form of a story. It is because real events do not offer themselves as stories that their narrativization is so difficult.” (1987, p.4).

There is no life that follows a simple path. Yet, the problems with narrating my life experiences persisted. “The problem of how to translate knowing into telling, the problem of fashioning human experience into a form”. (White, 1987, p.5). The idea of completely absorbing the writing into a structured, teleological shape had to be abandoned. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson explain the problems with writing one’s own story: “It is impossible to construct a single unchanging self capable of remembering and reciting the totality of the past because each of us lives in time and takes ever-changing perspectives on the moving targets of our pasts.” (2005, p.357)

While examining pivotal moments in my life, I contemplated my own beliefs and reactions in order to make explicit personal cultural connections. The text explores the area termed by sociologist Mary Louise Pratt as the “contact zone” where cultures intersect (1991). Pratt describes contact zones as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths.” (1991, p.34)

Within the thesis, the symbolic “contact zone” where cultures meet is an area of conflict. In the clash of cultures, the thesis explores the loss of cultural heritage. I fluctuate within the space of the colliding cultures—the vortex. At times, stepping around the edges of all cultures, portraying some parts of my heritage culture, and sharing aspects of language, food, ideals, myths and beliefs. A hybrid culture is alluded to; leaving the text open to interpretation as I struggle to find meaning.

iv) An original book form

The weaving of life events into a standard book form became not only difficult but also uninteresting. While writing, I wanted to find a new way to convey my thoughts in a mode that was personal to me.

I found inspiration in Claudia Rankin’s prose-poetry book *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014). The book shows how writing can be presented in a hybrid form that can reflect its content. While writing—as others have done before her—about the African American experience, the book takes an unfamiliar approach. The normalised expectation of book form is disrupted, while we experience the psychological toll of being black in the U.S.A.—not only through the writing but through the choice of structure, style and voice. It is a hybrid form that is not poetry or prose, but more a form of “lyrical essay”. (D’Agata, 1997)

This inspired me with its originality of form. For the thesis, I borrowed some of Rankin’s concepts: its unusual structure as a catalogue of experiences, the multivocality in style and perspective, and the lyrical essay form, while keeping in mind that postcolonial theory underpins *Citizen* in its mode and message.

SECTION 2: POSTCOLONIAL LITERARY INFLUENCES

i) Postcolonial theory & Aotearoa

While the thesis *Somewhat Indian* gives historical context to Indian migration to Aotearoa, this is not a simple migration story. It is a story of colonised people who have left their subaltern existence in their homeland because of the effects of colonisation to pursue a better life in another colonised land with its own subaltern group of people. Throughout the thesis, I endeavour to disentangle the complex issues surrounding the effects of colonialism as I unpick the knotted strands of culture and identity.

The thesis investigates postcolonial theory and the effects of colonisation on societies and the aftermath of encounters between cultures. Postcolonial literature questions Eurocentric literary theories of style and genre and disrupts the premise of linguistic universality and epistemologies. A major determination of postcolonialism is anti-colonial resistance, or decolonisation, as it works to reject Western hegemony.

In broader terms, postcolonialism seeks emancipation from all types of subjugation defined in terms of gender, race and class (Ashcroft, 2002).

In his seminal text *Orientalism*, published in 1978, Edward Said brought attention to how the Western world's image of the East is distorted. As a Palestinian, he defined himself as being a product of the historical process of colonialism. His primary emphasis was to bring light to how the construct of Orientalism has perpetuated the notion of the colonised as being “exotic” and therefore different (cited in Mishra, 2021).

Postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhaba adds to the work of Said in his influential text on postcolonial theory, *The Location of Culture* (2004). Bhaba scrutinises colonial authorities' use of stereotypical portrayals to “justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction”. By deliberately upholding the rhetoric of the “inherent and irreversible backwardness” of colonised peoples, colonisers used the English language to subjugate them (Bhaba, 2004) The very teaching of English is suffused with colonial superiority. The growth of the Empire and the development of English as a privileged academic study are intrinsically tied together (Ashcroft, 2002).

In the Aotearoa I grew up in, within our education system, British culture was normative. We were fed on British literature with its scenery, for example Wordsworth's daffodils and the exploits of British adventurers to the “darkest” of Africa with British history as the centre of civilisation. The English language was the place where power was held. Much of postcolonial writing challenges this and there is a commonality in rising against this colonist narrative of superiority by reexamining the centre of culture (Ashcroft 2002).

Bhaba asserts that nowadays, the “Western” nation has become an “obscure and ubiquitous form of living in the locality of culture” (2004). He explains that it is at the edges of society, where the indigenous and migrant voices are heard, that the centre of culture and identity can be found. Salman Rushdie's famous phrase, “the Empire writes back to and from the centre”, succinctly sums it up.

In Aotearoa, Witi Ihimaera, Patricia Grace, and Hone Tūwhare were trailblazers taking back the centre of culture by implanting a Māori voice in Aotearoa literature. Hone Tūwhare's *No Ordinary Sun* (1964) was the first collection of poetry written by a Māori person published in Aotearoa.

Throughout his career, Tuwhare increasingly centred his poetry on Māori issues. His poetic tributes to Dame Whina Cooper, including *Rain-maker's Song for Whina* (1987), tell of his own personal engagement with the Māori land rights movement. Tuwhare grew up speaking te reo Māori. The polyphonic tone of his poetry resonates with Māori oral performance.

Growing Up Māori (1998), compiled and edited by Witi Ihimaera, is a collection of stories that examine being Māori. The stories range from an account of the first Māori encounter with Pākehā through to modern-day stories set in cities and rural towns. With forty personal essays by Māori from varying walks of life, the book is rich with insight into being Māori in a Pākehā-dominated Aotearoa. As I searched for expressions of cultural identity, this book was a catalyst for me to write about Indians in Aotearoa. A more recent book edited by Ihimaera, along with Tina Makereti, *Black Marks on a White Page* (2017), reaches further out into Oceanic writing, for a deconstruction of colonialism.

Witi Ihimaera, when a young boy at school, read a short story written by a Pākehā writer about Māori, he became so incensed with the writing he threw the book out the window. He says of the experience, “I got caned for it and I guess the two things—the invisibilisation or sidelining of my culture plus the punishment for recognising it—made me vow that, bugger it, I was going to be a Māori writer whether people liked it or not.” His writing has since focused on reclaiming Māori culture as being central. “All I’ve ever done is move that literary whakapapa, that living world and its orality, its aurality too, into a written world in a different language, English.” (Cited in Gnanalingam, 2019).

ii) Cultural structural roots

Through most of his work, Ihimaera has embedded Māori cultural signs within its structure. He based his novel *Tangi* (1973) on a circulatory structure and mirrors the circular pattern of Māori speechmaking, or *kōrero*. In the novel, time moves forwards and backwards, spiralling as the main character himself circles around a pivotal event. In *Whānau* (1974), a circulatory structure replicates the spiralling of carving, while acknowledging that in te Ao Māori painted *kōwhaiwhai* patterns and *whakairo* or carving are a means of communicating and storytelling.

The pivotal centre of the novel is the wharenuī, Rongopai, which is laden with spiral kōwhaiwhai. A spiral structure appears again in *The Matriarch* (1986). Ihimera focuses on a relationship between a grandmother and her grandson, while the narrative carries the story of a family through an intergenerational historical epic. Ihimaera again uses a continuous spiral to structure the novel—the pivotal centre is inaianei or the present (Gnanalingam, 2019).

Postcolonial writers, such as Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* (1981), disrupt European notions of history and time. (Although Rushdie's satire of an Orientalist view of time for Indian people is less subtle in later novels.) In *Midnight's Children*, the structure of time seems more like a deconstruction. The protagonist's memory is not trustworthy, and so history is rearranged and European normative metaphysical states questioned.

To that end, the thesis *Somewhat Indian* embraces a non-linear structure. The concept is informed by Hinduism's Kalachakra, or the cycle of time. In Hinduism, time is circular, hence the notions of reincarnation and karma that the Western world is familiar with. In Hinduism the movement of life is divided into periodic timeframes. There are four recurring ages, including the Kali Yuga, which many believe is the present (Jones & Ryan, 2016).

In the thesis, I used four eras of time in the context of my own life: the time before I existed (which could also be eternity), me as a girl, me as an adult and the present time. The present moves onto (or back to) eternity. I allude to the circular pattern a few times in the text:

...you will find no beginning or end.
The beginning is biting its own tail
OM & OM it goes (p.18).

Again, the circular pattern of time, with Adishesa—the snake that bites its own tail—as a symbolic reference:

When Adishesa uncoils, life is created, when Adishesa coils back, the universe ceases to exist (p.133).

While, the thesis is an amalgamation of fragmented stories, arranged around one main story, events and themes lead the reader through a considered, circular structured plot. Psychological time takes precedence. The action of each of the stories moves forwards and backwards in time, while the narrative circles towards a greater significance or meaning.

The pivotal centre of the thesis is represented by a tree. The tree is the symbolic and metaphysical centre. It is where cultures collide. While the symbol of the tree is significant in many ways, within the structure of the thesis, I imagined its roots in a sphere shape, its intertwined tentacles mimicked by the shape of the story's threads. The reader has the opportunity to view things from various angles and points of view.

iii) Authentic style & multivocality

Mahatma Gandhi declared in his book *Hind Swaraj*, which can be translated as Home Rule, "To give millions a knowledge of English is to enslave them." (1908). One of the predicaments or ironies faced by postcolonial writers is that of having to write in English—the language of the oppressor.

English is now the dominant language of our globalised world. This creates a linguistic challenge for postcolonial writers. One of the first Indian novelists to write in English, Raja Rao, comments in the foreword of his first novel *Kanthapura* written in 1938: "One has to convey in a language that is not one's own spirit that is one's own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought movement that looks maltreated in an alien language." (cited in John, 2019, para 7).

The widely differing novels of Jhumpa Lahiri, Salman Rushdie and Arundhati Roy involve characters that are Indian or Indian migrants. They all have distinctly authentically Indian-sounding voices. I find it interesting that Lahiri, who won a Pulitzer Prize for her debut collection of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies* (1999), has pondered the question of voice. In a recent *Guardian* interview she discusses feeling as if she is in "a kind of linguistic exile".

Lahiri was born in London, the daughter of immigrants. Until the age of four, she spoke in Bengali, her parents' language, which she now regards as the "language of their world". She regards English, which she was made to learn as a child, as a

“bullying stepmother”. For her, English was a means to fulfil a desire to fit in. Yet, she says, she has never really felt as if she belonged (Allardice, 2021).

My cultural location is at the edge of two audiences. At the time of writing, I knew that I was reconstituting my experience with the tools of one culture while seeking to remain faithful to the experience of another. I can easily relate to Lahari’s claims. The Gujarati I know in my spirit, that I spoke fluently until I started school, cannot be translated to English. Yet I have grown up with English as my stepmother.

Rather than be limited by the “bullying English” that Lahari speaks of, I decided I could write about my world by taking the English language into my own hands. As postcolonial theorist Bill Ashcroft explains, the “processes of neologism, innovation, tropes, and imaginative usage” allow the breadth of the language to be extended. English can be a tool with which our worlds can be “textually constructed” in our own way. Through innovative usage, we can deconstruct the norm as we dismantle assumptions and English centralism (Ashcroft, 2002, p. 43).

While I’ve mostly structured *Somewhat Indian* as a collection of lived experiences, the text moves between points of view and styles of writing, from poetic prose to informative pieces of history. As a whole, the variation and multivocality of the stories is a strategy of subversiveness. The intention, while providing insight into a minority group’s lives, is to disturb preconceptions.

Sometimes, I moved the narrative away from physically lived reality and into the realm of magical realism. Although the president Western imposed culture considers this realm as being outside of physical reality, the thesis considers it not a magical place but the world that we inhabit. The concept of Hinduism as “mystical” is a Western concept that denies its true influence on the shape of Indian and diasporic culture.

Writing into this other reality allowed for more creative and interesting story outcomes. While writing, I felt these episodes were necessary to include and crucial to the underlying themes. As the writing comes from a subjective viewpoint, a blurring of lines occurs, as it does in actual life experience—fact and fiction can be interchangeable. The world of my childhood and beyond becomes a platform for evocative storytelling, myths, symbolism, and giving expressive shape to the uniqueness of the cultural setting and the surrounding characters.

To further this, in the thesis, the point of view can change within stories. While the point of view most often used in the thesis is First Person, scenes can be experienced from varying angles. In the example below, with the use of third person, I wanted the reader to understand the wider situation in order to empathise and become as close to the character, JK, as I (as the narrator) was. While the reader sees from a distance, the aesthetic volume is turned up. This presents as a transcendence from the austere reality presented in other parts of the thesis. The psychic distance diminishes with each sentence. In doing so, the reader's understanding of the character grows:

The boy floats in a sea of long grass. He is lying on his back; his upturned palms tucked under his head are his pillow. The airless summer heat smells sour—of crushed dandelions, chamomile and kikuyu. The boy feels snug, enclosed by the tangle of overgrown green around him ... (p. 92)

iv) Language: Hybridity & code switching

In postcolonial writing, language as the means of power is taken from the colonial centre and replaced. Homi K. Bhaba (2004) brings forward the concepts of “mimicry” and “hybridity” as being at the heart of postcolonial literature. “Mimicry” of the dominant culture can be an act of resistance when used in terms of farce to make a mockery of colonial culture. The language upon which colonialism relies, for example, notions of superiority—is undercut. In this way, it is difficult to assume a powerful stance when your ideas or culture are subject to mockery.

When “hybridity” occurs, languages evolve and the centre of power moves. Bill Ashcroft determined two processes at play (2002). Firstly, abrogation of or denying “English” privilege. This entails a nonacceptance of normative word usages. The second process is appropriation, which happens when a writer appropriates the language used by the coloniser or uses it to uniquely express themselves in telling their own story.

Finding an authentic-sounding voice in writing has always posed a problem for me. I have wondered how an Aotearoa-Indian voice should sound. One of my concerns was the publisher's and reader's expectations of what Indian characters in Aotearoa should sound like. So far, there is no character that exists in Aotearoa fiction who is Indian and speaks with a New Zealand accent. This is likely because of the lack of Aotearoa-Indians being published (see Section 3).

As I was born in Aotearoa, if you heard me on the phone, you would not hear an Indian-sounding voice or accent. My accent sounds “Kiwi”. In my childhood, no one I knew spoke English with an Indian accent—due to immigration laws restricting new Indian immigrants. People either spoke English with a “Kiwi twang” or they spoke Gujarati. My father and my uncles and aunts who arrived in Aotearoa as children sounded more like the Māori people who lived nearby than the Pākehā.

Patricia Grace’s authenticity of voice drew me in the first time I read one of her novels. Her characters speak in a voice that is familiar to me, even though I am not Māori. By including te reo Māori as spoken naturally and without translations in her 1986 novel *Potiki*, early in her writing career, Grace instilled the presence of her culture. Critics complained she was alienating readers. Grace is clear; her intention is to write about the kinds of people she knows. The people around her speak English, interspersed with Māori. She says, “What I was really trying to do was having my characters speak in the way that was natural to them.” (Graham-McLay, 2020, para. 14)

As the central location in the thesis is the rural edge of a small multicultural town, my voice is mostly plainspoken (as it is in reality) to invoke authenticity. I found that while writing from childhood memories, I became transported to that place in time. It was natural for me to take on the voice of a young girl—perhaps as an actor might do. My voice as a child is a slightly different voice from my adult voice:

Our dad wasn’t excited—he said it was a lot of humbug—he said it was because of a cloud that shadowed Pukekohe’s reputation. But it was a sunny day. (p.9)

While writing about daily microaggressions, as an adult me, a matter-of-fact, flat tone of voice indicates how normalised these experiences have become for me, while adding to the shock value for the reader who may have never experienced this:

A student refuses to listen to any advice I give her about her work ... She questions my judgement—that style looks too Indian, she says when I suggest a curvy typeface that would suit her design. I say nothing and search through websites to show her an American typography designer who has been a great influence on me ...

“Oh!” she says, in surprise. “Not Indian, so it’s okay.” (p.22)

During the act of dredging my memories, I found neither English nor Gujarati words were adequate in conveying the deepest emotions. When I've written about grief in the thesis, the sparseness of words leaves space for unspoken emotion and reflection. The text provides enough evocative description to allow actions to speak and, in this way, lead the reader to interpretation and meaning.

Within the Aotearoa-Indian community I belong to, spoken language can code switch between Gujarati and English. When speaking with my mother, we alter the English we use to sound like Gujarati. My mother came from India in 1953 and the Gujarati that she—and all her offspring—speak has become a localised language. It is Aotearoa-Gujarati, a language of a certain time and place. Only first generation Aotearoa-Indians speak it. While my mother has been living in Aotearoa, the language from her village in India has evolved differently. The spoken language of my heritage is unrecognisable to any other generation in Aotearoa or to anywhere else in the world. In *Somewhat Indian* the writing takes place between the abrogation of the received English and the act of appropriation. It is influenced by the vernacular tongue of an evolving language and reflects the multi-ethnicity of the voices I heard while growing up.

In the thesis, there are instances when the text has a song-like quality. I gathered the polyphonic tone—as Hone Tūwhare did—of the sounds of my childhood. Music and song were very much a part of my childhood. At community gatherings, the women would chant. They improvised the lyrics and out-sung each other, just as rap singers do. Indian music LPs, both classical and Bollywood soundtracks, played in the background of our daily lives. Some of the poetic-sounding pieces in the thesis, were inspired by the chanting and the kathak beats I heard throughout my childhood:

We carried our child on our hip. We climbed onto a ship. We spewed the journey. We chewed the paan. We heard the waves chant. We shed no tears. We are adventurers. We are seers. We saw further than the distance. (p.33)

Māori have their own phraseology for familial and societal groupings. I am not aware of equivalent terms in Gujarati, although I am familiar with the word “āpra” which denotes the word “ours”. While growing up the term “āpra-walla”, referred to our people. Because the Indian community was much smaller then, I understood the term to cover everyone Indian.

The terms “nuclear” and “extended” regarding family are Western constructs. The English term, an “extended” family, is unrecognisable to people who grew up within a family that includes more than two generations and is wider than second cousins. Working and living collaboratively or communally is integral to my upbringing and culture. For me to write a memoir or personal essay to uncover my identity feels counter-cultural; the opposite of communal being. Within my bearing, a collective way of being exists even today, not only within my family, but along with the wider group of people in my community.

In the thesis, I convey the nature of communal thought by using the pronouns “we” and “our” extensively. This device could have been further exaggerated except that the influence of Western autonomism is implicated in the cultural “contact zone”. This again conveys the concept that cultural identity is not fixed—it is extendable and evolving.

v) Feminist or white saviour

I am aware that the final story of the collection may seem contradictory. While the writing of Virginia Woolf has been relevant in informing feminist theory, her work has also been questioned as coming from a place of privilege. When I first read Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, I thought of how Indian women for centuries have not had room in their minds for themselves, let alone room to express themselves creatively. This is not because of colonialism, but of misconstrued tradition. While written a century ago, I felt Woolf’s message crossed cultures and time. Nowadays, it is more relevant to Indian women than Western women. Especially so when considering the lives of the Aotearoa-Indian girls I grew up with—in comparison with their brothers’ lives. I am recalling the ones who married men who regarded them as lower beings. These Aotearoa-Indian women of my generation have had to fight for opportunities. You will see few of these women in academia or on corporate ladders. Mostly, if they are working in professions, you will see them in caring roles such as teachers and nurses.

Woolf’s anti-nationalist stance in *The Three Guineas* (1938) declaring that as a woman she had no country, suited my feelings of marginalisation and therefore my antipathy towards all forms of nationalism.

Except, I could not reconcile these points knowing that this feminism came from the mind of a privileged English woman. Not that I find English women the problem, it is more that, again, I am inserting a Western authority as my savior.

I searched for replacements. Arundhati Roy came to mind, with her famous quote that appears in her book *Wartalk* (2003):

Another world is not only possible, she is on her way. On a quiet day, I can hear her breathing.

I still think this could be a reasonable replacement—depending on copyright laws of course. The sentiment of her quote is hopeful and could make for a good ending. Another woman who came to mind was Alice Walker with her reply to Arundhati Roy in the poem she wrote for *Occupy Writers* (2014):

The world we want is on the way; Arundhati
and now we
are
hearing her breathing.
That world we want is Us; united; already moving
into it.

The trouble with both quotes is that I could not feel such hope myself. My feelings of uncertainty persisted. I wanted the ending to reflect this—truthfully. My search for my place in society continues. On some days, there is advancement. Yet, I still depend on having to fulfil the requirements of my Gujarati heritage and Western ideals.

When I read the piece to other people, no one else voiced my misgivings. They saw the ending as uplifting and reflective. So, I decided to leave the quote by Virginia Woolf. The ambiguity of meaning suits my actuality. I have left it to the reader to decide if:

- a) I am taking a feminist, anti-nationalist stance;
- b) Feminist sisterhood is a cultural identity;
- c) I need a white savior;
- d) There is a plethora of women, forever chiming in with life affirmations.

SECTION 3: PUBLISHING & DIVERSITY IN AOTEAROA

i) Our voice is muffled

A Google search of books about Indians in New Zealand provides a range of seven general works about Indians in New Zealand (one of them is about Burt Munro's motorcycle). Pākehā historians have written most of these books. The search detected one book of fiction written by an Aoteora-Indian and one anthology of poems and short stories. The anthology, published in 2021, is the first-ever anthology of Aotearoa-Asian creative writing.

In 2020, the Publisher's Association of New Zealand held a workshop on diversity and inclusion. Under the guidance of unconscious bias expert Anton Blank, the attendees reflected on the demographics of publishing in Aotearoa:

“While there has been a focus on a bicultural nationhood and respect for Māori, the industry is overwhelmingly Pākehā (New Zealand European) and female. There is strong Māori publishing and a lesser amount of Asian or Pacific Island-authored books... There is a really pressing need for greater ethnic diversity in New Zealand publishing houses.” they concluded.
(Kolman, 2021)

This new awareness of diversity sounds promising. Although, in my experience, I feel as if there are subtle acts of bias still at play. As a children's book author-illustrator, I have won a few awards, my books have sold well overseas, and my latest book has been on every “best kids' books” list for 2020–2021. I write this not to boast but to set a scene, because while it seems my work is well received, you will not find any of my books when you search my name on the website of our biggest book-selling franchise—Whitcoulls. Although there is one book that I have illustrated that appears bearing my name below the European named author.

I asked, in person, at a Whitcoulls store if they had any books by Aotearoa-Indian authors. The bookseller gave me a book by Nalini Singh, who has become famous for her erotic fantasy writing about angels and demons. You will not find books by Ockham finalist Brannavan Gnanalingam who writes about South Asians in Aotearoa. Nor will you find books by Rajorshi Chakraborti whose books sell around the world and who writes about Indians here and in India.

Chakraborti who immigrated to Aotearoa from India, had already published three books overseas, then two more during his first three years here before writing his first book set in Aotearoa (which was published here). I asked him about his experience of publishing in Aotearoa. He said he felt readers were open to his books, while publishers and the writing community were less so. After being told by more than one publisher that he should set his stories in New Zealand in order to be published here, he says, “Within certain quarters of New Zealand literary life, people seem to have quite a ring-fenced idea of what constitutes New Zealand writing.” We are both unsure of what “New Zealand writing” means, though.

In speaking with three writers from South Asian descent about their publishing experiences I found the requirements given to each of them was conflicting:

“The publishers want me to write about New Zealand, but I haven’t lived here long enough.”

“The publishers want me to write about being Indian, but I have grown up in New Zealand.”

“The publishers want a straight Indian girl story but I am a lesbian Pom.”

When I mentioned to my publisher that I was considering writing a book about being Indian in Aotearoa, I was told a book about an Indian growing up in Aotearoa would not hold enough interest. More recently, after the success of Selina Tusitala Marsh’s autobiographical children’s books, my publisher suggested I write a similar book for children.

Meanwhile, a book written by a Pākehā about Indians in Aotearoa is getting great reviews in all the media. The book *Invisible* (2021) by Jaqueline Leckie was published while I was working on my thesis. Part of me was disappointed to find out she had written on a similar subject to my thesis. While I have appreciated her indepth research, I noticed how easily she was able to get her book published (and sold in Whitcoulls) without having to have lived the truth of it.

After hearing about an acquaintance, a writer who had to change her name from Sue to Olivia in order to appeal to a younger, more moneyed audience, I have questions about my name. A recent investigation by ABC News (2021) showed the bias in social

media algorithms against people of colour. It is harder for people of colour to sell their story. Most of us who belong to ethnic minority groups are aware of how we have to work harder than everyone else to succeed in any profession. An article in the *New York Times* comments that, “Mediocrity, the freedom to make average or worse material and continue to enjoy opportunities, is reserved for the few, and those mostly white, male and straight.” (Bradley, 2021)

Recently, in an article in the *Spinoff*, Asian food writers shared their experiences of being “non-white in a very white industry”. Nalini Baruch commented on how Pākehā or European food writers’ books about Asian cooking were published more easily than Asians. She added that, while these books might be popular, people are not being given access to the true heritage of the recipes.

Another food writer, Ashia Ismail-Singer was told by a publisher, “Maybe you need to move away from Indian food.” She comments, “In New Zealand—other than my cookbook—there are no Indian books published by mainstream publishing houses and only a couple of self-published ones, and that itself hasn’t happened without hard work and sheer determination. Like I said, we have to work twice as hard.” (Baruch. et al. 2020)

The margin can become the norm

The thesis is an intentional act of stepping out of the boundaries of fixed expectations. As more writers within the “margin” of society impress their own stamp on language, the marginal can one day become the normative (Ascroft, 2002). I feel that in Aotearoa we are on the brink of this happening.

I know in Aotearoa there are publishers who publish with a social conscience as well as profit in mind. Asian writers *are* being read. The poetry of Chris Tse, the stories of Alison Wong, Renee Liang, the personal essays of Rose Lu, the anthology by Asian writers, the memoir by Helene Wong, the essay by K. Emma Ng, the novels by Brannavan Gnanalingam or by Rajorshi Chakraborti and a new novella by Nod Ghosh during the lockdown of 2021, to name a few who are getting published and well received in Aotearoa.

The increase in personal, autobiographical stories and memoirs being published recently is indicative of the popularity of this genre. A post-Covid-lockdown survey by Nielsen saw a 40% rise in biographies and autobiographies being sold in the U.S.A. Surprisingly (to me), the trend of celebrity memoirs was equal to the rise of “normal” people’s autobiographies (O’Brien, 2020).

In Aotearoa, at independent bookstores, books such as *After the Tampa: From Afghanistan to New Zealand* (2021), an autobiography written by Tampa refugee Abbas Nazari and *Imagining Decolonisation* (2019), a text full of personal stories written collaboratively by seven Māori writers, are among the top ten sellers (The Spinoff, 2021). A passage from *Somewhat Indian* articulates my innate sense of hope:

We shed no tears. We are adventurers. We are seers.
We saw further than the distance. (p.33)

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