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Original Article

Aesthetics of Transnationalism: Reading Ronnie Govender's Song of The Atman as a Diasporic Text

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ABSTRACT

This research paper examines the diasporic aesthetics depicted in Ronnie Govender's novel *Song of the Atman* (2006). Positioned as an epic narrative, the novel centres on Chin Govender, a character symbolically representing Ronnie Govender's uncle, underscoring Govender's prolificacy as a playwright with notable works including *Beyond Calvary* (1970) and *The Lahnee's Pleasure* (1976), which transitioned into novel form in 2008. Govender's literary prowess culminated in winning the Commonwealth Writers' Prize for Best First Book. The study aimed to elucidate the nuances of diaspora and diasporic identities by historically contextualizing the term's evolution. Initially confined to describing the dispersal of Jews from the Middle East, the concept of diaspora has evolved to encompass a broader definition, encapsulating all communities forced to migrate to multiple destinations. This expanded conceptual framework is then applied to the South Asian diasporic context, highlighting four principal migration patterns: Asian traders, indentured labourers, professionals and expatriates, and asylum seekers fleeing political and religious persecution. The research delves into Govender's novel to uncover the aesthetic expressions of tradition and modernity within South Asian diasporic communities. It reveals how the novel serves as a vibrant chronicle of these communities' steadfast cultural roots intertwined with their embrace of diverse modern cultural forms.

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INTRODUCTION

Song of the Atman (2006) is a grandiose narrative of a family's heroic struggle, which intertwines together strange characters abounding with abundance, sensation and dimension. The author, Chin Govender, is the favourite son of Cato Manor who returns home to his separated family in the late 1940s after several years away, arriving with him a disarming story that strides the physical and political setting of South Africa. The story archives his adventures from an impecunious wine agent in East London to becoming an efficacious hotel vendor in District Six, Cape Town. The narrative is unified into the rich cultural experience of the ingenuousness of Indian life and the complexities of close communities that form the background of this tale. The narrative is a haunting portrayal of five generations of descendants of previously indentured Indian labourers and their fight to construct an identity in an emerging South Africa. The research explores Govender's novel to reveal the artistic expressions of tradition and modernity within South Asian diaspora groups. The article reveals how the novel presents a vivacious account of these communities' resolute cultural roots entwined with their clasp of various modern cultural forms.

TRANSNATIONALISM: CONTOURS OF 'DIASPORA' AND 'DIASPORIC' IDENTITIES.

The term diaspora has been associated with the dispersal of the Jews from their original homeland to various destinations in the world. Indeed, the word denotes forcible eviction and dispersal that occurred to the Jews owing to their failure to submit to Judaic traditions. Robin Cohen explains the term diaspora thus: "The idea that 'diaspora' implied forcible dispersion was found in Deuteronomy (28:25), with the addition of a thunderous Old Testament warning that dispersal to other places involved the punishment for a people who had discarded the righteous paths and betrayed the old ways (Cohen, 2008, p. 507). The term diaspora cannot be divorced from forced expulsion whether it is used in relation to the Jews or the diasporic emigrations in the modern world. The Jews were to experience forced eviction from their ancestral land as a punishment for having abandoned their traditional practices. Indeed, the term diaspora from the onset connotes a form of abandonment both to a community's ancestral land and traditions and the embracement of that which is foreign. Indeed, for the Jews, the term diaspora connotes the suffering, discrimination, and insecurity of living in an alien place, set adrift, separated from their pedigrees and their sense of who they were, burdened by a foreign ruling class (Cohen, 2008, p. 508). The Jews associate the term diaspora with a kind of traumatic experience and pain of living in a foreign land and experiencing domination from alien rulers. Diaspora further connotes the uprooting of groups of people from their cultural roots and traditions and planting them in foreign lands.

The Greeks expanded the term diaspora to include territorial expansion through colonization, military conquest, and migration. The Greeks' perception of diaspora was not traumatic but involved a sense of domination. Cohen argues: "… the term 'diaspora' is found in the Greek translation of the Bible and originates in the words 'to sow widely'. Among the Greeks, the utterance was used to define the annexation of Asia Minor and the Mediterranean in the antiquated period (800-600 BC) (Cohen, 2008, p. 507). The term diaspora has the expanded meaning of political conquest and territorial expansion. Diaspora then included the ruling elites perceived as the oppressors of a foreign population.

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Indeed for the Greeks, the term diaspora includes both the oppressor and the oppressed foreigner. Cohen explains that despite that there was notable dislocation of the primaeval Greek to Asia Minor due to poverty, population boom, and inter-state war, diaspora fundamentally had a progressive connotation. Extension through looting, military subjugation, colonization, and relocation were the leading features of the Greek diaspora (Cohen, 2008, p. 507). The Greek diaspora is significant as it includes emigrants for political or economic reasons. Both the ruler and the ruled, the oppressor and the oppressed are included in the concept of the Greek diaspora. This expansion is significant in understanding the modern diasporic community as the term has expanded to include other displaced communities apart from the Jews.

The term diaspora has gained a more elaborate definition in the modern age. Though literary scholars have not managed to agree on a uniform definition, there are some predominant features that have been attained within any suitable delimitation of the concept of diaspora. James Clifford comes to our aid with his elaborate explanation of the concept of diaspora. Clifford expounds on the concept of diaspora as emigrant minority groups that are scattered from an 'original center' to at least two 'peripheral' places; that keep a memory, visualization, or myth about their cradle homeland that believe they cannot be completely admitted by their host country (Clifford, 1997, p. 304). The concept of diaspora is further expanded to include minority communities and other forms of professionals or expatriates. The concept of a 'minority community' expands diaspora to include all communities that experience dispersal not just the Jews. The term diaspora therefore becomes more encompassing to cater for the global dispersals of various communities. Clifford further explains the notion of the displaced community as those familial groups that see the ancestral home as a place of ultimate return, when the right time comes. In this case, the diaspora communities are committed to the preservation and rebuilding of their homeland; and of which the communities' awareness and unanimity are 'importantly defined' by this unending affiliation with the homeland. The diaspora community experiences dispersal to at least two foreign destinations where these migrants form a minority population. The concept of being part of the minority group is important since it contributes to the diasporic community's failure to fully integrate into the ancestral legacy of the host community. The diasporic community is ideally unsettled as they perceive their native land as a place of ultimate return. The diasporic community perceives their host country as a foreign land to which they would never gain a sense of belonging. The element of alienation would always pursue these minority groups to harbour the ultimate dream of going back to their native land.

The concept of diaspora is also understood through the concept of travel. The kind of journeys envisioned here are those that involve settling down and becoming inhabitants of a foreign land. Avtar Brah posits that the idea of dispersal which he also refers to as a grand journey is pivotal in considering the notion of diaspora. Brah explains that at the core of the idea of diaspora is the image of a journey. Diasporas cannot be misunderstood to mean ordinary travels which may be temporal in execution. Ironically, diasporic passages are fundamentally about settling down, about erecting roofs and deepening roots 'elsewhere'. These dislocations must be historicized if the conception of diaspora is to serve as a useful experiential device, (Brah, 1996, p. 182). The kind of travel envisaged in the concept of diaspora is migratory in nature in that it involves moving to foreign lands and setting up new 'homes'. The diasporic community is expected to get settled or establish a 'permanent' place of abode in their host land. Their connection to their ancestral land is merely mythical since they have been 'uprooted' from their land and have set up 'new roots' elsewhere.

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FORMS OF DIASPORA IN THE SOUTH ASIAN SETTING

The South Asian experience of diaspora encompasses several distinct migratory patterns, as categorized by Gijsbert Oonk. These patterns not only influenced how Indian culture was preserved abroad but also shaped the reception of South Asian migrants in their host societies (Oonk, 2010, p. 10). The degree of cultural retention among these emigrants varied significantly, influenced by factors such as age and education. Older emigrants tended to hold onto their cultural heritage more than younger generations, while those with less formal education often maintained stronger ties to Indian traditions. This dynamic is reflected in Ronnie Govender's novel, where Baijnath reluctantly agrees to conduct a traditional cleansing ceremony for his new business only at his mother's insistence (Govender, 2004, p. 20). Baijnath and his mother, both immigrants from India, exemplify differing levels of attachment to tradition, with the older generation typically preserving cultural practices more steadfastly.

In addition, the novel portrays internal divisions within the community regarding traditional beliefs. Mathiemugan, a Tamil scholar, challenges Hindu myths as communal legends, arguing for a reinterpretation of figures like Ravana as heroic rather than villainous (Govender, 2004, p. 74). This perspective is vehemently opposed by Amurtham, who views such reinterpretations as blasphemous, highlighting contrasting attitudes toward traditional beliefs among educated and less educated emigrants. Chin, another character, confesses to being less religious than his mother, illustrating generational and educational divides in cultural retention.

The first pattern of South Asian migration involved traders seeking better business opportunities abroad. These early migrations were often temporary, with traders intending to return home after accumulating wealth. Oonk notes that trade diasporas were characterized by circular movements, where sons were sent abroad to expand business ventures but also with the expectation of eventual return (Oonk, 2010, p. 11). This temporary nature of migration is exemplified in Baijnath's father's story, who came from India to South Africa with dreams of striking it rich in the booming economy of Durban. However, the reality was different, and he ended up settling permanently, engaging in market gardening to support his family (Govender, 2004, pp. 19-20). Despite initial aspirations of returning home wealthy, economic realities in the host country often compelled migrants to establish permanent roots.

The second major pattern involved Indian indentured labourers, forcibly transported to replace freed slaves on plantations in Africa and America. Initially intending to return to India after completing their contracts, many labourers ended up settling permanently in their host countries due to economic circumstances and new attachments formed over time (Oonk, 2010, p. 11). Govender's novel vividly depicts the harsh conditions and economic pressures that drove many Indians, like Karupana Gounder, to migrate as labourers. Karupana's experience in the cane fields of Durban reflects the toil and exploitation faced by indentured labourers, highlighting their struggle for survival and dignity in a foreign land (Govender, 2004, p. 28). The term "indenture," once hoped to signify temporary service, became synonymous with enduring hardship and exploitation, a stark contrast to the promised dreams of wealth and return.

The third major pattern of South Asian migration emerged in the aftermath of World War II, driven primarily by religious persecution and the ensuing fear and mistrust within the region. Oonk describes this pattern succinctly: "First, many Muslims migrated from India to East and West Pakistan, while Hindus departed Pakistan to migrate to India. Hindus in Pakistan and Muslims in India felt insecure under the new governments, which they believed were unable to protect minority rights" (Oonk, 2010, p. 11). This religious-based

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persecution exemplifies the oppressive conditions experienced by South Asian communities, who consequently became part of the diasporic group.

In Govender's novel, the community of South End in Port Elizabeth reflects the diverse composition of the Indian diaspora, including Muslims and Hindus living harmoniously. The narrator observes: "Most of PE's small Indian population lived in South End. Except for a few Gujarati Muslim traders, the rest of the Indians, mostly Tamils, were either waiters, barmen, or in the fruit and vegetable hawking business" (Govender, 2004, p. 108). This community illustrates a cohesive blend of Muslims and Hindus, with the Tamils and Gujaratis engaging in various professions without religious discord.

However, beyond religious tensions, caste-based discrimination remains another form of oppression prevalent within the Indian diaspora. In Baijnath's interactions with Chin, a young Tamil, Baijnath initially sees potential for Chin to marry into his family due to his appearance and academic achievements. Yet, upon learning of Chin's Tamil identity, Baijnath dismisses him as a prospective son-in-law strictly on caste grounds. The narrator reveals: "Chin was Tamil – not quite what Baijnath had in mind. No matter how good Chin was, he could never marry one of his daughters. The prospective bridegroom had to be of the same caste as Baijnath…" (Govender, 2004, p. 24). This episode underscores how deeply ingrained caste considerations are within South Asian communities, both in their home countries and in the diaspora.

The migration waves after World War II also included professionals sought after by the colonial governments for their expertise in fields such as teaching, law, and medicine. Oonk asserts that many well-trained experts left India to look for employment opportunities as educators, lawyers, and medics in Europe, the US, and Canada, (Oonk, 2010, p. 11). These experts were active in supporting the foreign administrations to across numerous British territories, always relocating to new locations because of the colonial power structure.

In Govender's narrative, figures like Mr. Peters, a composed and well-mannered teacher of South Indian origin in Durban, exemplify these professionals who migrated to serve under British colonial rule. The narrator states: "Mr. Peters was normally very composed and correct in his manners and speech. It was something he'd inherited from his father, a south Indian without a caste name who had converted to the Roman Catholic faith" (Govender, 2004, p. 23). This portrayal highlights how migration for professional opportunities often involved adapting to new cultural and societal norms, as Mr. Peters circumnavigates his vocation in the British colony of South Africa.

The fourth migratory pattern post-World War II saw Indians from British colonies in Africa moving to Europe, America, and Canada due to political upheavals and economic opportunities. Oonk categorizes these migrants as "twice migrants," who resettled in destinations like the Netherlands, the UK, and Canada after initial migrations to places like Suriname or expulsion from East Africa (Oonk, 2010, p. 12). These movements underscored the complex interplay of political instability and economic aspirations shaping the trajectory of South Asian diasporas globally.

The South Asian diaspora embodies multifaceted migratory patterns influenced by religious persecution, caste dynamics, colonial demands for professional expertise, and political and economic circumstances. These narratives from Govender's novel and historical accounts provide insights into how South Asians navigated and contributed to diverse global contexts, shaping both their own identities and the societies they inhabited.

ARTISTIC EXPRESSIONS OF TRADITIONS AND CHANGES IN *SONG OF THE ATMAN*

The belief in Hinduism is an old custom among the Tamils. Indeed, Hindu dogmas and practices are wholly rooted in the Tamils civilizations. The extent

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to which the Tamils are absorbed in Hindu traditions is exemplified in the character of Amurtham. This elderly woman is well-rooted in Hinduism, for all her life revolves around prayer. The narrator notes: "Prayer had been her constant staff since Karupana died" (Govender, 2004, p. 38). The narrator notes her strong belief in the Hindu gods, thus her prayerful life. Indeed, she is so prayerful that prayer is described as her only companion or staff. Amurtham is considered a Hindu faith leader by her peers. The narrator observes: "… Mrs Rana … had a lot of respect for Amurtham's religiosity. Indeed, she regarded Amurtham as a faith healer. It was only after prayers by Amurtham in her little temple that Rana's daughter, Shanti, was able to have a baby after four years of marriage" (Govender, 2004, p. 74). The fact that Amurtham's peers consider her a committed Hindu believer indicates her deep roots in the Hindu tradition. Her religious talent in communing with the Hindu gods is evident in the 'miracles' that accompany her prayers, for instance, the ability of Shanti's womb to conceive and carry a pregnancy after her prayer. Another instance of Amurtham's religiosity is evident in her dedication of Chellama's son, Guru, to the Hindu goddess Marieammen. Guru had accidentally swallowed a swig of paraffin and needed urgent healing. The narrator observes: "Deep religiosity pervaded all aspects of their lives. When Chellama's son, Guru, was five years old, he took a hearty swig from a bottle of paraffin, thinking it was lemonade. He turned blue and limp.… Amurtham placed him before the altar naming him Mariemuthu… jewel of Marieammen, dedicating him to the Goddess Marieammen. …She steadfastly chanted the Mantras. He slowly recovered…" (Govender, 2004, p. 76). Amurtham's supplication to the Hindu goddess protects the life of a child. Her decision to turn to prayer is further evidence of her religiosity, for she remains steadfast in her belief that the goddess will solve her problems. This firm belief stresses her deep roots in Hindu traditions.

Secondly, the Tamils express their traditions in their practice of different rituals and ceremonies. The rituals and ceremonies practised in Hinduism have become part and parcel of the traditions of the Tamils. Amurtham is well-rooted in these traditions and observes all these rituals. The narrator observes: "Amurtham spent much time in the temple, engaging in elaborate rituals. There were several major festivals, which were meticulously observed: the Kavadi and Mariammen festivals, Deepavali, Pongal, and Purtassi. …both the North and the South Indian communities celebrated the Deepavali as their main festival…" (Govender, 2004, p. 74). The numerous religious rituals that Hindus perform enable them to commune with their gods, thus forming enduring bonds between mortals and immortals. In observing these rituals, an individual gains lasting bonds with the Hindu gods and traditions. Consequently, these religious rituals have been embedded in the lives of the characters, rendering them fully-fledged members of Hinduism. The fact that these festivals are keenly observed and celebrated in both North and South India shows their significance in defining Indian traditions.

In addition, there are other traditional rituals observed among the Tamils that reflect Indian traditions. When Chellamma reaches puberty, a traditional ceremony is conducted to initiate her into adulthood. The narrator notes: "There had to be a special ceremony to indicate that she was now of marriageable age. A manjal neer was performed. Behind the house, a kolum or a series of patterns were drawn with coloured flour in a square of levelled ground hardened with cow dung. On this were placed the koothu velkoo and the kamatchi velkoo, brass lamps that had been brought by Karupana's parents from India" (Govender, 2004, p. 59). The manjal neer ceremony is quite elaborate and involves both traditional Indian material cultural paraphernalia and religious incarnations. The brass lamps, 'velkoos', were dedicated to the goddess Kamatchieammal, the goddess of light. The ceremony also involved chanting and incantations to both the gods and the ancestors. These elements gave the ceremony its deep religious significance, to

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the extent that the ceremony can be considered a religious ritual.

In another traditional ritual, Baijnath conducts a ceremony to cleanse the building in which he intends to start his business. The narrator records: "Baijnath consulted a pandit, who gave him an auspicious date and time to have a small ceremony, after which he could move in. The ceremony was conducted in hushed tones so as not to offend the white neighbours. The pandit, who was used to intoning the mantras over the sacred fire of the havan in a loud, piercing nasal tone, was not at all pleased with having to petition to the deities in such a subdued manner, (Govender, 2004, p. 21). The cleansing ceremony is a traditional ritual that has gained religious significance. The pandit who conducts the ceremony is a religious leader, thus giving the ceremony a religious hue. The incantations themselves are ideally done in loud, high-pitched nasal tones that are characteristically religious. The chants are also done over a sacred fire in a furnace, giving the ceremony further religious colour.

Fourthly, the Tamils express their traditions in their marriage preparations and the wedding ceremonies that follow. The traditions of the Tamils are first expressed at the spouse selection stage where the parents play a significant role in the partner selection. Mrs. Baijnath advises Amurtham to organize Chin's wedding to her neighbour's daughter. The Baijnaths say: "Auntie, it's time you got Chin married,' … 'Our next-door peoples are good Tamil peoples. They got two pretty girls just right for Chin. You want I must talk to them … Mr. Naidoo is a very wealthy man. They have a fish stall in the market and his daughters are beautiful. They have been brought up properly" (Govender, 2004, p. 77). The seminal role played by parents in the selection of a suitable spouse for their children is expressed in Chin's predicament. It is the parents who are in this case involved in selecting a bride for him. The Baijnaths feel that it is the duty of Amurtham to get Chin married, where she has to make the decision of when and to whom Chin should get married. Mr. Puckree and his wife select a marriage partner for their daughter and proceed to organize a wedding for the couple. Rani, the daughter of Puckree, laments that her parents receive a proposal for her marriage even before she meets her suitor. The narrator notes: "The young lady was very much opposed to fixed marriages, although she loved her parents … to go against … their wishes. She was hoping that the proposal they had received would not be given serious consideration" (Govender, 2004, p. 52). It is evident that Rani's marriage proposal is given to her parents with total disregard for her desires in life. The marriage negotiations are done in earnest with Rani only being called to see her spouse once the negotiations are complete. Rani is obviously not comfortable with this arrangement. The narrator notes: "Rani as an obedient daughter, could not show her resentment directly to her parents, so she'd sulk in her bedroom, coming out reluctantly, keeping her head down and not looking at the young man. … Mrs. Puckree … was thrilled that a family so wealthy and high up in society was showing an interest in her daughter" (Govender, 2004, p. 52). Rani's marriage is only suitable to her parents who fix it solely to give them a link to the Guruswami's, a family that is extremely wealthy. That Rani is not in love with the man chosen for her is evident in her body language when she meets her suitor. She does not even look at her suitor; she looks at the floor. The marriage only thrills Mrs. Puckree, who takes pride in the financial prowess of the suitor's family.

The traditional Indian family is exposed as one where all the family members are under the unilateral leadership of the family head. The family head is the one who makes the major decisions and the other family members have to follow. Karupana establishes a family after getting married to Amurtham. Karupana is the head of his family, thus making all the key decisions in his home. Karupana makes a decision to buy a farm in Cato Manor and build a house where he lives with his family. The narrator notes: "With his teenage bride, Karupana

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settled in Cato Manor, land immediately to the west of Durban given to Cato by the Municipality. Karupana and Amurtham erected a wooden house and planted a market garden…" (Govender, 2004, p. 30). Considering that Karupana's wife is a mere teenager, we cannot fail to credit the decision to buy a piece of land in Cato Manor to Karupana. Similarly, both the decision and the finances to build a house for his family must have been initiated by Karupana.

The power vested in the patriarchal head of the family is felt in the position that Jack holds as the head of Karupana's family. Upon the demise of Karupana, Jack takes over the patriarchal position as the head of the family. The authority consigned in the patriarchy is personified in the pay packet. The family head is the only member of the family who is vested with the power of breaking open the seal of the pay packets of members of that family. The narrator observes: "… Chin had torn open the packet the first time he'd ever done so. There was a very strict rule that the only person allowed to open the pay packets in the Govender's family was Jack. … All he was taking was a shilling to buy a duff cake and a pint of milk, which he gulped down hungrily" (Govender, 2004, p. 78). It is ironic that though Chin is the one who has toiled for a whole month to earn a monthly salary, he cannot open his pay packet or spend a single coin from his salary. The head of the family is tasked with the duty of distributing the finances of the family to the various needs of the family members. It is, therefore, not surprising that Jack proceeds to assault Chin for having spent some money from his salary without his permission. The narrator observes: "Jack picked up the pay packets. One of them had been opened, the first time this had happened without his permission. Jack seldom raised his voice. He called Chin in a matter-of-fact way, giving no indication of his feelings" (Govender, 2004, p. 80). Jack summons Chin with the intention of picking a quarrel with him merely because he had picked a shilling from his wage to buy a snack. Jack proceeds to punish Chin by giving him a hard blow on his face to prove his tyrannical power as the patriarchal family head.

Society is not static, thus the traditional culture is not wholly sufficient to accommodate the lives of the members of society. Consequently, forces of transition have occurred, thus dictating changes to occur in the society. Firstly, the embrace of Christianity by some members of the Tamil community is a form of transition. Mr. Peters is a descendant of South India, but his parents converted to Christianity. The narrator observes: "… Mr. Peters was normally very composed and correct in his manners and speech. It was something he'd inherited from his father, a South Indian without a caste name who had converted to Roman Catholic faith" (Govender, 2004, p. 23). Traditionally, South Asians practice Hinduism. Some South Asians also converted to Islam owing to the Arabs' imperialism on Indians, before the coming of the British colonialists. These two religions, Hinduism and Islam, form part of the traditions of the South Asians. Christianity, which was introduced by the British, is therefore a feature of modernity in the culture of South Asians. Indeed, Peters is a staunch Christian in the perception of the pupils in school. The narrator notes: "When he'd been at school, he had the impression that Mr. Peters was a very religious man. Every morning at assembly, the school teacher led The Lord's Prayer, 'Our father who art in heaven…,' closing his eyes and tilting his head to heaven" (Govender, 2004, p. 22). The extent to which Peters has embraced Christianity is evident in his habit of leading prayers during school meetings. His mannerism when praying—tilting his head to heaven—shows deep-seated religious piety. This religious piety is significant since Peters is an Indian confessing Christian faith.

Secondly, the rise of a generation of scholars who question religious dogmas is another aspect of modernity. This generation of scholars argues that knowledge is only useful if it is questioned and its relevance tested. Mathiemugam, a Tamil scholar, questions Hinduism dogmas. Mathiemugam argues:

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"Ravana was a heroic Dravidian king who successfully defended his kingdom against the conquering Aryans, until another South Indian King, Hanuman, sided with Rama" (Govender, 2004, p. 74). The Tamil scholar interrogates the teachings of his traditional religion by evaluating it against known historical facts. This enables the scholar to make meaning from the dogmatic teachings of his religion. Similarly, Baijnath and Peters question the teachings of their religion and adopt only those that are relevant to their situation. Baijnath is a Hindu and traditionally is not allowed to eat beef. However, owing to his interaction with Peters, a Christian, he shares roast beef with him. The narrator notes: "Baijnath had a way of obtaining his weekly bottle of cane spirits, and once he had closed his front door, nobody would enter. Mr. Peters would bring along some slices of roast beef for bites – although Baijnath was in many ways a good Hindu, he was a practical man; he felt people should not follow customs blindly, but should ask why they were there…" (Govender, 2004, p. 22). Baijnath relishes eating beef, which he finds delicious and nutritious. He feels the tradition that bars Hindus from taking pork is archaic. Similarly, Baijnath encourages Peters to drink wine though Christian dogmas disallow the taking of alcoholic drinks.

Modernity has also set in through the emergence of new careers. Traditionally, the Tamils are peasant farmers. Amurtham practices market gardening where she grows food crops for sale. The narrator asserts that Amurtham had resolved to till the land with zeal and vigour. It was gruelling work, labouring in the small market garden throughout the day (Govender, 2004, p. 38). The garden gives Amurtham food crops for consumption by her family. She also generates some cash by trading the surplus in the market. The younger generation, however, generates income through other modes of employment. Chin works as a clerk in Baijnaths' firm where he is involved in bookkeeping activities. Chin and two other clerks are in paid employment where they earn monthly wages. The firm where they work is involved in auditing the accounts of all the Indian businesses and several white firms in Durban (Govender, 2004, pp. 41-42). Similarly, Jack is involved in sporting activities as a career. Jack participates in boxing activities along with other characters like Jim Slasher, Johnson Mkize, Speedy Tshangase, and Engine Twala (Govender, 2004, pp. 32-36). Dorrie is equally an inimitable character who works as a driver. He manages to secure a driving certificate and becomes a certified driver (Govender, 2004, p. 64).

The development of formal education is another mark of transition. Jack is selected to join the local school building committee. Jack gives assurance to organize the committee members to lobby and compel the government to build more schools for the Indians. A resident bishop volunteers to help the Indian community build schools for their children. The narrator notes: "'You must join our school building committee. Our children need more schools with higher standards'. 'We are paying our rates and taxes … The government must build schools for our children, like they do for the whites'" (Govender, 2004, p. 71). The effort that the people have in building schools for their children is significant. It shows the rate at which they are ready to embrace social change by exposing their children to knowledge. It is through this knowledge gained that social changes are initiated and sustained through the inception of new ideas.

CONCLUSION

This study has explored Ronnie Govender's novel, *Song of the Atman,* through the lens of diaspora theory in contemporary cultural scholarship. The primary objective was to examine how the novel's diasporic aesthetics illuminate the interplay between traditions and modernity. Initially, the term diaspora was contextualized from its original usage, which specifically referred to the dispersal of the Jews, to its broader contemporary meaning encompassing all communities dispersed from their original homelands. The South Asian diasporic community was then analyzed through four major

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migration patterns, including Asian traders, indentured labourers, Indian professionals and civil servants, and asylum seekers fleeing political and religious violence.

Subsequently, this research delved into an exploration of the aesthetic manifestations of traditions and modernities within Govender's novel. In the South African context depicted in the novel, the South Asian diaspora expresses its traditions through various forms, utilizing literature as a means of imagination and cultural preservation. These manifestations include religious expressions rooted in Hinduism, cultural rituals, marriage rites, and the preservation of patriarchal family structures. Conversely, modernities are portrayed through pursuits such as formal education, modern careers, the adoption of Western religious practices, and empirical research into existing bodies of knowledge.

Through this analysis, Govender's work emerges as a rich text that not only portrays the complexities of diasporic identity but also serves as a reflection of broader socio-cultural dynamics. It underscores how diasporic communities negotiate their cultural heritage with the pressures and opportunities of contemporary globalized contexts. By examining these themes within *Song of the Atman*, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how diaspora literature can illuminate and critique the intersections of tradition and modernity in diasporic experiences.

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