

Feuding couple follows the diaspora to Durban¹

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South Africa's Indian community is the largest of the Indian diaspora, as Imraan Coovadia points out, yet it has been written about too little. This is partly the result of an early determination in the two numerically dominant groups, black and white, to regard Indians as temporary sojourners, while exploiting their agricultural skills in the sugar industry and their commercial savvy in the development of commerce. Partly, too, though to a lesser extent, the community itself has been reticent about its lifestyle, history and achievements.

Indian life in Durban occupies half of Coovadia's first novel, *The Wedding*², of which the overall subject is what inspires Indians to leave their native land, and what becomes of them when they settle in a community of the diaspora.

Khateja, the heroine, who has grown up in a village, has refused the locals who have offered to marry her and has become a kind of Katherina the Shrew, whom her family cannot wait to get rid of. Like her literary ancestor, she has become fixed in rejection of everything her relatives offer her – not that they offer much. When Ismet, a clerk from Bombay, asks for her hand, she gives in to pressure and marries him, insisting that the marriage will never be consummated.

Unconsummated it remains for years, although the two continue in uneasy co-existence. The narrator, who has declared himself their grandson on the first page, is amused by the placatory husband and shrewish wife, and his voice is a reminder to the reader that this mad marriage will change. This tone, which controls our reactions throughout, has earlier allowed us to understand that Khateja's father Yusuf Haveri, for example, is a selfish and hypocritical little man, and that village family life is a long battle of words. At the same time, from the narrator's remove of time, more than 80 years later, it is a great joke. The conflict between Khateja and her mother-in-law in Bombay is equally a battle of wits in which the antagonists are equal, and of energy, where the youthful Khateja has the upper hand. For Ismet, his women-folk's

conflict is intolerable, and leads him to emigrate with his wife to South Africa, where, he knows their relationship must change, they must prosper and life must be new and wonderful. Ismet and Kateja, themselves Muslims, settle in Durban in the 1920s, and discover – as did many of their people – that the Indian community is too small, and their own social needs without family too great, to discriminate between Hindu and Muslim in their friendships. The grandson who tells their story confines himself to the Durban they can know: Aliwal Street, Grey Street, the city centre, Wills Road – where their house is eventually expropriated by the Durban city council – and Reservoir Hills, where they spend their old age. The heat and confinement in which they live, the shops, the trade goods on sale and the language of Indian Durban will be recognised by many people. Guest appearances are made by stars of South African political history. It is impossible to avoid comparing Coovadia's novel with Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, not only because of the comic and at times ironic tones of the narrator, but because *The Wedding* offers an exemplary history of Indian identity, although in this case it is diasporic Indian.

Ismet, who might have remained patient and enduring, a Bombay clerk for the rest of his life, is spurred on by Khatefa's discontent to find a newly assertive self in the commerce of a new city. Khateja, embittered by the emptiness of her life, fights her way towards a viable marital relationship, although her attempt to reach a different lifestyle (in the Communist Party) fails because the leaders fear her vehemence. It is Khateja and her unfocused anger, and the fact that in the pre-feminist days of her youth her ability to transform her life and her husband's is limited, which interest Coovadia. The ending is suitably post-colonial, and hints that once a family has left the motherland there can be no sense of home that is necessarily permanent. *The Wedding* is more than a good read: it is a memorable piece of fictional history.

¹ This review first appeared in *The Sunday Independent*, 7 April 2002, and is published with the permission of the author (ed).

² Coovadia, Imraan. 2002. *The Wedding*. Picador: New York, USA.