

### The making and staging of Coloured identity

**M. Adhikari (ed.), *Burdened by Race: Coloured Identities in Southern Africa***

UCT Press, Cape Town, 2009

240 pp

ISBN 978-1-91989-514-7

R250.00

The title of Mohamed Adhikari's edited collection foregrounds the salience of race in identity construction in the southern African context. In the case of coloured identity, however, the usual opposition of black-white becomes complicated by what Grant Farred calls "the problematic of the middle". Farred argues that "the interstices is a precarious, embattled, under- and (frequently) unrecognised space", one in which the privileging of primary opposition "overwrites (and undermines) the struggles of groups whose racial identity is more vexed and complicated".<sup>6</sup> This book considers the individuals who occupy this space as well as the ambiguities, contradictions and contestations associated with this position.

This is a valuable contribution to the literature on an identity that continues to be susceptible to marginalisation in post-apartheid South Africa. It is also both a useful resource for scholars engaged in research in this field and accessible enough to appeal to potential readers beyond academia. The chapters explore the ways in which coloured identity has developed in the region, with six of the nine chapters focusing on South Africa, and one chapter each on Zimbabwe, Zambia and Nyasaland (Malawi) from 1929–1940. The challenge that is presented in this text is to understand how and why coloured identities emerged, and how they have evolved over time.

Adhikari provides a comprehensive introduction in which he contextualises coloured identity in southern Africa. He emphasises how the status of marginality – both in terms of small numbers and lack of political or economic power – has influenced the development of coloured identity and how variables such as place, class and ideology have influenced and informed the expression of this identity. He provides a useful overview of each chapter, highlighting important trends and themes, and identifies potential areas for future research. What emerges from these debates is the dynamic nature of the field. This book is an important contribution to an ongoing scholarly conversation on the topic.

In the first chapter, entitled "From narratives of miscegenation to post-modernist re-imagining: Towards a historiography of coloured identity in South Africa", Adhikari offers an informative and thoughtful discussion of coloured identity by tracing the trajectory of its historical development. He identifies four approaches that have been used to describe its development: essentialism, instrumentalism, social constructionism, and creolisation. Adhikari himself favours a social constructionist theory of coloured identity because he feels that both the essentialist and the instrumentalist approaches do not sufficiently take into account the complexities of the identity. He is unfortunately quite dismissive of the instrumentalist view, describing it as a "spurious but politically useful rejectionist claim" (p 5) and arguing that the "fatuousness" of this position was made evident by the retention of power by the National Party in the Western Cape in

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6. G. Farred, *Midfielder's Moment: Coloured Literature and Culture in Contemporary South Africa* (Westview, Boulder, 2000), p 1.

1994. It seems to me that his critique in this regard is too harsh, and that this position to a large extent entailed a refusal of the insidious internalisation of racism, whose effects Aime Césaire poignantly describes where he says, “I am talking of millions of men who have been skilfully injected with fear, inferiority complexes, trepidation, servility, despair, abasement”.<sup>7</sup> Given the context within which this position developed, I feel that a more sensitive consideration of this perspective may have been more appropriate.

The next chapter, by Helene Strauss, is an insightful and perceptive application of the theoretical framework of creolisation (using Chris van Wyk’s *Shirley, Goodness and Mercy*) to understanding coloured identity. Adikhari correctly identifies this approach as one which could provide a useful avenue for future research into coloured identity, as creolisation theory offers an astute perspective into the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in coloured identity formation. Invoking Caribbean theories of *how* creolisation occurs, Strauss uses Stuart Hall’s definition of creolisation as one which emphasises “the hybridity of cultures rather than the impurity of breeding and miscegenation” (p 28). Creolisation theory offers a perspective on identity formation that considers how identities are constituted in the light of differences – such as cultural, social, linguistic – and how these identities are negotiated in situations of domination and conflict.

Chapters three and four deal with forced removals in the context of District Six. Both chapters offer an account of the crucial role that memory plays in the construction of coloured identity. In chapter three, Henry Trotter offers a sensitive and nuanced analysis of how the trauma of forced removals, along with relocation to specific geographic areas that were designated exclusively coloured (in opposition to the more racially diverse District Six), created a “narrative community” among coloured residents. He suggests that the ways in which they remember their past can be understood as a “commemoration narrative”, one in which the idealised recollections “help answer the deep emotional need of people who have suffered the trauma of evictions to grieve and come to terms with their loss” (p 62). A different perspective of how trauma shapes memory is presented by Christiaan Beyers (chapter four), who argues that coloured memories of District Six have constructed “partial characterisations” of their past that privilege a nostalgic, coloured-centric, socially exclusionary history of District Six. Beyers raises an important issue, namely that the narratives of District Six may constitute it as an essentially coloured space, so that other voices (Indians, Jews, whites, and particularly black Africans) are elided. He offers a reading of Richard Rive’s *Buckingham Palace* that illustrates this coloured-centric perspective and juxtaposes it with a fascinating reading of Nomvuyo Ngcelwane’s *Sala Kable District Six*.

The ambivalence of coloured identity is aptly illustrated in the next two chapters, which focus on the ambiguities and complexities of coloured identity in the post-apartheid era. In chapter five, Michelle Ruiters provides an excellent analysis of why coloured identity expresses itself in particular ways in the post-apartheid era, a context in which identity discourse is still structured around racial difference, because “South Africans resist a universal citizenship and continuously refer to people as coloured, black African and white” (p 114). Michael Besten (chapter six) explores a different strand in the narrative of coloured identity construction in his explanation of the revival of Khoer-San identity in post-apartheid South Africa. He provides a useful historical background to this identity and how it relates to coloured identity. He ties the revival of Khoer-San identity in the post-apartheid era to the desire for potential material benefits, particularly

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7. A. Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* (Monthly Review Press, New York and London, 1972), p 7.

that of restitution in the form of land. He also suggests that it may indicate the search for an identity whose social and psychological needs could not be met by coloured identity.

The last three chapters demonstrate different trajectories in coloured identity formation through a consideration of coloured identity in three other southern African countries: Zimbabwe, Zambia and Nyasaland (Malawi). In the case of Zimbabwe, James Muzondidya shows that the emergence of a distinct coloured identity entailed both collaboration and resistance, and that its relation to other black identities was complex, insights that are relevant to the South African context as well. Juliette Milner-Thornton argues that in the case of Zambia, it was specifically colonial sexual relations – the legacy of British colonialism – that created Zambia’s coloured communities. In the final chapter, Christopher Lee demonstrates that the construction of identity is always located within specific spatial and temporal contexts. He argues that the way in which coloured identity emerged in colonial Nyasaland must be seen within the context of contending perspectives and interests, because identity formation is dependent on local contexts and the ways in which these contexts intersect with the broader social milieu. For example, in Nyasaland, the way in which coloured identity developed was contingent on a political environment that favoured an ethnic, rather than a racial, option for rule, in which a “dual mandate” system of governance was proposed between African and British officials. The first-generation of Nyasaland Anglo-Africans therefore had to negotiate an identity in an environment in which they “were marginal to black and white interests alike” (p 215). That coloured identity has developed in a considerably different way in Malawi to that of South Africa and Zimbabwe similarly emphasises the significance of local conditions in the formation of that identity.

In her chapter on coloured identity in post-apartheid South Africa, Michelle Ruiters stresses the heterogeneity of coloured identity: that it is “multiple, fluid, hybrid”, as opposed to the homogenous way in which it has been presented in the past, “as if a stereotypical ‘Cape coloured’ identity existed” (p 112). This book skilfully demonstrates that complexity and produces a text that both complicates and enriches our understanding of coloured identity in the regions under discussion.

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