

# A Decolonial Reading of Ronnie Govender's "Over My Dead Body"

**Rajendra Chetty**

## Summary

This article discusses the contribution of Ronnie Govender, a South African writer, to build decolonial sensibilities and delink from the grand narrative of the colonial literary landscape in the short story "Over My Dead Body". Govender uses the world of art to make a decolonial statement. Decolonial artists work in the entanglement of power and engage with a border epistemology, those in the margins, the wretched of the earth. "Over My Dead Body" foregrounds the wounds infringed by racism, a pillar of Eurocentric knowing, sensing and believing that sustains a structure of knowledge. This structure is embedded in characters, institutions and languages that regulate and manage the world of the excluded. Healing is the process of delinking, or regaining pride, dignity, and humanity. The legacies of the community of Cato Manor that was pushed out of their land are built in Govender's stories. Decoloniality then is a concept that carries the experience of liberation struggles and recognises the strenuous conditions of marginalised people together with their strength, wisdom, and endurance. The body invoked by decolonial thinkers like Fanon and Biko is a black body, a racialised and humiliated body.

## Opsomming

Hierdie artikel bespreek die Suid-Afrikaanse skrywer Ronnie Govender se bydrae tot groter dekoloniale ontvanklikheid en losmaking van die dominante mentaliteit van die koloniale literêre landskap in die kortverhaal "Over My Dead Body". Govender gebruik die kunstewêreld om 'n dekoloniale bewering te maak. Dekoloniale kunstenaars kry te doen met magsversperrings en is betrokke by 'n randepistemologie, by die gemarginaliseerdes, die armsaliges van die wêreld. "Over My Dead Body" handel oor die wonde wat mense weens rassisme opdoen. Rassisme is 'n steunpilaar van Eurosentriese kennis, gevoelens en oortuigings wat 'n bepaalde kennisstruktuur ondersteun. Hierdie struktuur is vasgelê in die karakters, instellings en tale wat die wêreld van gemarginaliseerdes reguleer en beheer. Losmaking of die herwinning van die eie trots, waardigheid en menslikheid lei tot heling. Die nalatenskap van bewoners van Cato Manor wat van hulle grond afgesit is, vind neerslag in Govender se werk. Die konsep van dekolonialiteit dra die belewenisse van diegene wat vir vryheid gestry het, en erken die moeilike omstandighede waarin die gemarginaliseerdes krag, wysheid en uithou vermoë getoon het. Die liggaam wat dekoloniale denkers soos Fanon en Biko oproep, is 'n swart liggaam, 'n veragte en vernederde liggaam.

“Over My Dead Body”, a tale in *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories* (1996), tells of the main character Thunga’s fight against the threat of forced removal from Cato Manor during the apartheid era. Using Mignolo’s (2017) thinking on decoloniality, specifically the concepts racism and xenophobia, I attempt to view how decoloniality was conceived and enacted in Govender’s short story. The xenophobia against the Indians by the Afrikaner is ironical, because both are immigrants and refugees; African people like the Khoisan and Bantu were on the land when Dutch immigrants arrived. Unlike Indians, the Dutch arrived without invitation and passport and took over the land. Central to “Over My Dead Body” is the memories of dispossession and discontent that would not be forgotten in the hearts and minds of the victims. Govender remembers the dead of Cato Manor: those deceased and those dispossessed. The wronged are redeemed in the text as short story, and revived and embodied as performance on stage (Chetty 2017: 38), what Mignolo refers to as their reclaiming the land and dignity that belongs to them; their affirmation of their own humanity; and their confronting the barbarism of “Western humanism”, which made them lesser humans (2017: 6). Decoloniality is a project that strives to humanise people who were dehumanised through disrupting the hegemonic narrative that viewed them as barbarians because of skin colour, language, nationality and religion.

Govender departs from an embodied consciousness of the colonial wound and moves toward healing. Border thinking and doing (artistic creativity) is precisely the decolonial methodology posited by Linda Smith (1999) where theory comes in the form of storytelling. Govender’s unique performative prose reconstructs and resurrects the lives of the people of Cato Manor, their vitality and humor, pain and humiliation: a vibrant and racially integrated community destroyed by apartheid’s notorious racial laws. The forced removal of Indians from Cato Manor during the 1960s is less well known than those of District Six and Sophiatown. Many Indians, who had lived there in a multiracial and multicultural milieu, resisted, and Thunga’s story is one of the rare representations of the dispossession of the Cato Manor community. Although he has a heart attack under the stress of his fight and dies, Thunga does not leave his home: his spirit and those of many others remain in the community he loved so dearly. The complexity of Thunga’s resistance, his tragedy and ethical victory, is contained in the short story. In his autobiography, *In the Manure*, Govender describes the despair caused by forced removals, capturing the particular desperation of Thunga and his people generally:

Some old residents, unable to come to terms with enforced separation from their beloved hearth and home, committed suicide, if not physically, then certainly in spirit. This was a close-knit community, united in the face of adversity, somehow surviving in harsh conditions now facing extinction. (2008: 89)

The specific tale of Thunga is iconographic of the South African Indian community generally; it represents the injustice meted out to them on racial grounds and their final victory in ethical terms. Their stance is Gandhian in that they outfaced colonial and apartheid racial oppression by means of lawful and moral resistance. "Over My Dead Body" holds in tension the opposing forces of good and evil, right and wrong, life and death and coloniser and colonised. The tale reflects the pain and joy of Indian life in Natal: the beauty and happiness they created, and the suffering imposed on them by a repressive dispensation. In Thunga's nostalgic memory of Cato Manor, the sweetness of community and togetherness render the remembered landscape paradisaic. Thunga recalls the fruit trees, vegetable gardens and beauty, the plenty that was once that happy place, that *locus amoenus*, of his growing up. The memory is still traumatic since all those gardens were destroyed and those devoted gardeners figuratively bulldozed away in the name of the Group Areas Act. Govender is still traumatised by those memories and the place is still haunted by the violence of injustice. The Edenic world of sub-tropical delights, community and security are warm in his heart but so is the misery of forced removal. He longs for that place of harmony and love just as he fights against the anger within him. The mixed nature of this torment is emblematic of the Indian experience of Africa: a paradise for some but a place of exile and exclusion for many. Govender, in his autobiography, captures this romantic longing for the beauty of South Africa:

The picture of his grandfather's market garden in Cato Manor remains vivid in Sathie's memory – dead-straight rows of lush lettuce, beetroot, carrots, dhanias and other vegetables, freshly watered and glistening in the ever-present sunlight. The garden, dotted with mango trees and paw-paw, was hedged in on either side by the prolific granadilla vine, loaded with fruit, and the equally prolific double-bean creeper. Despite his mother's constant admonishments that the deadly green mamba camouflaged itself easily in the granadilla plant's deeply-layered greenness, he couldn't resist fingering the fruit as it emerged from its striking purple-centred flower to ripen into a purplish blue. (Govender 2008: 32)

The heavenly elements are replete: fullness is marred only by the serpent's dangerous proximity; the serpent here of course being a metonymy for the colonial government. Govender's disregard for danger is equally obvious in this passage; the loss of his eye is proof of such attitudes, as is his pugilistic attitude to authoritarianism and mindless conformity generally. But the memory of that little Eden stays in his soul as a psychic pattern of how life, even in poverty, can be transformed into sweetness by the harmony of community. This knowledge informs his socialist stance. The portrayal of injustice, representation of beauty and delineation of pain are similar to more well known accounts of colonial violence across the country. Richard Rive

deals with the topic in *Buckingham Palace, District Six* (1986), drawing on the same recollection of racial harmony and community living. Don Mattera mourns the loss of Sophiatown, Johannesburg, in *Gone with the Twilight: A Story of Sophiatown* (1987) as well as in his autobiography *Memory is the Weapon* (1987). Govender situates his tale within this territory of protest, regret and graphic depiction. What separates Govender's recollection from others is the fact that District Six and Sophiatown were well known and recognised by liberal sympathisers both within South Africa and overseas. But Cato Manor was not accorded the same degree of sympathy or recognition as a site of inhuman treatment. The decolonial turn encourages the shift of stories from the fringe to the centre. There remains a pall of silence surrounding South African Indian literature as well as suffering. Whereas other communities were granted a degree of recognition, failure to acknowledge inhuman treatment of the sugar slaves is of particular concern. The concealment of wrong doubles the injustice and makes Cato Manor a site of graver iniquity than others. Reasons for silence, silencing, neglect and concealment apply to various attitudes towards a group of immigrants who contributed to the struggle for equality: first against British imperialism with Gandhi as leader and later against apartheid as liberation activists like Fatima Meer, Phyllis Naidoo and Kesaveloo Goonam.

Frequently, government agencies tried to cover up the humiliation and upheaval they caused by pretending that they were engaged in slum clearance for reasons of public hygiene. This propaganda is exposed by a much-neglected detail of devious racist administration which was used as a mechanism to displace Indians. The same mechanism surfaced in Palestine for an identical purpose. Lavie (2011) points out that Israel regularly prevents Palestinian residents from performing routine maintenance on their homes. In Clairwood, Durban, the same restrictions are documented (Pather 2015). The restriction of necessary repairs may seem innocuous at first sight, yet this administrative detail signifies that white authority in Durban or Jewish powers in Palestine deliberately set out to create slum conditions by preventing domestic repairs. Artificial creation of a slum suits racist agendas because once a slum is created (by encouraging dilapidation) then slum clearance can be stated as essential for matters of hygiene and social welfare. Preventing repair demonstrates incontrovertibly a racist intention and proves the bias towards social engineering from a hegemonic perspective. Consultation or open discussion is replaced by forced implementation of racist priorities to suit a minority intent on overpowering and feeding off a majority. That such prevention of repair occurred in places like Clairwood negates any attempt to gloss over forced removals as necessary for improved housing conditions: a case sometimes made even by liberal scholars.

The Slums Act was devised in 1934 and applied nationally. The policies were applied piecemeal and in more pragmatic ways than might be imagined. The

poor moreover did not disappear and the housing question was not possible to solve through such measures. (Freund 1993: 9)

Before considering the text of “Over my Dead Body”, it is necessary to examine some of the key phases of forced removals and anti-Indian attitudes in Durban: from the anti-slum legislation of the 1930s to the pegging laws of the 1940s to the Group Areas Act under apartheid. The intensity of control and cruelty involved increased from one decade to the next. During the 1940s, measures aimed at containing so-called Indian penetration: the Pegging Acts of 1942-1943 and the Ghetto Act of 1946 became a major focus of Indian community activism. The penetration scare particularly involved middle class housing on the lower slope of the Berea above the Indian business core in Durban into which some Indian families were moving; resistance to it focussed on racism and property rights. As late as 1953, an indignant Greyville Indian Ratepayers Association wrote that

under guise of providing housing for the homeless Indians, the Council seems to be working hand-in-hand with the Government to clear Durban of all non-whites and make it a wholly white area. The environment was one of intensified white racism. (Freund 1993: 12)

Far too little is made of the institutional hatred towards Indians in Natal which Freund documents. By contrast, forgiveness of such wrongs amongst Indians is significant. How else can it be explained that the names of Sophiatown or District Six are seared on the national consciousness as sites of injustice yet what happened in Cato Manor and many other areas of Durban such as Stellawood and Riverside remain relatively unknown? Even in scholarly commentary on Govender's work, the underlying evils of forced removal are far too seldom remarked upon.

The Cape Town City Council was openly opposed to “clearing” District Six. Their public opposition meant that the removals, when they finally did occur, became national news. The Durban Corporation, however, was the most solidly English-speaking, yet it had no such qualms about “clearing” out Indian residents. English speakers often prided themselves on not being Nationalists (in terms of Afrikaner Nationalism) yet Durban racism amongst English speakers, the very people who had encouraged Indians to work in Natal, and who had benefitted so greatly from Indian labour at all levels, was far more blatant, at least during this period, than racism in Cape Town. Durban's English-speaking racists allegedly colluded with the Afrikaner government to keep forced removals quiet in areas such as Cato Manor; in contrast to public outrage in Cape Town about removals in District Six (Freund 1993: 3-4).

Far too often the extent of the evil undertaken by Pretoria's Nationalist Government is ignored as far as Indians are concerned. Silence has exacerbated the vast damage done in all the major financial, social and

religious areas of South African Indian society. While officials thought that they were engaged in the noble art of slum clearance and urban beautification and refused to consider the racist implications of the form this was taking, their anti-Group Areas antagonists emphasised the racist aspects of the reconstruction of the city and ignored the problem of slum clearance. Not only did they not comprehend the bureaucrat's urban vision, but they also did not really reflect the housing needs of many poor Durban residents (Freund 1993: 3).

Moving such carefully created large family units away from "home" areas such as Cato Manor by force was far more devastating to Indian community life than it would have been for small family units of whites. Fatima Meer explains in detail the importance of *kutum* (what Europeans have come to call extended family) in Indian family structures:

Irrespective of the composition of his (or her) immediate household (nuclear or otherwise), the average Indian is firmly rooted to his (or her) *kutum*. His *kutum* consists of all those with whom he (or she) can trace consanguinity through a common paternal grandfather or grandfather's brother. (Meer 1969: 66)

Bureaucrats showed no awareness of, or regard for, the centrality of larger family life amongst Indians and even less sensitivity about breaking them up. Thunga in "Over My Dead Body" laments the loss of a traditional way of life. Heads of family watch the destruction of a community and the unique *kutum* way of living. Demonstrably then, Govender's text cannot be anatomised in isolation. The background concerns of slum laws, Pegging Acts and the Group Areas Act are an inseparable part of his writing. Govender's pain reflects the pain of the thousands that have been dispossessed and relocated by such laws. His exposure of injustice contributed significantly to public refutation of such legislation. His writing is not simply a record of wrong: it invalidates the legal standing of white-on-Indian legislation. To indict the minority parliament which pretended to be a democracy and a Christian state, Govender cites the words of the tycoon Abe Bailey. The irony of a millionaire who made his money off the backs of white supremacy, who retired to his mansion in St James (Cape Town) with a yacht moored in Kalk Bay, and wished to have all Indians shot, is sharp: "Abe Bailey had said in parliament that he was prepared to shoot 'every damn coolie on sight'. Yet, even they would not destroy an entire district, surely!" (Govender 1996: 128) Sir Abraham Bailey, as a member of the Jewish community, should have known better than to lose sympathy with the plight of those who had little and lived in exile. Considering the enormities of the holocaust that millions of his fellow Jews faced with the racist hatred of the Nazis, there is a terrible prospective irony in his parliamentary rhetoric against Indians.

The elaborate structures of rhetoric play an important and telling role in "Over My Dead Body". The opening lines tell of Thunga's apparent admi-

ration for what he regards as Ismail Khan's "impressive phrases" spoken in the Mayville Theatre in remonstrance against proposed evictions of Indian residents in Cato Manor. Govender gently mocks the rising force of Khan's showy expressions: "It was hot and stuffy in the Mayville Theatre, but the speaker rose to even greater heights" (128). The heat and stuffiness of the venue speaks in fact of the hot air of the speaker. His clichés and empty flourishes betray a speaker intent on public favour, bursts of applause, rather than the reality of personal sacrifice. Thunga, by contrast, is committed to the ground of Cato Manor and the family he brought up there. The raising of his family on Cato Manor soil has invested the ground with his identity. There is also a spiritual transfer which sanctifies the place. It is a meagre claim after all. All he asks for is what he has earned: a wood and iron house on a plot of land which was once swampy but made fertile and beautiful by hard labour and love. The house there is his home.

Thunga reacts, not with the rhetorical emptiness of Khan, but as the sort of patriarch that Meer describes above. The sanctity of family life in a particularly rich and culturally inscribed way, is what the white government chooses to ignore and bulldoze. Because Thunga's demands are so modest and righteous, the outrage against them is much graver. Nor does Govender's text of protest exist in a capsule and function only as protest against that time. Disregard for human dignity is shown to be dangerous and applies widely to regrettable yet persistent habits of racist and xenophobic behaviour as witnessed today in South Africa as much as in Europe and America. Govender's anatomy of racism even in these first lines is so precise that it functions outside its immediate context of anti-apartheid protest writing only.

The ironies that interflow in the speeches of Khan and Bailey expose the emptiness and danger of particular rhetorical modes. In contrast to Khan's loud mouthings is Thunga's plain speech; heart-felt musings as he begins to grasp what lies ahead: "Thunga was angry and bitter. They'll take away my home ... over my dead body. This is my home and I built it. God knows how I struggled. Over my dead body!" (128)

In contrast to Thunga's succinct and powerful words is an anxious sycophantism in Bailey's voice as if he tries to earn Anglo-Saxon approval by denouncing Indians. Such devious protestations or the vacuous rhetorical flourishes of Khan's oratory are replaced by the plain speech of everyman which Govender reveres and encodes in his plays and prose works. Govender mocks euphemism or false gentility by calling his autobiography *In the Manure* instead of its more obvious form. The nature of plain speech has been investigated rhetorically, as in Cordelia's plain speech of *King Lear* contrasted to the false panegyrics and protestations of love from Goneril and Regan. In Govender, his reliance on the ordinary language of life is tied to his early belief and practice on stage. In his breakthrough use of Indian patois and departure from Eurocentric theatre conventions he invokes the speech of

everyman as a democratic criterion. His political defiance is linked to a theatrical tradition of realism and all that that rhetorical structure implies.

Politically, Govender's reliance on plain speech invokes a socialist outlook which has strong links to the liberation struggle of the ANC, the IRA and the PLO. Cuba, Palestine and Ireland are countries that pertain to his desire for a liberal order of plain living.

Most deeply, the tragedy of Thunga's death at the end recalls the lives lost in colonial struggle across the world over centuries. Govender's use of common speech expression relates Thunga to struggle heroes and martyrs of tyranny in South Africa and around the globe, universally. Rhetorical conventions become dense and meaningful within the space of some five opening paragraphs. Freund's (1993) lucid explication of social conditions and the effects on the old man he interviewed function as historical intertexts to Thunga's defence of *kutum* and defiance of settler inhumanity committed by apparently civilised Western Christians. Govender's systematic destruction of this facade of culture and false humanity is as dogged and effective in words as the bulldozers that bring down the unpretentious facade of Thunga's family home. Govender's "story" is not a narrative innocent of political or social-rhetorical intention: it is an intricate and precisely crafted denunciation of Western hubris. It acts as a warning to the Global North pride in today's political environment as much as that of the apartheid era.

When Govender tells us that "Thunga had no clear political objectives" the statement rebounds on the apparent "innocence" of the writer. The appearance of being apolitical is contradicted by the profound political and social commitment of Thunga as head of family, father, husband, lover, citizen, and labourer. Thunga lacks any wordy party political manifesto yet he is deeply political in Govender's sense of the word: he is a responsible citizen – the Platonic ideal which Govender endorses consistently. For this reason, Govender does not idealise Thunga. He is intent to present a credible and mature member of society. Thunga wanted to be a lawyer but could not afford the fees. Again, Govender's text is a fiery indictment of inequality. Whereas privileged whites were being trained up as the master race of the country, enabled by government bursaries and parents' superior employment (entrenched by statutory job reservation) to gain tertiary education and the pick of top posts, non-whites were openly kept back to serve the white ruler-class. Thunga reflects Govender's own struggle against such class structure. The "story" in this sense is no longer an amusing tale or diverting recollection of coolie life but a text interfused with memories of a traumatic and oppressive past felt at the heart of author and narrative protagonist.

Consistent with his political and socialist investment of plain speech, as well as numerous of his stage characters, not to mention his own biographically observed "self", Govender portrays Thunga with fastidious attention to detail. Thunga, though not able to become a lawyer himself, became a type of Jaggars, a Dickensian street lawyer, in some ways more capable and effective



than the courtroom orator. Again, distinctions of rhetorical convention characterise this narrative and its various trajectories. Govender describes a young male teacher who has been caught with a white prostitute. The woe-begone youth, facing the extinction of his career and future, comes to Thunga because he has been told that Thunga may be “better than the lawyers”. In this comment, Govender is at work dismantling the facade of the house of Christian democracy brick by brick. Although he and Thunga may have been denied university training, their own wits have served them well enough to attract customers ahead of their university-trained counterparts. Nor does Govender the storyteller fall into the easy trap of presenting him-self/Thunga as saintly do-gooder. Thunga unashamedly eyes the young teacher as a source of ready cash: “Ah, this looks promising; he looks like he needs help badly and he seems reasonably well-off” (129). Govender describes the gormless teacher as “quarry”. Thunga does help the young man but in the plain street terms of common life that Govender reveres. He bribes the white “good-time” girl of the honey-trap to leave town for a hundred pounds. The case was dropped, because the complainant did not appear. Thunga took another hundred pounds for his own troubles and the magistrate took the last hundred. The world Govender revels in and believes in, is what he presents with relish on stage; it is not the pretence of country clubs and phoney accents. He begs his reader/audience to step out of the coach and into the street or, if in the street already, not to dream of the coach but live the life of the street: bribery, prostitution, human urges for sex, lies, and the lot.

Govender’s own love of sport trickles into Thunga “the first rate sports administrator”, the honorary treasurer of Mayville Football association, whose account books have mysteriously vanished, apparently in a robbery. In his defence of his probity as football official, Thunga recalls the words of Khan in his great Mayville Theatre speech: “Does he want to make me a pariah in the land of my birth with its multitude of natural resources and inspiring beauty?” (133). This collocation of rhetorical flourish in the context of the Mayville Football Association appositely defines so much political protestation as no more than verbiage and hot air. Thunga, in recalling the empty phrases, proves himself an astute streetfighter. Govender suggests that Thunga, and many others like him, possibly Govender himself, have been obliged by circumstance to play out awkward social roles in racist South Africa’s *danse macabre*. The distinction is that Thunga is conscious of the role he is forced to play by dint of not being allowed education. Thunga appropriates loud-sounding words and phrases in an opportunist, street-savvy, hyperbolic way because he has to: not because he has become that other person.

Govender draws a fine line here just as he does with Mothi’s dance before the lahnee. In *The Lahnee’s Pleasure*, Mothi is dancing and singing for the lahnee but also laughing at the swagger of the lahnee for underestimating the Indian’s intelligence. Thunga, when defending his own people, the Ram-

kissoons, has to dance before the lahnee, the City Treasurer. He has to play the part of the coolie lawyer, unqualified, grovelling. But he does not become that other Thunga which the white man wants to see. Again, Thunga, like Mothi, is playing to the white man's weakest suit: his pompous arrogance. In one of the great moments of Govender's work, within the minute range of the short story, he intimates this hair-line break between appearance and reality, social persona and private self-kept whole. Mr Johnstone is the city official who listens to Thunga pleading for a reprieve for the Ramkissoons. In a moment of genius, Govender describes how "Mr Johnstone thought he knew Thunga's type well": "The oily smile, the fawning tone ... you just had to hand it to these coolies. They just refused to lie down quietly and die, or better still, go back to India." (134)

The words "thought he knew" convey exquisitely the slip between white assumption and Indian reality. The moment is as memorable as anything in Forster's *Passage to India* (1985) in which white assumptions and prejudice are juxtaposed with Indian probity. The person whites assume Aziz to be, what they think they know about him and his kind, is utterly confounded. The revealing three words "thought he knew" spells a great deal about white arrogance, ignorance and downfall. Thunga dances the dance of the oily, fawning lawyer yet retains his own sovereignty despite the obsequious persona whites such as Mr Johnstone love to hate. The desire to have brown people pander to them is a significant weakness in the imperial white male officer-persona. Ronnie Heaslop in *A Passage to India* changes before his fiancée's eyes into the colonial bully. He acquires the desire for obeisance that Johnstone and the lahnee foolishly enjoy, unable to suspect the independence of the oriental dancer/actor laughing and lurking behind the mask of the subaltern.

"Over My Dead Body" begins with the hot air of Khan's speechifying. To win at his Football Association meeting, Thunga even stole some of the choice phrases from Khan's speech. Govender uses this intratextual mockery to remind his reader of the sober boundaries of his own belief system: plain living and plain speech. The Thunga who existed before the proclamation of Cato Manor as a white zone is a dramatically altered Thunga from the fearless old man who emerges later. He no longer has to play his part at the white man's table in order to sustain his family and community. All that he toiled for is going to be removed anyway. So Thunga can speak out plainly: "He did not prepare his speeches. They did not contain impressive phrases or pompous clichés. They were simple and came from the heart." (136)

A certain fatalism has liberated Thunga from the charade of life under white rule. The language of plain speech is that of the author, the people's friend. It is a statement too of the Indian community, exhausted, trying and not prepared to give up or go back to India, a place they no longer know. Thunga's speech defies all the analysis of statistics, the arguments, the demeaning legislation, the nasty tricks of disempowerment:

We have built our homes, our schools, our temples, our mosques and our churches with love and hard work. It is wrong for the government, in which we have no say, to take from us what is legally ours. This is legalised robbery. Will you allow a stranger to come into your house and to take over, to throw you out? Let us not be afraid. God is on our side, for our side is the side of truth. Stand up for your rights. Let us be united in our resistance. They can act against one or two, but they cannot act against an entire district. (136)

Thunga's words match his thoughts and being, they are weighted with meaning and feeling. In the child-like statement of wrong-doing, the words put the clever contrivances and distortions of bureaucracy to shame. The rhetoric of white propaganda lies about slum clearance and removal of so many family homes, the outrages – all are exposed at last by simple truth: legalised robbery.

The end to this short story closes the anthology of Cato Manor stories as a whole so it has to serve as a conclusion to the whole tale of Cato Manor, the memory of close-knit family life and happiness. Thunga, as Thunga, cannot leave Cato Manor any more than Govender can. The associated *locus amoenus*, that place of happiness, is so closely guarded in his heart that Thunga stays on to his end. He is with Cato Manor to the end.

Thunga walked out of the house. That evening he sat alone on the veranda, looking out onto the garden. There was a solitary white rose, speckled with worm holes. Thunga got up to cut it to adorn the shrine in his bedroom. He bent over and the pain shot through his chest. He collapsed in a heap. (139)

Thunga's ravaged body, like the worm-eaten rose, may perish, but his essence, a metonymy for South African Indians, remains in the memories of the community; the story of Thunga is immortalised in Govender's story and in the collective psyche of the community. This conclusion is very close in tranquillity and mood to the close of Poobathie's tale, the first of the collection. After the storm there is a calm and reconciliation to a higher order. Just as goodness was equated gently with godliness in Vellamma's astral world, so now the good man is raised spiritually in his mortal fall. The play-acting, false rhetoric of survival has fallen with the mortal body in a heap of dust, but the valiant spirit remains in Cato Manor. The white rose, not idealised in occidental terms of romantic chivalry, but worm-eaten, intimates still a higher plane, a state to which Thunga has been raised: not an idealised bloom but a good one and a brave one and one that is Govender's measure of greatness. This reconcilment and balance are a rewarding close to a noteworthy story and an enduring testimony to a resilient community whose values remain at the heart of a nation's testing ground: to rise above petty jealousies and unfair scheming, to build and share together.

Thunga is shown eventually to be what he really is: a generous, kind head of family who supports and succours his wife and children and wider

community. He is the good citizen; described with flaws and follies but a man who loves his family, home and community. Govender carefully withholds this final paean until he has shown the streetfighter in his unvarnished day-to-day survival. Only when Thunga has bribed magistrates and smarmily flattered white officials can Govender safely show the human being whom he admires. Within the restraints of a short story this depth and conviction of characterisation are remarkable. At the very point of his glory, being the patriarch, homemaker, philanthropist, Thunga is struck down with the summary announcement in the newspaper that Cato Manor is being re-assigned as a white area.

In reading Govender's "Over My Dead Body", intertexts of associated situations and writings surface: Ireland and Palestine expose parallel conditions of hegemonic domination and human rights violations. Writings against such evils form part of Govender's oeuvre. The issue of **silence**/silencing alone keeps the horror of Cato Manor and what happened there a singularly deep wound in the national consciousness. Silence or neglect appears to condone racism, xenophobia, hurt, harm and lack of concern: "In Durban, the Council had never liked or accepted Indians as an inherent part of Durban and they shamelessly spearheaded and directed the drive towards segregation" (Freund 1993: 5). Govender, in "Over my Dead Body", presents the topography of both a disputed area and the agony caused by colonial violence. His story reifies in miniature the pattern of brutalisation repeated across the country and the world. Today decoloniality is everywhere, and as Mignolo (2017: 8) asserts, it is a connector between hundreds, perhaps thousands of organised responses delinking from modernity and Western civilisation and relinking with the legacies that people want to preserve in view of the affirming modes of existence they want to live.

## References

- Chetty, R.  
2017 *At the edge: the writings of Ronnie Govender*. New York: Peter Lang Publishers.
- Forster, E.M.  
1985 *A Passage to India*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Freund, Bill  
1993 *The Destruction of Communities 1930-1980: The Indian Working Class of Durban and the Group Areas Act. No. 346L*. University of the Witwatersrand, The African Studies Institute.
- Govender, Ronnie  
1996 *At the Edge and Other Cato Manor Stories*. Pretoria: Hibbard Publishers.  
2008 *In the Manure*. Cape Town: New Africa.  
2008 *The Lahnee's Pleasure*. Johannesburg: Jacana Media.

A DECOLONIAL READING OF RONNIE GOVENDERS'S ...

- Lavie, Smadar  
2011 "Staying Put: Crossing the Israel-Palestine Border with Gloria Anzaldua". *Anthropology and Humanism* 36(1): 104-121.
- Mattera, Don  
1987 *Gone with the Twilight: A Story of Sophiatown*. London: Zed Books.  
1987 *Memory is the Weapon*. Johannesburg: Ravan Press.
- Meer, Fatima  
1969 *Portrait of Indian South Africans*. Durban: Avon.
- Mignolo, Walter  
2017 Coloniality is Far From Over, and So Must be Decoloniality. *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context and Enquiry* 43(1): 38-45.
- Pather, Juggie  
2015 *Clairwood: The Untold Story*. Durban: Wordpress.
- Rive, Richard  
1986 *Buckingham Palace, District Six*. Cape Town: David Philips.

**Rajendra Chetty**  
University of the Western Cape  
rchetty@uwc.ac.za