

Ghosts of the Indian Ocean¹

poem

Pralini Naidoo 

Once I dreamt about the ghosts
of whales and dolphins
and unknown people
deep in the underbelly of the harbour,
just South of Durban's promenade

Skeletal and blurry they whirled
and murmured messages of murder and cruelty
Bloated bodies hauled to whaling stations²
Starving bodies hauled to plantations³
Long ago hauntings

Sometimes I dream of alive whales breaching,
warning of an oceanic vomit
Waves retching onto land, the sins of generations
engulfing buildings that stand in silly proximity to the shore

But my nightmares—
Those happen
during the day when I am wide awake
Here rivers don't flow into oceans but collide

A mad war
A mad war in the waterways
Ocean aches with the armament of oil and lost lives
Rivers burn and thunder with new arsenal

The Umgeni's banks erode the heavy waste of systems collapsing,
teetering over in shhhhhhhhit ...
the excrement of factories and disconnect and too muchness ...

When my amma and my papa died,
we released their ashes into the Umgeni
from the crematorium⁴ on the hill
Their ashes flowed into the river towards
the ocean that had brought the ancestors here

Our lives and deaths
Our dreams and nightmares
Our pasts and presents and futures
are inextricable
from these bodies of water

Agenda 37.3 2023

ISSN 1013-0950 print/ISSN 2158-978X online

© 2023 Agenda Feminist Media

<https://doi.org/10.1080/10130950.2023.2229654>

UNISA 
university
of south africa
PRESS

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group

pp. 165–166



It is here that we pray
 It is here that we immerse our bodies
 It is here that we find food
 It is here that we greet the sun and the moon

It is here
 here amidst the hauntings
 of whales and people
 and so many industrial sssssssins

Notes

1. A version of this poem was recited at Time of the Writer, 2023, in Durban, South Africa.
2. Whaling in Durban, introduced by the Norwegians in 1907, continued until around 1975. "They used 75kg metal harpoons loaded with explosives. The whaler would pump the dead whales with compressed air so that they could float. The dead whales, as much as six at a time, would then be towed back to Durban" (Govender & Chetty 2014, pp. 97-9).
3. Many of my ancestors arrived in South Africa, via Durban harbour, directly or indirectly, as a result of indenture, a system of servitude that replaced slavery after its abolition. Indenture primarily serviced the plantations, focussing on monocultures such as sugarcane.
4. The Sivananda Ghat at the Clare Estate Crematorium is a sanctum that holds water from the Ganges in a chlorinated pool. Those wishing to dispose of the ashes of their loved ones may do so at the Ghat. The ritual uses the water from the Ganges to flush the ashes through a chute that leads into the Umgeni River.

ORCID

Pralini Naidoo  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-8684-4279>

References

Govender, N & Chetty, V 2014, *Legends of the Tide: Roots of the Durban Fishing Industry*, Rebel Rabble, Durban, KwaZulu-Natal.



PRALINI NAIDOO is a PhD candidate at the Department of Women's and Gender Studies, University of the Western Cape (UWC). Her research focuses on erased/ hidden narratives of women who have descended from indenture in South Africa, and their relationships to earth, seed, food, and the other-than-human. She is the author of *Wild has Roots*, a collection of poems, reflections and short stories. While her poems primarily centre on the meditative art of noticing the every-day, they are also invocations, inviting exploration into buried and silenced wisdoms. She also writes about women and girls who dream, love, make courageous decisions, and save their own lives. As a Black woman and mother, Pralini is passionate about social and environmental justice. Her work appears in various publications including *Teesta Review*, *BKO Magazine*, *Anthology – Women's poetry of India and South Africa*, *Dreams as R-evolution Artbook*, and *Pluriversal Conversations on Transnational Feminisms*. Email: pralini.naidoo@gmail.com