

This page is in honour of Dr Ray Miller and his team of actors, designers and technicians and Professor Kevin Warner, Chairman of the Theatre and Dance Department at Appalachian State University (ASU).



Todd Bush, Muthal Naidoo and Ray Miller standing in front of the advertisement outside the Valborg Theatre

From April 26 to April 29, 2017, I was at ASU in Boone, North Carolina, attending the Theatre and Dance Department's production of my play, *Flight from the Mahabharath*. Dr Ray Miller, director and choreographer of the play, had invited me to attend the performances and I was there as guest of the Department.

I had written *Flight from the Mahabharath* sometime in the early 1990s, after I had watched the Chopra brothers' television dramatization of the epic, the *Mahabharata*

. At the time I was also reading the works of the radical feminist author, Mary Daly, Professor at Boston College, whom I greatly admired. And as I watched the televised serial, *Mahabharat*

, I was appalled at the way in which women are portrayed in the epic and felt impelled to

counter such a portrayal. So I wrote

Flight from the Mahabharath

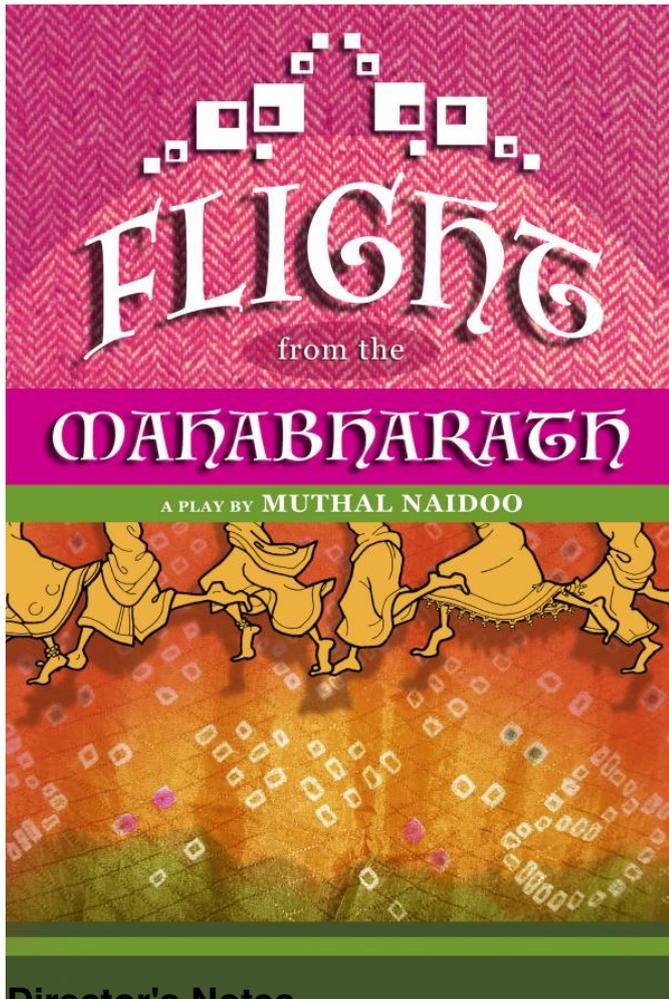
, in which women abandon the epic and create a play in which they free themselves of stultifying traditions and redefine themselves in terms of their individual understandings of who they are.

When I sat watching the play in the Valborg Theatre at ASU, I was overwhelmed. Dr Miller and his team had created a performance that was not just a portrayal of my vision; it had been embellished by their own creative insights and every aspect of the production – stage settings, lighting, costumes, songs – expressed the ebb and flow between individual freedom and restrictive convention. Music, specially composed for the performance, set the perfect mood and atmosphere for the play. And the acting performances, interspersed with lively dance sequences, brought to life the characters and the humour of the play.

I could not believe that I was watching a play that I had written.

Download the play [here...](#)

Notes from the programme, download the full programme [here...](#)



Director's Notes

Directing, for me, is a privilege, particularly on a project that has the breadth and depth as Flight from the Mahabharath. A director is granted the responsibility to engage with a play intellectually, imaginatively, emotionally and physically, along with a cast and designers and crew, and together they create a production that is the culmination of their collective vision. Collaboration is at heart of this experience. The theatre is not a place for the isolated artist. In the theatre, we know that it is in the engagement with others that we will discover ideas and insights that otherwise might elude us. It takes a community of like-minded, inquisitive and dedicated people who are focused on the work of this one playwright to really bring to the stage a vivid and honest and interesting theatrical experience.

Of course, theatre making and appreciating is a community event and the circle is not complete until the audience engages with the work and with the performance. We each have a vital role to play in opening our hearts and minds to the questions posed by our playwrights.

In this case, Muthal Naidoo asks us to examine the tension we experience between the need for

each of us to search out and give expression to our own individuality, while at the same time acknowledging the powerful influence of strongly held traditions that bind us together in community. Choreographer Martha Graham underscores the importance of this question when she observes: "There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening, that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one you in all time, this expression is unique:'

These characters run from The Epic in order make the discovery of who they are. They believe that The Epic does not allow for the fullest expression of their unique identities. They race on to the stage to engage in creating Drama, into confronting the mystery of their own identities through story telling. Philosopher Zygmunt Bauman describes the fast paced complexity of how we experience our lives today as a kind of "liquid modernity:' We search out for stories - both familiar and strange - as a way in which to ground ourselves. Corinthians admonishes us that, "for now, we see through a glass, darkLY:' But, in the theatre, we seek to "see more clearly" by engaging with the storytelling talents of playwrights who know how to stretch our imaginations so that we might engage with questions with more depth, more understanding, more appreciation.

Muthal Naidoo has provided you and I with just such a play. We invite you to take this journey with us as we give voice, and shape, and color to the words and images that this playwright has given us. We invite you, as Anne Bogart would say, "to remember" those perennial questions that continue to haunt and to define our lives today.

-Ray Miller□

Dramaturgical Note

"This is my last play. I wrote it when I was living in Pretoria and had no hope of ever being involved in theatre again. I wrote it sometime in the early 1990's. I don't remember exactly when."

The quote above by Muthal Naidoo, the playwright of Flight of Mahabharath, derives from a prologue featured in the script provided by the Work-InProgress (WIP) Theatre Company, a company that she herself founded in 1981. Her final play contains the wit and wisdom of her voice, which was shaped by her remarkable experiences, both in a positive and negative sense. Inspired by an Indian television show that depicted stories from the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata, Muthal Naidoo sought to write a play that examined female characters involved in the epic through a feminist lens (Richman, 2015). Indeed, the play drips with themes of

feminism, achieving autonomy, gender and sexuality, and freedom. A feminist and activist herself, Naidoo carries with her immense experience in fighting for freedom and human rights through her times in living under the apartheid in South Africa (Richman, 2015). Naidoo succeeds in conveying her thought-provoking messages through each line of the play as the characters embark in trying to find their own voice and achieve a sense of personhood.

Specifically, the women seek to detach themselves from gender oppression in the epic. A critique of traditionalism thus serves as another prominent theme in the play. Naidoo challenges the restrictive gender roles that appear to derive from the Mahabharata; specifically, she refutes the idea that the role of women is fixed on fulfilling both the duties of a subservient wife and child rearing mother. Her critique goes beyond that, however, for the two featured men feel tied to rigid gender expectations as well. Unlike their roles in the epic, they find solace and inspiration through music, dance, and each other as gay lovers.

The style of the play incorporates Brechtian elements in that characters frequently break the fourth wall in order to provide information to the audience. The stage itself is acknowledged and used by the women, where they put on mini-plays for themselves with the intent to redefine their personal stories and secure a sense of voice and identity. As the scenes unfold, the audience is given the chance to learn and ponder the actions and words made by each character. The play addresses broad, social issues through a specific cultural lens. The art of theatre serves as a platform for bridging commonalities and differences between cultures.

The characters inspire empathy. Naidoo calls for change and an evaluation of gender norms that she argues inhibit and reduce people into simplified and harmful definitions of what it means to be a woman or man. Achieving a true sense of self and overcoming oppression serves as a primary theme in the play, or maybe as a common dream that many aspire to, no matter the cultural and/or ethnic background.

-Lydia Congdon

References:

Richman, Paula. "Silence in Muthal Naidoo's "Flight from the Mahabharath:" Disrupting the Power of Categories in a South African Play." *Critique: Flight from the Mahabharath*. Muthal

Naidoo, 01 Feb. 2015. Web. OS Apr. 2017

**Naidoo, Muthal. "WIP Theatre Plays"



Author Dr. Muthal Naidoo, a South African playwright of Indian descent, who will travel to Appalachian State University for the world premiere of her work "Flight from the Mahabharath" April 26-30. Photo courtesy of Muthal Naidoo

Q&A with South African playwright Muthal Naidoo

The writer visits the High Country to participate in the world premiere of her work, "Flight from the Mahabharath," at Appalachian State University in Boone.

This month, the Department of Theatre and Dance at Appalachian State University will present the world premiere of "Flight from the Mahabharath." It examines the "Mahābhārata," one of the two major Sanskrit epics of ancient India, from the perspective of the female characters. The "Mahābhārata," often referred to as "the Epic," serves as a metaphor for a patriarchal society where women function mainly as adjuncts. In the play, the women escape the Epic into a different genre, Drama. Joined by two men, the play creates a new reality where the characters are free to explore their identities. The stage provides a home for action where the characters redefine themselves.

Author Dr. Muthal Naidoo, a South African playwright of Indian descent, often focuses her work on power dynamics in racially divided societies. She wrote "Flight from the Mahabharath" in 1992 after she was inspired by B.R. Chopra's "Mahabharat" television series in the early 1990s.

Having last visited the United States in 2003, Naidoo will travel to North Carolina for the first time as she joins the faculty, staff and students at Appalachian State University for a five-day residency. While on campus, Naidoo will teach classes, meet with the cast and creative team and participate in a talkback session after the opening night performance.

[Read the full interview here...](#)

Crtique: Flight from the Mahabharath

Silence in Muthal Naidoo's "Flight from the Mahabharath:" Disrupting the Power of Categories in a South African play by Paula Richman

Rarely does a play script make audible the mechanisms of silencing, but South African writer Muthal Naidoo manages to do so in "Flight from the Mahabharath" [henceforth "Flight"]. It depicts the *Mahabharata*, one of Hinduism's two preeminent epics, as keeping its characters not only imprisoned, but also invested, in categories that silence dissent.

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Born in Pietermaritzburg to Hindu parents of south Indian descent in 1935, Naidoo as a child attended Indian dance-dramas that depicted episodes from religious texts, including the *Mahabharata*

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Yet, over the course of her life, all her plays have dealt with the power dynamics of racially divided societies, with one exception: "Flight."

Only after studying, teaching, and directing both in South Africa (1962-65) and the United States

(1965-76) did Naidoo turn to writing plays; only after 13 other plays (1981-87), did she write her sole work based on a Hindu epic.³ While watching B.R. Chopra's Mahabharat serial in the early 1990s, she was struck by the "wonderful potential" of the epic's women. "I decided to take their lives and do something with them from a feminist point of view," she recalls.

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In "Flight," the female characters, embittered by the death of their menfolk in battle, flee the epic to create their own play, thereby breaking the silence in which they had been imprisoned for centuries.

Naidoo was no stranger to silencing. Her own voice had been muzzled under apartheid because she wrote "mixed-race" plays, those in which persons across the four ranked levels of South Africa's racial hierarchy of "Whites," "Indians," "Coloureds," and "Blacks," worked together.⁵ Because perpetuating white supremacy required keeping each of the other three groups isolated from each other (rather than united against apartheid), the regime prohibited "mixing." The 1965 amendment to the Group Areas Act banned mixed theatre companies and mixed audiences; any commercial theatre that staged mixed race plays could face heavy fines; the law made it difficult for playwrights to earn a living by writing. Naidoo's mixed race play, "Coming Home" (1982), about a Black stranger who moves into a White couple's home, was nominated for a Critics Circle Award in Durban yet ran only briefly in the loft above a restaurant whose owner offered space at minimal rent to directors of original plays regardless of race.

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Other mechanisms constrained Naidoo's voice as a playwright prior to South Africa's first non-racial elections in 1994. The state regularly banned plays it deemed "undesirable."⁷ At the request of the Natal Indian Congress (NIC) in 1983, Naidoo wrote "The Masterplan," which revealed the hidden agenda of elections for the racially segregated tricameral parliament that the government claimed would allow substantive input into governance by all South African citizens (namely, Whites, Indians, and Coloureds, since Blacks allegedly lived in separate nations labeled "Homelands"). In April 1983, WIP Theatre first mounted "Masterplan," staged it at subsequent NIC meetings, and was to perform it in September 1983 at a fund-raiser when The Office of the Commander of the Narcotics Bureau, Durban, notified Naidoo by mail that staging the play in public would constitute a criminal offence (2008: 372-73).

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Locally, dramas that satirized hypocritical behavior in the Indian community often encountered hostility, which had chilling effects on writers who sought to prompt self-critique among others in their "racial" group. For example, when Naidoo worked with the Durban Academy of Theatre Arts, which included some of her Indian students from Sultan Technical College, the troupe created a revue of songs, dances and skits that mocked "various conventions and institutions in the 'Indian' community." The revue was condemned for "lampooning of traditions" (Naidoo

1993:7).⁹ Thus, some scripts never got staged out of fear of banning, and others languished because some conservative Indians took umbrage when customs were questioned or complacency critiqued.

In this essay, I argue that Naidoo's "Flight" connects rejecting categories to breaking silences and, thus, to gaining freedom: by making audible Epic voices usually silenced, she shows that fixed, ranked categories lead people to view themselves and members of other groups according to rigid, essentialized identities, and hence deform the lives of all South Africans. "Flight" uses various dramatic strategies to "talk back" to Mahabharata ideology. This essay's first section analyzes "Flight's" debates about how silenced people can retell their stories. The second looks at differing, and sometimes conflicting, ways of "correcting" previous versions of a story. The third scrutinizes how stories told by non-elites differ from those by elites. The conclusion reflects on "Flight's" continuing ability to illuminate how categories warp notions of self and other.

Epic Roles and Dichotomous Categories

Naidoo presents the epic genre as wielding so much power that she always refers to Vyasa's *Mahabharata*

as "the Epic" (capital "E"), while labeling the drama that her female characters are enacting simply as "the play." "Flight" unfolds as a series of entrances and exits: characters flee the Epic to join the play or reject the play to return to the Epic. The internal logic that structures the dialogue between characters in Naidoo's "Flight" presumes that specific genres allow characters lesser or greater amounts of freedom to act. "Flight's" female characters believe that the epic genre locks them into highly restricted roles, while the genre of drama offers them greater agency. Indeed, the play opens as Draupadi, wife of the five Pandava brothers, having just led a set of women out of the Epic, now brings them into the play, proclaiming: "This is scene one of our new existence."

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Radha, foster-mother of Karna, concurs: "Here I can speak. I have a voice" (p. 300). This utopian rhetoric begins the play on a celebratory note

Yet early in the plot, Naidoo spotlights a woman so immersed in Epic norms that she cannot imagine any other way of life. Gandhari, mother of the 100 Kaurava sons, arrives near the stage, sadly calling for Kunthi, mother of 3 Pandava brothers.¹¹ Gandhari and Kunthi gave birth, respectively, to the two sets of sons who led two branches of the family to war against each other, but the two mothers grieved together when their offspring died in battle. As Gandhari comes in search of Kunthi, who has disappeared from the Epic, Draupadi orders Gandhari remove her blindfold, which she donned when she married her blind husband. Draupadi defines the stage as space where women can remain true to themselves and condemns Gandhari sacrificing sight for her husband. Gandhari refuses to uncover her eyes, declaring that all she

has ever wanted was to be a good wife and mother. Returning to the Epic, she breaks the ranks of female solidarity.

The play also stresses the difference between Epic and play through its costumes. Draupadi declares that she wants dress to reflect women's agency, rather than merely their status as daughters, wives, and mothers.¹² Although the actresses enter the stage in carefully pleated saris and bound hair, they quickly begin to transform their appearance. Draupadi pulls off a wig, beneath which she sports a short, carefree haircut, announcing that she cut it to reject

both

bound tresses of respectability and unbound hair that signifies her humiliation in court. Then River Goddess Ganga removes her sari, revealing a loose garment better suited to her flowing nature. Others take off outer clothing to reveal jeans or shorts. Next Radha and Ganga suggest that their discarded clothes be displayed in a museum, so future generations will realize "the ghosts we used to be" (303) and never again wear such garb. When Draupadi proposes that they end this scene here, each actress voices assent, showing that (unlike in Vyasa's Epic) here they make the decisions.

In scene two, Naidoo scripts a challenge to binary oppositions by having the actresses assess whether the play's cast must be a homogeneous group. Two men dressed as women approach the stage and ask to join the actresses in "creating a new reality" (304). The two are Brihannala (Arjun in make-up, jewelry and female dancer's clothing)¹³ and Sikandi (Princess Amba, in her last life, who has been reborn as a male). Debate now transpires about whether the cast should expand to encompass transgendered people who have also fled the Epic or whether it should remain exclusively female. Radha reminds the actresses of all the effort it took to flee the Epic, where they remained subordinated and forced to bear sons who were then sent to die in battle. Identifying Arjun's renown as deadly archer as representative of the Epic ethos of violence, she suggests men remain excluded from the actresses' play.

The two actors respond by problematizing binary opposition between male and female. When Brihannala and Sikandi explain how the Epic has victimized them and has led them to renounce Epic bloodshed, the actresses must reconsider their notions of affinity. If they exclude the two men, they collaborate in perpetuating the binary categories of the Epic: the Epic propagated a static, unchanging identity for women; the actresses have assumed a static, unchanging identity for men. When Brihannala pleads for admission, he explains his current situation: he renounced the life of a warrior to become a dancer and has now devoted himself to art. When the actresses hear his tale, they decide to accept the two men into the play, expanding the boundaries of its cast.

Naidoo then questions another set of binary categories in the Epic: violence versus passivity. Can the cast reject the glorification of violence so central to Epic patriarchy or is violence integral to all narratives? As Subhadra, Krishna's sister and a wife of Arjun, puts it, "I don't see how we can make our play exciting if we exclude violence and conflict" (306).¹⁴ Instead, Brihannala proposes that the cast exclude not all violence but only that which humiliates or kills people in order to retell their stories without glorifying bloodshed, as did the Epic. The actresses concur, so he teaches them karate to free them from depending on men for protection.

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Now empowered to act in self-defense if attacked. Radha articulates a new policy: "We are not going to have heroes and villains, force the audience to take sides, encourage them to adopt a punitive attitude and so stimulate a blood lust" (308). This policy ends female victimization while establishing criteria for self-defense, rather than merely meeting violence with violence.

Agency and Conflict

Naidoo now shifts attention to two sets of negotiations needed to carry out Draupadi's project of enabling formerly silenced characters to retell their stories from their own viewpoints. First, as different stories are enacted, cast members must adopt various roles, most requiring cross-gender casting (since the cast is mostly female). For example, Radha plays Duryodhana for Draupadi's story. So Naidoo assigns his speech to Radha-Duryodhana; her name appears first and is linked to his name by a hyphen. The device emphasizes the artificial, and somewhat ad-hoc, nature of storytelling in the play-within-a-play. Second, Draupadi, as Director, instructs the cast to recount their narratives according to the new identities they have embraced after leaving the Epic. Yet, once Draupadi authorizes such changes, cast members begin to transform the play in ways that make sense to them so a cast member might not see the situation in the same way as the director. Or when a story involves two (or more) characters, the vision of an individual actor might clash with a competing vision of another actor in unforeseen ways.

Indeed, Draupadi witnesses her own story changing in accord with perspectives of others. For example, as the play's narrator, Sikandi changes Draupadi's husband-choice ceremony (svayamvara) into an art competition to showcase Brihannala's (Arjun's) dancing skills. When Brihannala wins the prize for best dancer, Draupadi garlands him as if at a svayamvara and tells her father that she will marry him.¹⁶ Radha-Duryodhana, who traveled to the event to win Draupadi by displaying his warrior prowess, resents that the svayamvara has been changed to an art competition, however, so he threatens to carry Draupadi off by force. The actresses declare weapons prohibited on stage and order Duryodhana to lay down his mace. Menacingly, he demands to know who shall force him do so. The women use karate to remove his mace and subdue him. Here Draupadi's plan for retelling her story goes astray because Sikandi's agenda differs from hers.

As scene three continues, Draupadi seeks to restore what she lost in the Epic, but Arjun has a different agenda. Draupadi plans to restage her story to culminate in her marriage to Arjun (victor at her svayamvara), and excise later events that forced her to wed Arjun's four brothers as well. Draupadi declares, "Where we colluded in our own oppression, we [will] change the circumstances to meet our new needs" (306). Yet in attempting to change her circumstances, Draupadi runs headlong into conflict with Arjun, who has *already* changed his circumstances by rejecting the Epic roles of warrior

and

husband. He refuses to marry Draupadi, noting bitterly that although "we are supposed to be creating a new reality here," Draupadi is recreating "the same thing all over again. I may as well be in the Epic" (311). Both sought emancipation, but Draupadi defines freedom as monogamy, while Arjun defines it as the right not to be married to a wife. Disillusioned, he withdraws from the play. Draupadi also withdraws.

In scene four, Naidoo scripts an unprecedented outcome that interrogates cultural constructions of masculinity. Since Draupadi refuses to act in the play, Sikandi decides to play Draupadi's role. When Radha-Duryodhana pulls off Sikandi-Draupadi's sari, he strips her naked. Naidoo draws attention to the restaged nature of this episode when Radha-Duryodhana announces, "In the Epic, the sari never came to an end. Behold Ladies and Gentlemen, one ordinary sari, WITH AN END" (313, Naidoo's emphasis). Then when Sikandi-Draupadi is placed on Radha-Duryodhana's lap, Sikandi's wig falls off, revealing that "she" is a he.^[17] Radha-Duryodhana flees "in homophobic terror," while Sikandi-Draupadi pursues him, seductively moaning "Come to me. I'm dying for you" (313). As the women subdue Radha-Duryodhana with karate, Draupadi is saved not by the miraculous intervention of Krishna but because her assailant fears contact with a cross-dresser. By now, Draupadi barely recognizes her own story.

Draupadi turns a deaf ear when Brihannala tries to reveal his homosexuality in scene five. As he tells how gender constructs were forced upon him, recalling, "from the time you are little, people keep stuffing toy weapons into your hands and pushing you towards violence" (318), Draupadi staunchly denies that he was ever trapped in a gender role *except* when he adopted the guise of Brihannala. He retorts that

only

as Brihannala did he escape entrapment in a gender role and accuses her of keeping him "locked in an image that is not of my making" (319). When Sikandi tries to justify Brihannala's stance, Draupadi shuts him up, despite demanding earlier that her voice, and that of others in the cast, be heard in the play.

Always suspicious of reified categories, Naidoo also complicates depiction of transgendered persons in the play by having Sikandi and Brihannala disagree about how to win respect for same-sex love. Idealistic Sikandi wants each cast member to tell her or his "true" story,

proclaiming that only through "fusing" (319) these stories can the cast create a play where each individual's story will be told. In contrast, Brihannala advocates using Vyasa's authority resourcefully by emphasizing that he originated the tradition of depicting characters whose sexuality departs from heterosexual norms. He urges, "We have to tell this story first so when we tell yours, people will see that it was Vyasa who invented trans-sexuality" (322). Their lack of agreement prevents a single character from representing (or tokenizing) all non-heterosexual voices.

By scripting two renditions (scenes seven and eight) of Sikandi's story, Naidoo presents competing narratives of his homosexuality. According to the Epic, Bhishma sought a wife for his nephew so he abducted Princess Amba, who was promised in marriage to King Salwa. When Amba insisted that Bhishma return her, Salwa, rejected Amba as tainted since she had been abducted. Blaming Bhishma for ruining her life, Amba vowed to take rebirth as a male (Sikandi) in order to cause Bhishma's death. In contrast, when Sikandi tells his "true" story, an entirely different tale emerges. In his youth, Sikandi once dressed up in women's clothes and cosmetics and began to dance. A passing friend, smitten by his Sikandi's beauty, danced with him, and then the two became intimate. Sikandi's aunt saw them and assumed that Sikandi was possessed by a demon so she brought an exorcist. The exorcist beat Sikandi until he was forced to say he would never dress like a woman again. Sikandi then ran away with a traveling drama troupe, and specialized in female roles. When Sikandi met Brihannala, they became a couple. By following the Epic account with Sikandi's own narrative, Naidoo suggests that Vyasa tried to explain away Sikandi's homosexuality with the device of rebirth: in his previous birth as Amba, he vowed to change gender in the next birth.

Draupadi listens to neither story nor will she accept Arjun's homosexuality or even use the name that Arjun has chosen: "Brihannala." "Brihannala is not a real person," she objects scornfully, he is "just an identity" that you assumed (329). Draupadi asks Brihannala whether he denies being a "noble, kind, sensitive, courageous, and an intrepid warrior" (329). Although he admits that he was raised to be a warrior, he has now rejected that role and tells Draupadi that she loves Arjun and he is *not* Arjun. "I am a gay musician and dancer" (330), he insists. At last, Draupadi realizes that Brihannala and Sikandi are lovers. Calling Sikandi a "pervert," she leaves for the Epic to find the "real" Arjun. In contrast, Kunthi affectionately praises her son Brihannala's artistic talents, demonstrating that some royal women can accept his new identity.

Credulity, Priestcraft, and Peasant

In the final scene, Naidoo takes the play in a new direction, away from the princely realm of Draupadi and into a village, where Radha recounts her experience with Hidimba, who lives there.¹⁸ Because Draupadi has returned to the Epic, Radha takes on the director's role and announces a new agenda: so far they have only dealt with stories of "the privileged classes," so she wants to look at the story of "a peasant woman," someone like her. Subhadra blurts out, "I

didn't know you had a story" (331). Radha explains that every character has a story but whose story gets told depends on who does the telling. Subhadra realizes her thinking has been limited by the Epic, where those low in status seldom speak. Although Radha acknowledges that "We are all still tied to the Epic" (331), she urges the cast to expand the play's boundaries to encompass characters silenced in the Epic. "Flight's" last scene then explores the dynamics of rural alterity.

The Epic depicts Hidimba as a "rakshasi," usually translated as "female demon." Hidimba had lived in fear of her flesh-eating brother until Bhima, one Pandava brother living in the forest, slays him. Hidimba later married Bhima, whom she loved deeply yet Bhima's mother, Kunthi, looked down on Hidimba because she was a rakshasi. After Hidimba bore Bhima a son, he left them and returned to the city. Afterwards, Hidimba turned into a loner who gathered medicinal herbs in the forest to cure sickness. "I am a symbol of evil because I live alone, don't have children and make medicines" (333), she tells Radha to explain why the villagers are suspicious of her.¹⁹

Naidoo depicts Hidimba as not only silenced but also stigmatized. "Flight's" last scene is set during a severe drought, when lightning strikes a village home in which two children are burned to death. The villagers attribute their deaths to Hidimba, whom they accuse of witchcraft. Only with Radha's aid does Hidimba escape when the villagers gang up to stone her. The angry group calls for the local shaman to slay "the witch." Taking the opportunity to pretend he can control the rain, he vows to sacrifice her at sundown which, he declares, will make the drought end.²⁰ The villagers search for Hidimba but by dusk, they still have failed to locate her, so the shaman incites them to slay a substitute. Just then, rain begins to pour. Radha tries to make them see that they let fear and ignorance lead them to the brink of murder, saying: "Instead of being victims of our fears, we can learn to understand and take control of our lives. Then we will be free" (336). She urges them to observe carefully how the nearby mountain affects local rain patterns, so they will never again be tricked by a shaman who claims miraculous power.

At this juncture, Naidoo brings Draupadi back from the Epic. She tells the cast: "I was back in that Epic] structure, locked into that pattern again. But this time I was aware of it. I found I was standing outside of myself, watching myself going through the motions. I couldn't get involved. I could see that we were all in cages of customs and traditions" (337).²¹ As this quote shows, when she returned to the Epic, Draupadi found it impossible to slip into her old role. Her own transformation distanced her from the Epic ethos and made visible to her the mechanisms of silence that had prevented her from exercising agency there. Her own experience as director of "Flight" may have helped to alienate her from the Epic and perceive the power it had wielded over her.

Draupadi now realizes how the Epic molded her thinking in the past. She tells Brihannala, "I realized that I had been programmed to want you: a romantic ideal, Arjun" (338). Because she now recognizes romantic notions as patriarchal constructions, they no longer hold the same power. Yet, Draupadi did challenge some aspects of the status quo in the Epic, bravely questioning Bhishma about dharma before an assembly of men. Vyasa allowed her and Sikandi to transgress certain bounds yet he never granted them power to change the outcome of Epic events. Draupadi wonders if Gandhari stays in the Epic because she feels secure when her life is structured for her, rather than leaving to make her own decisions. Draupadi realizes that she relishes being back in the play.

"Flight" culminates with a celebration as the whole cast welcomes back Draupadi, and music begins.²² In a short note preceding the play, Naidoo gives casting instructions: "the characters should represent the rainbow nation of South Africa and any tendency toward ethnic stereotyping should be scrupulously avoided. Performers should be chosen for their ability to interpret the roles" (Perkins 1998:116) The play ends with Naidoo's stage directions calling for actors to perform "songs and dances of the rainbow nation of South Africa" (Perkins 1998:141) Those actors and actresses who began as South Africans in a rainbow nation have now finished playing their roles as Epic characters and as cast members retelling their stories in a play-within-a-play. As their drama ends, they step back into South Africa's rainbow nation. Their play has critiqued Epic patriarchy and, simultaneously, shown the dangers of classifying people in a ranked categories.

Conclusion

Using debates about binary oppositions, portrayals of transgendered individuals, and stories of non-elite characters, Naidoo's revised telling of the *Mahabharata* makes visible and interrogates exclusive, ranked categories that have silenced particular Epic characters. Through cultivating distance from the Epic by enacting their own play, cast members come to realize how dichotomies such as man vs. woman or violence vs. passivity flatten and distort human experience. Such oppositions generate others (childbearers vs. warriors, effeminacy vs. masculinity, witches vs. shamans) that turn people against each other. By reinterpreting the stories of silenced characters, cast members gain transformative knowledge of themselves and their society, allowing them to break the long-standing silence. Naidoo's portrayal of relations between enactment and silence shows that individuals can learn to resist the seeming security of exclusive categories, move beyond reified identities, and make their voices heard.

Approximately a decade after Naidoo wrote "Flight," she published a collection of short stories titled *Jail Birds and Other Stories* (Naidoo 2004). Her foreword to the collection contains a short statement about her goals as a writer that applies in striking ways to "Flight." There Naidoo defines her writing as "the documentation of the individual's or individuals' pursuit of freedom." Naidoo acknowledges that attaining freedom "makes the onerous demand that one take

responsibility for creating one's life." As the title "Jail Birds" suggests, she sees most people as accepting social norms for the sake of security but she focuses on those for whom "life within the social contract has become a jail sentence:" both those who "break through the regulations and find the freedom to be themselves" and those who fear transgressing the rules and "remain trapped in the prison of social conditioning and never find themselves" (Naidoo 2004:iv). In "Flight," Draupadi, Brihannala, Sikandi and Radha find ways to break out of "jail."

Most of Naidoo's earlier scripts incorporate more focus on specific laws and actions that perpetuate apartheid. These plays deal with specific events in the 1980s (e.g. the tricameral parliament, the banning process) that make them less relevant to today's audiences as they were when first written. In contrast, "Flight" concerns more than just South African society. Ostensibly set in a time long ago, "Flight" illuminates the mechanics of systems that impose and maintain exclusive ranked categories, such as apartheid in South Africa, racial segregation in the United States, and caste hierarchy in India. Yet "Flight" never refers to these localities directly. Instead its events illustrate the dynamics of inequality and the silences that perpetuate it.

For those familiar with the basic *Mahabharata* plot, "Flight" wields the same dramatic power today as it did when Naidoo wrote it. Naidoo's penetrating critique of fixed, ranked categories that reify identity remains illuminating today.²³ Ironically, as of April, 2011, Naidoo's play against silencing dissent has never been staged. It would be fitting if in India, where the Epic originated and has been retold for centuries, a drama troupe were to mount a production of "Flight" for the twenty-first century.

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1. In this essay, I use *Mahabharata* when referring to the Sanskrit text attributed to Vyasa, but "Mahabharath" in the title of Naidoo's English play since she spelled it that way, and "Mahabharat" for Chopra's television serial for the same reason. In my analysis, I use "Flight" to refer to Naidoo's script and "the play" to refer to the play-within-a-play that the characters in "Flight" stage.

2. For study of terukkuttu, the dance-drama that people of south Indian descent performed in Natal, see Annamalai 1992, Govender 1991:64-68, and Meer 1969: 217-222.

3. As a child, Naidoo lived in Marabastad (also called "The Asiatic Bazaar") near the city center of Pretoria. Naidoo's parents, who knew Telugu and Tamil, took her to terukkuttu dance-dramas staged by all-male troupes. At age 14, she acted in a Telugu drama based on Kalidasa's Sanskrit play, "Shakuntala" (Naidoo 1993:3). After earning a certificate in teaching, she received a B.A. in Speech and Drama at Natal University in Durban and then taught high school at M. L.Sultan Technical College. In 1962, she attended an intensive six-week workshop with Krishna Shah in theatre arts. After the workshop, the Durban Academy of Theatre Arts (DATA) was formed. Later she joined the Shah Theatre Academy. In 1965, with a Fulbright Fellowship for graduate study in the United States, she earned her Ph.D. in Drama at Indiana University, and taught at two universities. After directing the theatre wing of the Black Arts Group in St. Louis, (Looker 2004:137-139), she returned to Durban in 1976. Between 1981 and 1987, she wrote anti-apartheid plays staged by her troupe, WIP [Work-in-Progress] Theatre.

4. Chopra's "Mahabharat," containing more than 90 episodes, was broadcast in India on Doordarshan television from 2 October 1988 to 24 June 1990. The serial was then shown abroad, including South Africa. Although Naidoo told me that she could not remember exactly when she wrote "Flight" (Richman: 2007), she recalled, "I was inspired to write *Flight from the Mahabharath*

after watching the serialized version of the *Mahabharat*,"

(2007: 298) on M-Net (Electronic Media Network Limited), begun in 1986 as South Africa's first private pay TV service. It broadcasts special programs for Africa's Asian community on East Net, which aired first the Ramayan serial, and later the Mahabharat serial (Klimpacher 1998). According to Desai (1993), Chopra's serial aired in South Africa in 1993, so Naidoo must have been written "Flight" then or later.

5. These terms appear in this essay not because they are accurate descriptors but due to their legal and political status during the period under study. Although quotation marks are henceforth omitted, it should be understood that in this essay such terms refer only to racial constructs imposed on South Africans by apartheid. "White" and "Black" allegedly refer to skin color but few Caucasians or Africans have completely white or black skin; "Indian" signifies the geographical origin (India) of some South Africans. "Coloured" refers to Muslims of Malay descent or offspring of mixed race.

6. The play opened at the 200-seat Hermit loft (Hermitage Street, Durban), whose owner John Dennen ignored apartheid laws to support experimental theatrical works. Naidoo (2008: 138-155) provides the script of "Coming Home" and see p. 51 for a photocopy of a newspaper's list and photos of 1982 Critics Circle Awardees, among whom Naidoo is the only non-White person. From 1982 to 1984, Naidoo tried to earn a living as a playwright, but found it impossible, and returned to the field of education (Sichel 1987).

7. Sometimes such bans seemed capricious. For when the Durban Academy of Theatre Arts staged Edward Albee's "Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf," it was banned.

8. The tricameral parliament scheme was structured so that Whites would retain virtually all political power, while seeming to function democratically. The house of parliament for Whites decided all pan-nation matters while Coloured and Indian houses received quite limited power and only within their residential areas. Since Black power was limited to "Homelands," Blacks had no say in national policies. "The Masterplan" (Naidoo 2008: 345-369) was first staged to mark the release of a jailed political prisoner.

9. Of course, many South Africans of Indian heritage shared her politics and supported her in numerous ways. The actors in WIP Theatre Company had full-time day jobs and worked without payment. The Drama Department at the University of Durban, Westville, the university for "Indians," produced one of Naidoo's plays, "Masks" in April 1983 (2008:161-191). "Masks" depicts a woman of Indian and Black ancestry who denies the Black part of her, and becomes mentally unbalanced; when she accepts all parts of her heritage, she regains her sanity. Naidoo wrote a draft of this play in the U.S., but revised it for stage only after returning to South Africa (*Natal Daily News* 1983).

10. Two versions of Naidoo's "Flight" have been published. One lacks scene divisions (Perkins 1998:113-141). The other appears in Naidoo's recent collection of all her plays (2008: 298-338), in which she has broken "Flight" into a 10-scene play. In my essay, all quotes come from the 2008 version unless otherwise indicated, and I put the page number in the essay's body in parentheses, immediately after the quote. Also, when each female character first appears, I identify her as mother, wife, or daughter of a man, as Vyasa's Sanskrit *Mahabharata* does. Some of the humor in "Flight," derives from comparing how Vyasa portrays each character with how Naidoo depicts him or her.

11. Kunthi bore three Pandavas and her co-wife, Madri, who later died, bore two.

12. Among female characters in epic literature, Sita from the *Ramayana* is usually identified as the ideal wife. It would be hard to advocate Draupadi as a model of the modest wife since she has five husbands, questions Bhishma fearlessly in the assembly hall, and refuses to bind her

hair until she washes it in the blood of Duryodhana, who molested her. From Naidoo's point of view, however, she seems enthralled by love for Arjun, and puts up with being married to five husbands, thus acceding to patriarchy.

13. During the final year of the Pandavas' exile in the forest, each brother must remain in disguise. Arjun assumes the role of a dance teacher named "Brhannada." (I retain Naidoo's spellings for Epic characters; Sanskrit Brhannada becomes Brihannala).

14. Meta-commentary about the process of staging a play by actors within the play, provides much of the humor in "Flight." In a number of places, actors complain about Vyasa's narrative decisions, insult others by likening them to Vyasa or quote R.K. Narayan's condensed version of the epic.

15. Actually, karate is less appropriate than jujitsu, which deals only with self-defense.

16. For a svayamvara, a king invites all qualified kshatriyas to his palace. In some cases, the princess chooses her husband from among the assembled warriors and, in other cases, the husband wins her hand through a test of strength.

17. Krishna's miraculous intervention appears in some rescensions of the *Mahabharata*, but not all of them, so it is not included in the critical edition.

18. Dominant interpretations of the *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana* view rakshasas as demons and rakshasis as demonesses. See Richman 2009. Radha, foster mother of Karna and wife of a charioteer, appears in "Flight" as a spokesperson for those who are not members of the kshatriya (warrior) varna. Naidoo makes Radha a friend of Hidimba and has Radha narrate what the two women experienced due to drought in their village.

19. In an interview, Naidoo told me, she modeled Hidimba on an African healer in Giyani, who uses specific healing properties of herbs to treat people who are ill (Richman:2007).

20. When he saw clouds about to cross the mountain, he knew rain would fall after dusk.

21. Bertolt Brecht inspired Naidoo to consider the Epic as a genre and emphasize ways to create distance from, and consciousness of, the dramatic medium (Richman 2007).

22. Indian dance-dramas and folk plays conventionally end with the cast singing the final song together. It also signals that the play is complete.

23. Naidoo defines herself not as an "Indian" but as a South African playwright who grew up in a community whose vernacular culture linked them to India. She refuses to limit herself to being "Indian" because she sees the category as a trap that served apartheid (Naidoo 1993: 2).

Photo Gallery

Photos by Lynn Willis, courtesy of the Appalachian State University Department of Theatre and Dance.

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{gallery}mahabharata{/gallery}