

Diaspora, Displacement, and Desire in East African Asian Literature

No New Land*

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East African Asian literature offers a unique perspective on the intersection of migration, identity, and memory. Rooted in the colonial and postcolonial histories of countries like Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania, this body of work reflects the complex experiences of South Asian communities who settled in East Africa and were later displaced due to political, social, and racial factors. Writers such as Moyez Vassanji, Peter Nazareth, Jameela Siddiqi, and Yusuf K. Dawood explore themes of exclusion, hybridity, and nostalgia, while interrogating the shifting boundaries of home and belonging.

Their works question both the homogenising ideologies of the postcolonial nation-state and the essentialist politics of diaspora. They depict migrants caught between histories, cultures, and identities—unable to fully belong to either their ancestral homelands or their adopted countries in Africa or the West. The East African nation-state emerged from a nationalist struggle against colonial rule. This process relied on a vision of shared cultural origins and heroic anti-colonialism. However, the construction of post-independence national identity was often exclusive. Those not considered indigenous—such as the Asian population—were left outside the dominant narrative of nationhood. The result was what Homi Bhabha refers to as an “ambivalent” national identity, internally fractured by difference (Bhabha 1994, 148). Although the Asian community had been present in East Africa since the late 19th century, largely due to British colonial recruitment of Indian laborers and traders, their place in the postcolonial national imagination remained contested. This was

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particularly true in Kenya and Uganda, where African nationalism saw them as economic beneficiaries of colonialism who had failed to support anti-colonial liberation (Mazrui 1968, 65). Their complex historical roles were reduced to a monolithic portrayal of privilege and aloofness.

East African Asian communities often viewed themselves as temporary residents or “guests” in Africa. This idea of guesthood justified their reluctance to participate in nationalist movements. In *In a Brown Mantle*, Nazareth’s characters articulate this detachment, expressing the belief that liberation was “somebody else’s fight” (Nazareth 1972, 49). Vassanji’s Shamsi community, similarly, avoids political engagement, focusing instead on family, trade, and religious loyalty (Vassanji 1989, 84). This aloofness, although functional under colonial rule, became politically untenable in the postcolonial era. African nationalism sought to dismantle racial hierarchies and colonial privileges, advocating for a reconfiguration of identity based on indigenous belonging and African unity. Against this backdrop, the Asian community’s reluctance to fully participate in anti-colonial struggles became a source of resentment.

This detachment, however, was not universal. Certain individuals within the Asian community, such as Pio Gama Pinto, Makhan Singh, and Girdhari Lal Vidyarthi, played important roles in the struggle for independence. Yet, as depicted in East African Asian writing, the community at large often hesitated to engage politically, in part due to the preservation of economic interests and a fear of losing their privileged position within colonial structures. Consequently, post-independence policies of Africanization—aimed at promoting African ownership and participation—were seen by many Asians as abrupt and unjust reversals of fortunes, despite their own complicity in the previous system.

This political aloofness, though partially a survival strategy, was shaped by colonial structures that promoted racial segregation and economic compartmentalization. Many Asians internalized these divisions, benefitting from economic opportunities while remaining socially separate from Africans. Consequently, when independence arrived, their lack of involvement in the nationalist cause made them targets of resentment, and eventually, state policies such as Uganda’s 1972 expulsion of Asians under Idi Amin.

Despite historical tensions, East Africa is remembered in many works as a place of religious tolerance and cultural richness. In *The Feast of the Nine Virgins*, Siddiqi’s narrator recalls a time when mosques, temples, churches, and gurudwaras coexisted peacefully, and religious festivals brought together people of different faiths (Siddiqi 2001, 112). This idyllic memory, however, is juxtaposed

posed with depictions of internal class divisions and racial superiority within the Asian community. As Siddiqi suggests, the social harmony of the past was often built on a false sense of unity—a unity constructed against the backdrop of African exclusion. The narrator notes that this cohesiveness “was only possible out of a sense of having a common enemy—the Black Man” (Siddiqi 2001, 134). Similarly, in *The Gunny Sack*, Vassanji explores how the Asian community absorbed colonial and Arab stereotypes of Africans, reinforcing a Manichean binary that depicted Africans as inferior (Vassanji 1989, 101).

The older generation of East African Asians, particularly those depicted in Vassanji's works, often attempted to recreate Indian identity in exile. Their community rituals, naming practices, and social structures replicated an idealized India, transplanted into African settings. This internalized nostalgia, what Vijay Mishra calls “the projection of India onto another geographical space,” allowed the diaspora to sustain a sense of belonging even in dislocation (Mishra 2007, 135). However, this strategy also limited integration. By turning inward, the diaspora avoided meaningful cultural exchange with African societies. As a result, their cultural survival often came at the cost of isolation and political vulnerability.

In contrast to the essentialism of the older generation, younger characters in East African Asian literature embrace hybridity. Salim Juma in *The Gunny Sack* is one of such figure. A descendant of an African slave and an Indian merchant, Salim adopts the name “Huseni”, embracing an identity that reflects multiple origins (Vassanji 1989, 46). His identity is marked by fragmentation, ambiguity, and adaptation. Siddiqi's characters also embody hybrid transnational identities. One character is described as “Born in Bombay, raised in Mombasa, married in Kampala, educated in London... and died in Vancouver. Where was this person actually from?” (Siddiqi 2001, 158). These characters inhabit what Bhabha calls the “third space” of cultural negotiation—no longer tied to a single origin but continually reshaping themselves in response to their environments (Bhabha 1994, 55).

For many East African Asians, resettlement in Western cities like Toronto or London brings disillusionment. In *No New Land*, Vassanji depicts the experiences of Tanzanian Asians navigating the racialized urban spaces of Canada. Initially attracted by the promises of multiculturalism, they soon encounter discrimination and stereotyping. The characters attempt to distinguish themselves from other South Asians—particularly Pakistanis—by asserting their East African roots and wearing culturally distinct attire like the Kaunda suit (Vassanji 1989, 89). These efforts, however, fail to prevent racist attacks and

social exclusion. The community becomes ghettoized in Don Mills, a suburb that offers little of the “haven of peace” that Dar es Salaam once symbolized. The characters lament that “the blacks kicked us out, now the whites will do the same” (Vassanji 1989, 93). The West, far from being a space of liberation, becomes another site of marginalization.

The cultural displacement faced by migrants is often depicted through the transformation of symbolic spaces. In *No New Land*, Nurdin Lalani visits a peep show named “Dar es Salaam, The Heaven of Love”—a cynical play on the literal translation of Dar es Salaam as “haven of peace.” This moment highlights the cultural erosion and moral confusion experienced by migrants, especially when removed from the collective codes of their earlier communities (Vassanji 1991, 136). Lalani’s moral decline—consuming alcohol, visiting pornographic venues—is not merely personal but emblematic of the broader dissolution of community values in diaspora. The attempt to reconcile past and present creates psychological strain and cultural fragmentation.

Faced with marginalization in the West, many migrants turn to East Africa as a lost paradise. Yet this nostalgia is fraught with contradictions. In memoirs such as P.S. Nayar’s, Uganda is remembered as a place where one wanted “to live and die,” until “Africanization” shattered the illusion of communal harmony (Nayar 2001, 72). However, such recollections often omit the racial dynamics that made African nationalism necessary. Peter Nazareth, in contrast, urges that any reflection on the expulsion of Asians from Uganda must consider whether the community “participated in creating the conditions for the expulsion” (Nazareth 2008, 142). Milton Carrasco agrees, arguing that many Asians saw themselves as superior to black Ugandans and continued discriminatory attitudes after independence. The backlash against these hierarchies, combined with populist nationalism, resulted in their political vulnerability (Carrasco 2002, 119).

The migrant experience in East African Asian literature is one of contradictions and complexities. Writers such as Vassanji, Nazareth, and Siddiqi portray a community shaped by privilege and marginalization, nostalgia and disillusionment, hybridity and exclusion. Their works challenge both nationalist narratives that erase minority histories and diaspora discourses that romanticize cultural purity and belonging. The migrant experience in East African Asian writing is a narrative of contradictions: nostalgia and alienation, privilege and exclusion, mobility and displacement. The works of Vassanji, Nazareth, Siddiqi, and others trace the shifting trajectories of a community once entrenched

in colonial hierarchies, later expelled by nationalist politics, and now struggling to find its footing in Western multicultural societies.

These writers do not offer easy resolutions. Instead, they present the diasporic subject as one caught between worlds, negotiating complex inheritances and uncertain futures. Identity, in this literature, is not a destination but a journey—an ongoing process of remembering, forgetting, adapting, and resisting. In doing so, East African Asian writing not only captures the migrant condition with remarkable depth but also offers insights into the broader human experience of belonging in an ever-changing world.

Belonging, in these texts, is not static but always in flux. Migrants exist in a space between worlds, marked by multiple affiliations and fragmented memories. Whether in Kampala, Dar es Salaam, Toronto, or London, the search for home remains elusive. Yet through this dislocation, East African Asian writing articulates a powerful vision of human resilience, adaptation, and the continuing struggle for identity in a changing world.

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